



LIBERTY  
IN  
NORTH  
KOREA

# Stories From The North

*Humans Of North Korea*



**North Korea is more than Kim Jong-un and nuclear weapons.** It's home to 25 million people who face one of the world's most brutal regimes. The regime forbids nearly every freedom. There is no freedom of speech, religion, information, or even movement. To enforce this repressive system, the government relies on a system of political prison camps – reminiscent of Nazi concentration camps– torture, forced labor, and forced starvation.

To make matters worse, the North Korean regime has isolated the people from the rest of humanity, preventing them from sharing their stories with the world. The only voice that is allowed is the regime's and this has led to a lack of international support for the North Korean people.

It's easy to see 25 million as just a number on paper. But within that number are people just like you. There are parents who dream of a better future for their kids, entrepreneurs who want to use their creativity to carve out a better world, and students who are driven and curious.

It's hard to wrap our minds around the number of people who have had their power and potential stripped away by this regime. So here are three short stories from inside North Korea. You won't learn everything there is to know about this issue through them, but you will get a sense of the humanity behind the numbers.



**I got foreign media from my dad.** He was a member of the Korean Workers Party and many of his friends were security agents. They confiscated a lot of foreign media and gave it to my dad and he would bring it home.

Some of my most vivid memories are getting together with my friends at someone's house, shutting off all the lights, and secretly watching South Korean dramas. It was exhilarating. If you heard anything outside, you'd get startled and think,

**"Did they come to arrest us?  
Are we going to jail now?"  
It was thrilling doing things  
we knew we shouldn't do.**

Everything portrayed in the South Korean dramas was so clean and everyone seemed so wealthy. I used to think "Wow, there is such a world out there." We were taught that South Korea was a poor country but I wondered, "Why can't we live like that?"

I wanted to wear clothes from the dramas but I couldn't find them anywhere. We used to get a lot of used clothes from the market down by the harbor. You either find used clothes or fabric and have a tailor make the outfit for you. After three or four days of wearing a new style, everyone would be wearing the same thing because it looked so cool.



My designs were very popular. If I started wearing something new, there was always someone who would wear similarly styled clothes because the number of South Korean dramas that inspired us was so limited. Girls would ask me where I got my clothes and if I wanted to exchange outfits. Bartering was very common and sometimes they'd offer their more expensive clothes in exchange for mine.



But you had to look out for the Inspection Unit. If they caught you wearing jeans and a hoodie, they'd cut the bottom of the jeans with scissors. My sister and brother were older than me so their friends were sometimes in the Inspection Unit. If I knew the person, I would just tell them, "I'll go change right now" or "I'll give you these jeans but please don't cut the bottoms off" and I would go get it back from them later.

The regime doesn't want people wearing those kinds of clothes. I think it's because things like jeans symbolize freedom. North Korean society is so restricted that if they allowed jeans there would be no end to what people would want to wear.

**Even now in South Korea, every time I put on a pair of jeans I think, "*This is freedom.*"**

***Jihyun Kang** escaped North Korea in 2009. She now works in the fashion industry in Seoul. To protect the safety of her family still inside North Korea, she must hide her identity.*



**Our family tried our best to escape together.** We knew that if we were separated, it would be almost impossible to see each other again. But my grandma was already 85 years old so my parents decided to send my brother and me to South Korea first. They didn't want their precious children rotting away in a place like North Korea.

We prepared to escape for a year and planned exactly how we would do it. Our house was near the border so we would escape from right in front of our house. On the day of our escape, we cooked a feast for the four of us and had a very casual conversation. I offered a shot of liquor to my parents and bowed to them. We didn't cry or anything. I just told them that the food was delicious and that I was so happy to go live in a better place where we would be able to study and play freely. We tried not to be sad and tried to smile. Right before I left I told my mom,

**"We'll see each other soon. I'll wait for you in that better place." I gave her a hug, closed the door, and walked out.**

That's when I heard my dad cry for the first time in my life. It was the sound of sobbing. My mom said she would send us off with a smile and she stayed strong, telling us to follow the bright path. But that moment stayed with me throughout my journey.



After I left my house, I went to my aunt's to say bye to my grandma. I told her that now that I had graduated from high school, I was going to spend a few months at my aunt's house in another city. My brother also went to see his friend for the last time. And then we just left. My parents weren't going to be there during our last moments in North Korea. We thought them being there might weaken our resolve to leave. But when my brother and I arrived at the place we were supposed to cross the river, we saw a light coming toward us. We definitely thought we were in trouble and stayed as still as possible.

**The path was narrow and as the light came closer I thought, “If we come across these people right now, they will see our footprints near the river and will report us.”**

But it was actually our mom and dad. They wanted to see us one last time and they told us that there were three guards standing about 150 meters away from where we would cross so they would let us know if there was any danger when they walked past the guards. They said to wait about a minute and if there was no sign from them, then we could cross. We said our goodbyes during those last two minutes together. My dad was crying again. My mom said that this might be the last time she saw us but that she’s happy that we were going to a better place. Those two minutes went by so fast, but I’m thankful that we got to hug each other one last time.

After my brother and I escaped, we heard that our dad wasn’t doing well. He was always pretty healthy so we just assumed that he had caught a cold. But after we made it to South Korea, we heard that his health was even worse. He passed away a year after we arrived in South Korea. Mom told us that after we crossed the river, he couldn’t eat anymore. He told her that he wasn’t sure about living a better life in South Korea and that it was so hard to send his own kids away. It felt like pieces of his heart were missing.







My mom finally arrived in South Korea three years after we escaped. Before we left she was quite pretty. But she had lost all of her teeth and had grown so many age spots on her face since then. She had suffered so much emotionally. She had buried my dad and had sent away the two children who she had raised so precious and I'm sure she probably felt so empty after we left. You could tell how much she suffered just by looking at her face.

**My dad's absence is overwhelming. I had always dreamed of having a meal together as a family in South Korea. But it's just the three of us now.**

***Hyo Jin** escaped North Korea in 2013. She recently graduated from college and plans on enlisting in the South Korean military. Her dream is to be the first female officer from North Korea.*

**I lived near Gyeongseong** and there was a small hot spring there. That's where I used to hang out with my friends a lot. Every day after school, we'd go to the riverbank and swim. There were codfish in the river, so we'd fish and make fish porridge. The 1990s were the most difficult years of my childhood, but I also have a lot of fond memories from those days. I was still very young, but because we didn't have anything to eat, I'd go gather seaweed and kelp from the ocean to support our family.

When I was young, my grandfather influenced me a lot. He was in the military and I was under a lot of pressure to continue his legacy. I had six aunts, and the only one who had a son was my mom. North Korean society is very patriarchal and a man is responsible for leading the household. So my aunts and my grandfather hoped that I'd be that person and follow in his footsteps. They could think of no other option for me other than pursuing a government career.

## **So I dreamed of becoming a career soldier. But that dream shattered one fall afternoon.**

My mom had successfully escaped North Korea after three tries. She left by herself and later sent a broker to fetch me. So one day, two brokers came to find me. They told me that my mom was just three hours away and asked if I'd go with them. Of course, I would. I was young



and it had been years since I had last seen her so I followed them with no idea where we were going. I was still dreaming of becoming a soldier and I thought I'd be able to see my mom at the riverbank, but then we crossed the river and got in a car. I realized that I was not in North Korea anymore. I saw lights, Chinese characters on signs, and people with weird colored hair.



I had never seen such amazing-looking cars before I went to China. And when I looked out the car window, the roads were so wide. I thought I was dreaming. I thought I was in a dream because it was so shocking. It was my first time outside of North Korea and everything seemed amazing.

But I think it was the food that shocked me the most. Yanji, China is only two hours from North Korea. When we went to the broker's house in Yanji, there was a puppy and they gave him a piece of meat. I was so shocked. That would never happen in North Korea. The fact that they could afford giving meat to a dog was so shocking that I was speechless.



## **Watching the broker's daughter calling the dog's name and tossing him a piece of meat shocked me so much that I cussed out loud. It was such a stark contrast to North Korea.**

My family belonged to the Korean Workers Party so we had the Rodong Newspaper delivered to our house every day. The newspaper would say how things were bad in South Korea, that kids were starving to death in Africa, that other countries were doing worse than North Korea, and even though things are tough, our country is the best in the world. That's how I was educated. But as soon as I got out of the country, I saw this piece of meat being tossed to a dog and I couldn't believe it. I thought the broker's family was rich or something. But they weren't. They were just an ordinary family.

***Huh Joon*** escaped North Korea in 2010. He is now a university student who runs a popular YouTube channel that focuses on North Korea.

## What is Liberty in North Korea?

Liberty in North Korea is an international NGO working with the North Korean people as they achieve their liberty. LiNK helps North Korean refugees escape through a **3,000-mile secret rescue route** and **empowers** North Koreans who have reached freedom to be changemakers, **advocates**, and leaders on this issue.

## You've read their stories, now what?

### **Donate →**

Help North Koreans reach safety and empower North Korean refugees to succeed in freedom. Your gift goes to programs that rescue and empower North Korean refugees!

### **Learn More →**

Learn more about the challenges the North Korean face and read more stories from inside North Korea on our website!

### **Fundraise →**

Rally your community to stand alongside the North Korean people by starting a fundraiser on Facebook! 100% of what you fundraise goes directly to rescuing North Korean refugees.





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