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In North Korea, the fact that 3 million people starved to death didn't seem out of the ordinary.

The determination to escape from a country that denies its people freedom and human rights was stronger than the will to survive. So I decided to leave North Korea, my close friends, neighbors, and lovely hometown and I left my fate up to the Tumen River at the border between China and North Korea. But I was separated from my father as soon as I set foot in China because of Chinese police rounding up North Korean defectors, and I was repatriated with my mother and two siblings.

It was 1963, three years before China's Cultural Revolution began, when my ethnic Korean-Chinese (*joseon-jok*) father, at the young age of 16, crossed the border into North Korea to find freedom. In December 1997, he heard radio programs aired on the Korean Broadcasting System while visiting family in China. Realizing he had been duped his entire life, he persuaded us to leave North Korea. So in February 1998, my father crossed the border in search of freedom again, this time, into China, by way of upstream Tumen River. My mother, two siblings, and I escaped via a route more downstream. We were supposed to meet him at a predetermined location in China, but we have not known of his whereabouts for the last 19 years. My mother, two siblings and I were immediately repatriated.

Afterward, I witnessed my mother kicked with hard shoes for defecting, and we were forced to sit down and stand up nearly 100 times in the process of being inspected for carrying money. We were subject to thought criticism at numerous agencies. Our neighbors and friends gave us the cold shoulder.

I was taken to and tortured at the Ministry of State Security for keeping a small Korean Bible given to me from my mother. You see, North Korea doesn't allow freedom of religion. I was released only after lying that I found it on the ground. My mother and younger sister went to China and were supposed to return in a couple of days, but they were kidnapped and sold. My little sister, at the young age of 17, was sold and forced to marry a man over 40.

I was also trafficked, so my brother lost all of us when he was just 10. When I was repatriated a year later, I witnessed the worst North Korea's human rights atrocities.

At the Cheongjin detention center, pregnant women were forced to hard labor all day. Because North Korea does not allow mixed ethnicities, they make women who have become pregnant in China to miscarry by forcing them to hard labor. At night, we heard pregnant mothers screaming, and babies died without being able to see their mothers. There was a woman who gave birth to a baby at night at 8 months after a full day of work. She was so happy to hold her child, but that moment was short lived. Soon after, a guard commanded her to drown her own newborn. She pleaded the guard for mercy with the baby in her arms, but in the end, she did as told. The image of the dead infant tore through my 20-year-old heart.

I was reunited with my mother, whom I had not seen for a year, when I was sent to the provincial police jail because she was also repatriated. But we were separated again, since I was sent to the Jeungsan Reeducation Center no. 11 without trial.

Not many made it out alive from this place. Everyone was subject to harsh labor, and meals were so lacking that we ate raw locusts, discarded cabbage leaves, and skinned frogs and rats. People died withered and dehydrated from continuous diarrhea.

I befriended a girl named Younghee. Her parents were shot dead and she was alone. We promised to survive this place and go to South Korea together. One day, we secretly ate some grass while working but got caught and were ordered to eat grass roots with dirt still on them. This caused Younghee diarrhea, and she eventually died from it. I could do nothing but weep and close her eyes after her death.

Almost everyone who dies there is buried at a place called "Flower Hill," but everyone knows that the dead bodies end up being food the dog belonging to the guard. My friend Younghee was no exception.

At Jeungsan Reeducation Center no. 11, I was beaten with a wooden bar and kicked for not obeying commands on time. I suffered a broken rib that healed at an angle, and I suffer chronic illnesses like epilepsy and fibromyalgia. I was given a 1-year sentence but was pardoned after 8 months on Kim Jong Il's birthday on Feb. 16, 2000. I embarked on my third escape knowing I had to tell the world about North Korea's human rights realities. But I was repatriated for the third time when I was three months pregnant and was forced an abortion without any medication at the local police station in North Korea.

So my first child passed away without ever seeing the world, without any time for me to apologize.

Even when I was hemorrhaging to death, they were filling out papers to send me to Hamheung Reeducation no. 55 without fair trial. Thankfully, the police officer on my case let me go on bail due to my condition.

Though I was in terrible health, I crossed the Tumen yet again.

I had to, because I vowed to myself as I closed the eyes of the dying at Jeungsan Reeducation Center no. 11, that I would survive to live the life they never got to live.

Between my first escape from North Korea in Feb. 1998 and 2007, I was repatriated 3 times and escaped a total of 4 times. I spent 8 months in a reeducation center and some time in China, a foreign place to me, before finally reaching South Korea in 2007.

As soon as I arrived, I arranged for my mother and my daughter to come to Korea via Myanmar, but I have no news about my two younger siblings and father.

Then one day, my brother arrived in South Korea. My brother had been on the streets alone for 13 years, and my mother could do nothing but cry while they embraced. And the next year, in 2011, my little sister who was 17 when I last saw her, made it to South Korea via Thailand at the age of 31. We hugged and wept endless tears at our first reunion in 14 years.

Right now, I miss my father terribly.

This longing is not unique. It is the longing of all North Korean defectors. The running of the recently defected North Korean soldier across the Joint Security Area represents a dash toward freedom that is the dream of 25 million North Koreans. North Korea is a terrifying prison, and it takes a miracle to survive there.

But the Chinese government sends North Koreans seeking freedom back to this prison.

On Nov. 4, a mother and her child were detained on the way to meet the father in South Korea. The excitement of meeting his dad was momentary, because the Chinese government sent them back on a deadly path.

China, which has lived through a so-called cultural revolution, is well aware of how repatriated defectors will be treated, yet it continues to send North Koreans back. How is this different from killing?

I strongly urge the Chinese government to discontinue forcible repatriation of North Koreans toward death. Much like Paul the Apostle, who says he is in debt for the Gospel, I confess, to my father, those who have died in prison after repatriation, and all North Koreans, that I am in debt for freedom.

I ask UN officials and representatives around the world, and members of the US Congress, to fight for the freedom and human rights of North Koreans and repatriated defectors, who do not even have the right to know or the right to own.

I want to share a poem I wrote, titled, "Is Anyone There?"

*I am afraid, is anyone out there?  
This is hell, is anyone out there?  
Despite my urgent pleas, no one is opening the door for me.  
Is anyone there?  
Please, hear our cries.  
Hear the pain of us getting stepped on. Is anyone there?  
People are dying. My friend is dying also.  
I am calling and calling, why is there no answer?  
Is there really no one there?*

The Dutch poet Job Degenaar said, "The doors to prison must be open from the outside." I appeal to you to find many ways we can open the doors to North Korea.

And when you mean people from the North once it becomes a free country, and they ask you "what have you done, as early beneficiaries of freedoms we did not have?" you have a good answer.

Thank you.