



LIFE UNDER KIM JONG UN

Recent North Korean escapees relate how the secretive country has changed under the “Great Successor.”

By **Anna Fifield**

Nov. 17, 2017

Illustrations by Dominic Bugatto. Yoonjung Seo assisted in the reporting.

English
(영어)

Korean
(한국어)

“In North Korea, life only gets better if the state helps you. But these days, the state doesn’t help. We’re on our own.”

— *The bride, now 23, from Hyesan. Escaped from North Korea in May 2017*

When Kim Jong Un became the leader of North Korea almost six years ago, many North Koreans thought that their lives were going to improve. He offered the hope of generational change in the world’s longest-running communist dynasty. After all, he was so young. A millennial. Someone with experience of the outside world.

But the “Great Successor,” as he is called by the regime, has turned out to be every bit as brutal as his father and grandfather before him. Even as he has allowed greater economic freedom, he has tried to seal the country off more than ever, tightening security along the border with China and stepping up the punishments for those who dare to try to cross it. And at home, freedom of speech, and of thought, is still a mirage.

In six months of interviews in South Korea and Thailand, The Washington Post talked with more than 25 North Koreans from different walks of life who lived in Kim Jong Un’s North Korea and managed to escape from it. In barbecue restaurants, cramped apartments and hotel rooms, these refugees provided the fullest account to date of daily life inside North Korea and how it has changed, and how it hasn’t, since Kim took over from his father, Kim Jong Il, at the end of 2011. Many are from the northern parts of the country that border China — the part of North Korea where life is toughest, and where knowledge about the outside world just across the river is most widespread — and are from the relatively small segment of the population that is prepared to take the risks involved in trying to escape.

Some parts of their stories cannot be independently verified because of the secretive nature of the regime, and their names have been withheld to protect their family members still in North Korea. They were introduced to The Post by groups that help North Korean escapees, including [No Chain for North Korea](#), [Woorion](#) and [Liberty in North Korea](#).

But in talking about their personal experiences, including torture and the culture of surveillance, they recounted the hardships of daily life under Kim Jong Un’s regime. They paint a picture of a once-communist state that has all but broken down, its state-directed economy at a standstill. Today, North Koreans are making their own way, earning money in an entrepreneurial and often illegal fashion. There are only a few problems in North Korea these days that money can’t solve.

As life inside North Korea is changing, so too are people’s reasons for escaping.

Increasingly, North Koreans are not fleeing their totalitarian state because they are hungry, as they did during the 15 or so years following the outbreak of a devastating famine in the mid-1990s. Now, they are leaving because they are disillusioned.

Market activity is exploding, and with that comes a flow of information, whether as chitchat from traders who cross into China or as soap operas loaded on USB sticks. And this leads many North Koreans to dream in a way they hadn’t before.

Some are leaving North Korea because they want their children to get a better education. Some are leaving because their dreams of success and riches in the North Korean system are being thwarted. And some are leaving because they want to be able to speak their minds.

A NEW KIM AT THE HELM



“Standing at the forefront of the Korean revolution is Kim Jong Un, great successor to the revolutionary cause of Juche [self-reliance ideology] and outstanding leader of our party, army and people.”

Korean Central News Agency — Dec. 19, 2011

The young mother

젊은 어머니

From: Hoeryong, Age: 29
Escaped in 2014

I could see how young he was, and I hoped that maybe things were going to get better. We were given some rations through our neighborhood association — we even got meat and fish — at the time he took over.

The preschooler

유치원생

From: Hoeryong, Age: 7
Escaped in 2014

I remember how fat he was. He had a very fat face like a pig.

As the regime started preparing for Kim’s succession, it put out a song that everyone in the country was made to learn, called “Footsteps.” The idea was that Kim was following in the footsteps of his father and would lead the country into a glorious future.



The North Korean regime composed the song “Footsteps” in preparation for Kim Jong Un’s succession. (DPRK Today)

The money man

돈 남자

We heard the song “Footsteps” and we were told to memorize it so [we] knew that he was going to be the leader after Kim Jong Il.

▶ *We were told how great he was, that he could ride a horse*

10/19/2018 From: Hyesan, Age: 43
Escaped in 2015

Kim when he was 5 years old and shoot a gun when he was 3. Of course we didn't believe these things, but if you laughed or said anything, you'd be killed.

The university student

대학생

From: Sariwon, Age: 37
Escaped in 2013

I was in my second year at the university when this person was introduced to us as our new leader. I thought it was a joke. Among my closest friends, we were calling him a piece of s---. Everyone thinks this, but you can only say it to your closest friends or to your parents if you know that they agree.

The drug dealer

마약상

From: Hoeryong, Age: 46
Escaped in 2014

I created some kind of fantasy in my mind about Kim Jong Un. Because he was so young, I thought he was going to open North Korea's doors, but after he took power and I lived three years under him, life became harder.

MONEY TALKS

In theory, North Korea is a bastion of socialism, a country where the state provides everything, including housing, health care, education and jobs. In reality, the state economy barely operates anymore. People work in factories and fields, but there is little for them to do, and they are paid almost nothing. A vibrant private economy has sprung up out of necessity, one where people find ways to make money on their own, whether through selling homemade tofu or dealing drugs, through smuggling small DVD players with screens called “notels” over the border or extracting bribes.

The university student

대학생

From: Sariwon, Age: 37
Escaped in 2013

North Korea technically has a centrally planned economy, but now people's lives revolve around the market. No one expects the government to provide things anymore. Everyone has to find their own way to survive.

The hairdresser

미용사

From: Hyesan, Age: 23
Escaped in 2016

I had to drop out of teachers college when I was 19 because my father became ill so I needed to work. I started doing people's hair at my house. All the women wanted perms. I charged 30 [Chinese] yuan for a regular perm or 50 yuan for a perm with better products. But it was still hard to make money. [Thirty yuan is about \$4.50.]

The farmer

농부

From: Hoeryong, Age: 46
Escaped in 2014

We lived in the city center, but we rented some land in the foothills of the mountains and grew corn there. During planting and harvest season, ► we would wake up at 4 a.m. and walk three hours to reach the farmland. We'd take a little break for lunch or a snack, then work until 8 p.m. before walking home again. Doing

Kim Jong Un's North Korea: Life inside the totalitarian state - Washington Post
the wedding was the hardest because we had to get rid of them by hand. And we'd buy beans from the market and make tofu that we'd sell from our house. Our profit was less than 5,000 won [60 cents at the black market rate] a day. But because the bean price fluctuates, sometimes we were left with nothing at all.

North Koreans first learned how to be entrepreneurs during the famine, when they had to make money to survive. While men had to continue to show up for work in dormant factories, women would turn corn into noodles and keep a little for themselves but sell the rest so they could buy more corn for the following day. Homeless children would steal manhole covers to sell as scrap metal. Markets began to appear and took hold. North Koreans used to joke you could buy everything there except cats' horns.

These days, you can probably buy cats' horns, too.

Look inside a market in North Korea



Footage taken by the DailyNK in 2017 shows scenes from a busy street market in Chongjin, North Korea. (Unification Media Group)

The bean trader

콩 상인

From: Hyesan, Age: 23
 Escaped in 2014

I had an aunt in Pyongyang who sold beans in the market there. I would buy what she needed from various farmers and get it to her. I'd pay people to pack up the beans into sacks, pay porters to take them to the station, get them onto the train. You have to smooth the way with money. My uncle is in the military, so his position provided protection for my aunt's business. Of course, my aunt was the main earner in the house. It's the women who can really make money in North Korea.

Tens of thousands of North Koreans now work outside the country, in lumber yards and garment factories and on construction sites, in China, Russia and other countries, earning foreign

currency. Generally, two-thirds of their pay goes to the regime, and they're allowed to keep the rest.

The construction worker

건설 노동자

From: Pyongyang, Age: 40
Escaped in 2015

I wanted to earn money for my family and buy a house, so I paid \$100 to bribe my way into an overseas construction job. I was sent to St. Petersburg. We lived at the construction site and would work from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., or sometimes until midnight in the summer, then we'd go back to our dormitory to eat. We worked seven days a week, but we could finish early on Sundays — 7 p.m. — and that was nice. My whole purpose for being there was to make lots of money and go home proud of my achievement. I still remember the first time I got paid. It was 1,000 rubles. When I finished work at 10 p.m., I went to the store and saw that a bottle of beer was 27 rubles. I thought, wow I'm rich.

As the economy and the rules that govern it change, there are more and more gray areas that can be exploited. That means that illegal trade and activity have blossomed, too.

The drug dealer

마약상

From: Hoeryong, Age: 46
Escaped in 2014

I did so many things that I wasn't supposed to do. I worked as a broker transferring money and connecting people in North Korea with people in South Korea through phone calls. I arranged reunions for them in China. I smuggled antiques out of North Korea and sold them in China. I sold ginseng and pheasants to China. And I dealt ice [methamphetamines.]. Officially, I was a factory worker, but I bribed my way out of having to go to work. If you don't operate this way in North Korea, you have nothing.

The doctor

의사

From: Hyesan, Age: 42
Escaped in 2014

▶ *The salary for doctors was about 3,500 won a month. That was less than it cost to buy one kilogram of rice. So of course, being a doctor was not my main job. My main job was smuggling at night. I would send herbal medicine from North Korea into China, and with the money, I would import home appliances back into North Korea. Rice cookers, notels, LCD monitors, that kind of thing.*

From the biggest cities to the smallest villages, there is now some kind of market building where people can sell their wares and keep their profits. Some are state-run, some are state-sanctioned, some are ad hoc. The markets have been retroactively legalized by the regime.

Money is now needed for nearly everything — even for the parts of communist life that the Kim regime crows about providing, like housing and schooling. Bribery and corruption have become endemic, undermining the regime by loosening controls and creating incentives that may not always be in line with Kim's priorities.

The farmer

농부

From: Hoeryong, Age: 46
Escaped in 2014

Technically, you don't have to pay to go to school, but the teachers tell you that you have to submit a certain amount of beans or rabbit skins that can be sold. If you don't submit, you get told off continuously, and that's why students stop going to school. The kids are hurt just because the parents can't afford it.

The young mother

젊은 어머니

From: Hoeryong, Age: 29
Escaped in 2014

I used to pay the teachers at my daughter's school so they would look after her better than others. I would give them 120,000 won at a time — that's enough to buy 25 kilograms of rice — twice a year. If you don't pay the teachers, they won't make any effort.

The fisherman

어부

From: Ryongchon, Age: 45
Escaped in July 2017

I lived through all three Kims, but our life was not getting any better for any of us. We all have to pay for Kim Jong Un's projects, like Ryomyong Street [a residential development in Pyongyang]. We had to contribute 15,000 North Korean won per household [more than four months' salary] to the government for that street.

The drug dealer

마약상

From: Hoeryong, Age: 46
Escaped in 2014

▶ *My main business was selling ice. I think that 70 or 80 percent of the adults in Hoeryong city were using ice. My customers were just ordinary people. Police officers, security agents, party members, teachers, doctors. Ice made a really good gift for birthday parties or for high school graduation presents. It makes you feel good and helps you release stress, and it really helps relations between men and women. My 76-year-old mother was using it because she had low blood pressure, and it worked well. Lots of police officers and security agents would come to my house to smoke, and of course I didn't charge them — they were my protection. They would come by during their lunch break, stop by my house. The head of the secret police in my area was almost living at my house.*



“Lots of police officers and security agents would come to my house to smoke, and of course I didn’t charge them – they were my protection.”

The ability to make money, sometimes lots of money, through means both legal and illegal has led to visible inequality in a country that has long touted itself as an egalitarian socialist paradise. This could be a potential source of disruption. Bean traders and drug dealers and everyone in between have the prospect of making a decent living. Those working only in official jobs, whether they be on a state-owned ostrich farm or in a government ministry in Pyongyang, earn only a few dollars a month and get little in the way of rations to supplement their meager salaries.

The rich kid

부자 인 아이

From: Chongjin, Age: 20
Escaped in 2014

Skating rinks opened in 2013, and rollerblading became a really big thing. ► Rich kids had their own rollerblades. We’d carry them slung over our shoulders as we walked to the rink – it was a status symbol, a sign that you have money. I bought my rollerblades at the market. They were pink, and it cost 200 Chinese yuan. That’s the same price as 30 kilograms of rice. It’s unthinkable for poor kids.

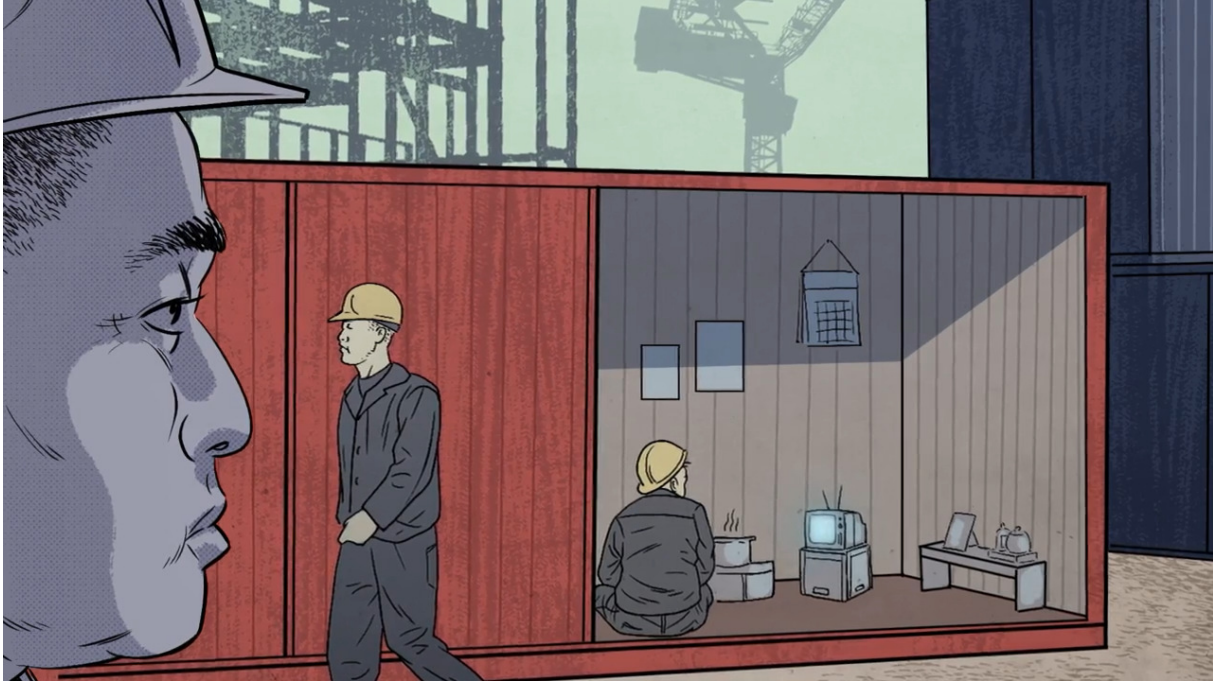
The construction worker

건설 노동자

From: Pyongyang, Age: 40
Escaped in 2015

► *There were long periods where we didn’t get paid. I once went for six months without getting any salary at all. We lived in a shipping container at the construction site. We were given rice and cabbage and one egg per person per day, and we had an electric coil in our container that we could cook on. We needed some protein because our work was so hard, so we started buying pigskin at the market because it was cheap. Washing was like a*

special occasion. But if you went to the bathhouse, you would miss out on work. Once I didn't bathe for two months. We didn't think anything of it. It was just the way we lived.



“There were long periods where we didn't get paid. I once went for six months without getting any salary at all.”

The rich kid

부자 인 아이

From: Chongjin, Age: 20
Escaped in 2014

Cellphones are a big thing. To be able to afford a smartphone, you had to come from a rich family. Of course, there were some poor kids at my school, but I didn't hang out with them. I had an Arirang smartphone that cost \$400. When boys came up to talk to me, I'd check out their phone. If they had one of those old-style phones with buttons, I wasn't interested.

The markets are the distribution point not just for goods, but also for information. Chatter, rumors, illicit foreign media.

The farmer

농부

From: Hoeryong, Age: 46
Escaped in 2014

Women make their living in the market, and while they're sitting there at the stalls, they talk. So the market is a great place to learn about the outside world.

The phone connector

전화 커넥터

From: Hoeryong, Age: 49

I watched lots of [smuggled] movies and soap operas on USB sticks from the market. I would plug them into my TV. Vendors who are selling ordinary things like batteries or rice or whatever,

they hide the USBs inside under the counter. When you go into the market you say to the vendors: Do you have anything delicious today? That's the code. USBs are also good because they are so easy to hide, and you can just break them if you get caught.



“When you go into the market you say to the vendors: Do you have anything delicious today?”

The fisherman

어부

From: Ryongchon, Age: 45
Escaped in July 2017

In the past, if you watched Chinese movies on USBs you were okay. You got put in a labor camp only if you were caught with South Korean or American movies. But now, under Kim Jong Un, you get sent to a labor camp if you're caught watching Chinese movies, too. The police and the security services and government officials live better these days. The more people they catch, the more money they earn.

The teenage prisoner

십대 죄수

From: Hyesan, Age: 22
Escaped in 2013

I was 8 years old when I started watching foreign movies. I always liked watching romantic South Korean dramas like “My Fair Lady.” I loved the way that women were being cherished. North Korea is a very male-oriented society, men never bother about taking care of women. And I liked to look at their fancy cars and houses.

The accordion player

아코디언 연주자

From: Hamhung, Age: 25
Escaped in 2015

My mom worked in the market selling home appliances, so she had a way to get DVDs. I watched Chinese, Indian and Russian movies, and lots of South Korean soap operas. I thought that if I got to South Korea, I could do anything I wanted.

REPRESSION AND DISILLUSIONMENT

It is impossible to overstate the pervasiveness of the personality cult surrounding the Kims in North Korea. Founding President Kim Il Sung, his son Kim Jong Il and his grandson, the current leader, Kim Jong Un form a kind of holy trinity in North Korea. There is no criticizing them or questioning the system — at least not without risking your freedom and the freedom of your entire family. Your life itself could be at stake.

The preschooler

유치원생

I learned songs about the general and about the Kim family and how great Kim Il Sung was.

From: Hoeryong, Age: 7
Escaped in 2014

The elementary schoolgirl

초등학생

We got gifts on Kim Jong Un’s birthday: candy and cookies and gum and puffed rice. I was so grateful to him for giving me all these sweets. We would stand up in class and say, “Thank you, General Kim Jong Un.”

From: Ryongchon, Age: 7
Escaped in July 2017



“We would stand up in class and say, ‘Thank you, General Kim Jong Un.’”

The university student

대학생

From: Sariwon, Age: 37
Escaped in 2013

We had ideological education for 90 minutes every day. There was revolutionary history, lessons about Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, Kim Jong Un. Of course, they taught us about why we needed nuclear weapons, and they would tell us that we needed to make sacrifices in our daily lives so they could build these weapons and protect our country, keep the nation safe. I was so sick and tired of hearing about all this revolutionary history, I was so sick of calling everyone “comrade.” I didn’t care about any of that stuff.

The young mother

젊은 어머니

From: Hoeryong, Age: 29
Escaped in 2014

▶ *Everybody knew that Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un were both liars, that everything is their fault, but it’s impossible to voice any opposition because we are under such tight surveillance. If someone is drunk and says Kim Jong Un is a son of a bitch, you’ll never see them again.*

The doctor

의사

From: Hyesan, Age: 42
Escaped in 2014

It’s like a religion. From birth, you learn about the Kim family, learn that they are gods, that you must be absolutely obedient to the Kim family. The elites are treated nicely, and because of that they make sure that the system stays stable. But for everyone else, it’s a reign of terror. The Kim family uses terror to keep people scared, and that makes it impossible to stage any kind of social gathering, let alone an uprising.

The construction worker

건설 노동자

From: Pyongyang, Age: 40
Escaped in 2015

We had education sessions when we would go back to the main building and into a big room where there were portraits of the leaders. Everyone had to bow and buy bunches of flowers to lay in front of the portraits. There would be a speech by the boss, who was a party member. We would hear about how Kim Jong Un had done this and this and that [he] was working so hard for the party and for the nation and for the people. I believed it up until the Kim Jong Un era, but this exaggeration was just too much. It just didn’t make sense.

The money man

돈 남자

From: Hyesan, Age: 43
Escaped in 2015

Every month there was special instruction about Kim Jong Un. It came down from Pyongyang to the neighborhood associations. We were told that Kim Jong Un wanted to know everything so that he could take proper care of everyone, help everyone. Nobody believed this because if Kim Jong Un knew we had no electricity and were eating corn rice [imitation rice made from ground corn], why wasn’t he doing anything about it?

The bean trader

—

콩 상인

From: Hyesan, Age: 23
Escaped in 2014

There was this story going around that Kim Il Sung had asked Kim Jong Un to get him an apple. Kim Jong Un asked for a shovel because he wanted to bring the whole tree. It was the kind of joke that the secret police would create. Instead of just doing top-down teaching, they would also create stories like this [about devotion to the regime] because they thought that their propaganda would circulate better as rumors and would seem more convincing.

North Korea operates as a vast surveillance state, with a menacing state security department called the Bowibu as its backbone. Its agents are everywhere and operate with impunity.

The regime also operates a kind of neighborhood watch system. Every district in every town or city is broken up into neighborhood groups of 30 or 40 households, each with a leader who is responsible for coordinating grass-roots surveillance and encouraging people to snitch.

The young mother

젊은 어머니

From: Hoeryong, Age: 29
Escaped in 2014

People in each neighborhood association are always checking up on each other. If one family seems to be living better than everyone else, then all the neighbors try to find out how they are making their money. Everybody is sensitive because if someone seems to be living well, then people get jealous of that house. Nobody has to be asked to bring that wealthy family down and make sure that this wealthy family loses their money. When you see a family lose their house, that feels good. That's why it's important not to show off how wealthy you are.

The farmer

농부

From: Hoeryong, Age: 46
Escaped in 2014

Of course I thought about the outside world, but if you say, "I want to go to China or South Korea," then it can be reported by an informant to the security services. You can think it, but you can't say it. You never know who is going to snitch on you. We often heard and saw how Chinese people had money because Chinese people used to come to North Korea to sell things, so we thought it would be nice to live there.

The rich kid

부자 인 아이

From: Chongjin, Age: 20
Escaped in 2014

There were youth leaders who would patrol around, looking for things that we weren't supposed to be doing. If you were wearing jeans or skinny pants, or if you had a manicure or your hair was too long, you would get in trouble. They would sometimes check your phone to see if you had any South Korean songs. I got busted for this, but I got out of it by buying them a box of 20 bottles of beer.



“They would sometimes check your phone to see if you had any South Korean songs.”

For those who ran afoul of the regime in ways that money could not solve, the punishment could be harsh.

The teenage prisoner

십대 죄수

From: Hyesan, Age: 22
Escaped in 2013

When I was 16, I was staying at my grandma’s house and there was a banging on the door late at night. Two secret police officers took me to the police station and asked me: “Where are your parents?” I told them I didn’t know. It turned out that they had gone missing and I suspected that my mom’s business associates, when they realized this, planted a whole lot of stuff on her, said that she was the mastermind behind this big smuggling operation. The police yelled at me: “You’re just like your mother. You probably have fantasies about China, too.” They slapped my face about five times.

The phone connector

전화 커넥터

From: Hoeryong, Age: 49
Escaped in 2013

The first time I went to prison, I had been caught helping people make phone calls to their relatives in South Korea. I was sentenced to four months’ hard labor, building a road on the side of a mountain that they said we needed in case there was a war. The men did the digging and the women had to carry rocks and soil.

Escapees from North Korea’s gruesome political prisons have recounted brutal treatment over the years, including medieval torture with shackles and fire and being forced to undergo

abortion by the crudest methods. Human rights activists say that this appears to have lessened slightly under Kim. But severe beatings and certain kinds of torture — including being forced to remain in stress positions for crippling lengths of time — are commonplace throughout North Korea's detention systems, as are public executions.

Clip: Kang Na-ra in the 'Jangmadang Generation'



"Jangmadang Generation" is a documentary by Liberty in North Korea featuring interviews with millennial North Koreans on their upbringing in the hermit kingdom. (Liberty in North Korea)

The teenage prisoner

십대 죄수

From: Hyesan, Age: 22
Escaped in 2013

I was interrogated again by the secret police, and they wanted to know about my mother's business. They were slapping me around the face again. They always go for the face. I was beaten severely that time. They pushed me so hard against the wall that I had blood coming from my head. I still get a headache sometimes. While I was there they made me sit with my legs crossed and my arms resting on my knees and my head always down. If you move at all or if you try to stretch your legs out, they will yell at you and hit you. I had to stay like that for hours on end.

The money man

돈 남자

From: Hyesan, Age: 43
Escaped in 2015

In 2015, a money transfer went bad — the woman I'd given the money to got caught and she ratted on me — and I was put in detention. I spent two months there. I wasn't treated like a human being — they beat me, they made me sit in stress positions where I couldn't lift my head. Two times they slapped my face and kicked me during interrogation, but I was not beaten up badly. Maybe because I was not a nobody, maybe they feared that I knew someone who could get back at them.

Starvation is often part of the punishment, even for children. The 16-year-old lost 13 pounds in prison, weighing only 88 pounds when she emerged.

The teenage prisoner

십대 죄수

From: Hyesan, Age: 22
Escaped in 2013

We got up at 6 a.m. every day and went to bed at 11 p.m., and in between we would be working the whole time, shoveling cement or lugging sacks, except for lunch. Lunch was usually steamed corn.

▶ *I was too scared to eat. I cried a lot. I didn't want to live.*

The phone connector

전화 커넥터

From: Hoeryong, Age: 49
Escaped in 2013

Even though we were working so hard in prison camp, all we got to eat was a tiny bit of corn rice and a small potato. By the time I got out, I was so malnourished I could hardly walk.

It is this web of prisons and concentration camps, coupled with the threat of execution, that stops people from speaking up. There is no organized dissent in North Korea, no political opposition.

The Washington Post

The story must be told.

Your subscription supports journalism that matters.

Try 1 month for \$1

The drug dealer

마약상

From: Hoeryong, Age: 46
Escaped in 2014

If you make problems, then your whole family gets punished. That's why people don't want to make any trouble. If I get punished for my wrongdoing, that's one thing. But it's my whole family that would be put at risk if I did something. North Koreans have seen that Kim Jong Un killed his own uncle, so we understand how merciless he can be. That's why you can't have an uprising in North Korea.

The university student

대학생

From: Sariwon, Age: 37
Escaped in 2013

The secret to North Korea's survival is the reign of terror. Why do you think North Korea has public executions? Why do you think they block all communications? Why do you think North Koreans leave, knowing that they will never see their families again? It shows how bad things are. All our rights as people have been stripped away.

The phone connector

전화 커넥터

From: Hoeryong, Age: 49
Escaped in 2013

If you speak out against the system, you will immediately be arrested. And if you do something wrong, then three generations of your family will be punished. In 2009, I heard there was a going to be some kind of coup launched in Chongjin and that all of the people involved were executed. When you hear about cases like this, of course you're scared. So instead of trying to do something to change the system, it's better just to leave.

Some people do leave, but not that many. It's incredibly risky and logistically difficult to get around the border guards and the barbed wire. Unknown thousands cross into China each year. Some remain in China, almost always young women who get sold to poor Chinese men in the countryside who can't get a wife any other way. Some get caught and sent back — to certain imprisonment.

The repatriated wife

송환 된 아내

From: Nampo, Age: 50
Escaped North Korea for the last time in 2016

I had lived in China for 20 years, but someone must have reported me. I was sent back to North Korea, and I spent two and a half years in a prison camp. [After she had left once more for China], I knew I couldn't be repatriated again. I thought that it would be the end of my life.

But each year, a thousand or so North Koreans make it to South Korea. In the 20-odd years since the famine, only 30,000 North Koreans have made it to the southern side of the peninsula.

During the late 1990s and the early 2000s, almost all the North Koreans who fled were escaping out of hunger or economic need. But the explosion of markets has improved life for many. Today, more people are leaving North Korea because they are disillusioned with the system, not because they can't feed their families.

The accordion player

아코디언 연주자

From: Hamhung, Age: 25
Escaped in 2015

I was ambitious. I wanted to be a party member and enjoy all the opportunities that come with that. My dream was to make lots of money and be a high-ranking government official. ► Family background means so much in North Korea, but I had family in China and I realized that this would stop me from being able to follow my dreams. ► I left because I didn't have the freedom to do what I wanted to do.

The bean trader

콩 상인

From: Hyesan, Age: 23
Escaped in 2014

I wanted to progress in life, I wanted to go to university, but because my mother had defected to China, it looked like I wouldn't be able to go any further. It looked like I would be stuck in North Korea where I was. ► I could have moved, lived, no problem, but I felt like I didn't have any future in North Korea. That's why I decided to leave.

The meat delivery guy

고기 배달원

From: Undok, Age: 23
Escaped in 2014

We were told in school that we could be anybody. But after graduation, I realized that this wasn't true and that ► I was being punished for somebody else's wrongdoing. I realized I wouldn't be able to survive here. So for two years I looked for a way out. When I thought about escaping, it gave me a psychological boost.

The doctor

의사

I hoped to work abroad as a doctor in the Middle East or Africa. But to work overseas you have to pass security screening to make

From: Hyesan, Age: 42
Escaped in 2014

sure you're ideologically sound and aren't going to defect. That's a problem that money can't solve and that's where I got blocked. I was very angry, very annoyed. I cursed our society. I am a very capable person, and I was a party member, but even I couldn't make it.

The construction worker

건설 노동자

From: Pyongyang, Age: 40
Escaped in 2015

I worked for three and a half years, but I made only \$2,000 during that time. We were allowed to work overseas for five years maximum, and I was hoping to save \$10,000 and return home proud. I realized it wasn't going to happen, so I started looking for a chance to escape.

The university student

대학생

From: Sariwon, Age: 37
Escaped in 2013

I was so disgusted with the system. I didn't have freedom to speak my mind, or to travel anywhere I wanted, or even to wear what I wanted. It was like living in a prison. We were monitored all the time by our neighborhood leader, by the normal police, by the secret police. ► If you ask me what was the worst thing about North Korea, I'd say: Being born there.



259 Comments

More stories

This thin ribbon of land separates North and South Korea. Why should we care?

Korea's demilitarized zone explained.

Twenty-five million reasons the U.S. hasn't struck North Korea

How Kim Jong Un's regime would retaliate.

Most Read

Follow Post Graphics

Twitter

Facebook

Tumblr