

In Order to Live: a North Korean Girl's Journey to Freedom

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Born weighing less than three pounds, Yeonmi Park, had to fight to survive infancy. Her can-do spirit and inner resiliency also kept her alive through the Great Famine that struck North Korea in the 1990s. Park describes the horror that descended upon North Korea after Russia and China stopped supporting their economy. In the far north, Park's mother and father had to scramble for work. Most of the manufacturing jobs in their city disappeared so Yeonmi's father began selling on the black market. Even doing this dangerous work, the family tottered on the edge of famine often, and at other times did quite well. But well in this context was relative. In the flush periods, the Parks had rice three times daily, and meat only two or three times a month.

Park also describes the rigid class groupings the North Korean government enforced. There were three classes (*songbun*) and movement between them went in only direction, down.

The highest was the 'core' class composed of honored revolutionaries who had fought for or died for the North. The second was considered 'basic or wavering' class. It included anyone who had lived in South Korea, merchants, intellectuals, and those who could not be trusted to remain loyal to the government. Finally, there was the 'hostile' class composed of former landowners, South Korean soldiers, Christians, and the families of political prisoners extending down three generations.

Although Yeonmi's paternal family had been landowners, they were in the highest class until one of Yeonmi's uncles, a teacher, was accused of raping a schoolgirl. This may or may not have happened, but the possible crime demoted the entire extended clan into the basic class.

The book shows you what life was like in North Korea at the end of the last century. Yeonmi describes many nights without electricity. She also shares details of everyday life: the joy she felt seeing firecrackers in China on national holidays, the corpse she and her sister discovered of a man who'd starved to death, the nights she and her sister had to keep each other alive when both parents left them to go make money.

But all is not darkness here, she describes the joy and closeness her family felt without any distractions, digital or electronic. How they told each other stories, played simple games, how simple toys made from trash satisfied them.

One involving section, describes her first visit to Pyongyang, a city every child knows about in North Korea but seldom sees. The journey there by train took several days even though it was only a little over two hundred miles from her city. There, Yeonmi was amazed by a ride in an elevator and her first visit to the zoo.

When returning home—the brilliant dream over—she watched starving children beg for garbage as they hung onto the train long after it started moving. Yeonmi saw only one thing in their eyes: not curiosity, not questions, but an animal need to survive. Later, the train screeched to a halt when one of the children fell off and died. Although nonfiction, this book is as gripping as a novel. Halfway through the focus changes to China after Yeonmi, her sister, and her mother decide there is no future for the family in North Korea and leave for China.

No simple project, this entailed finding a smuggler who took them over the border. Yeonmi's sister left first. In fact, this is the only way, Yeonmi succeeds in getting her mother to leave. Because he was too ill to accompany them, their father stayed behind, but he was 100% behind their move. After their dad was caught smuggling again, the girls had absolutely no future there.

But China was not nirvana. It involved human trafficking and other terrible things. But you know from the onset that this book has a happy ending. And it's compelling to see the modern world through a young teenager's eyes, first exposed to ordinary delights such as cellphones, gyms, television soap operas, and ever disposable chopsticks in a restaurant. And food, enough for once, to fill Yeonmi's belly. This book is a wonderful complement to several books recently published about this country, too long shrouded in secrecy. Try two of my favorites: *The Orphan Master's Son* and *Without You, There is No Us: My Time with the Sons of North Korea's Elite*.

Posted by Dory L. on January 27, 2016

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