

YEONMI PARK

The North Korean Defector

Samantha B McMurdock recently had a chat with North Korean defector Yeonmi Park who escaped *“the darkest place on earth”*.

Yeonmi Park was born 27 years ago in Hyesan, North Korea to a civil servant father who worked as part of the ruling Workers’ Party and mother who was a nurse for the North Korean Army. By North Korean standards, the Park family were well-to-do (*they owned a bicycle, which is the equivalent to a top of the range BMW here*) but when Yeonmi was 9, her father was caught ‘*illegally trading*’, selling sugar, rice and later copper so his children could eat and was sent to a hard labour prison camp. Bearing in mind that even a doctor only earns \$1 per month (*and the cost of living does not correlate with the wages*), so families are forced into “*illegal*” trading to feed themselves and their children despite the threat of the consequences, not to mention having the whole family placed down the caste system and the next three generations of the family penalised (*‘crimes’ are punished to the third generation*).

THE KIM DYNASTY CASTE SYSTEM

From as long as Yeonmi can remember, the propaganda was piped into their homes (*like it is in all North Korean homes to brainwash*) and depending where you fall within the caste system dictates every single aspect of your life - where you are allowed to live, whether you’ll receive an education, what job you’re assigned, what you’ll eat... Many people are living in caste systems dependent upon how their great-grandparents aligned themselves with Kim Il Sung!

There’s three classes: The Opportunity Class (*highest ranking and 25% of this group are SK ‘royalty’, i.e. the Core Class within this Opportunity Class*),

The Wavering Class (*the bracket Yeonmi and her family were part of - 30% of the population*)

Finally the lowest - The Hostile Class (*which Yeonmi and her family were placed in after her father committed a ‘crime’. This crime means every future generation cannot move beyond this level*). These people have no hope, their lives are bleak and they’ll eventually die of starvation or a starvation-related illness.



North Koreans do not have friends (*“we have comrades”*). The Kim Dynasty make sure of that. From very early childhood each child (*and adult*) has to take part in a *Self-Criticism Session* each Saturday where they confess their wrongdoings and must inform on the misdeeds of one other child/person, or you yourself will face punishment. Yeonmi tells me of one boy who’d told a classmate he’d watched a film from South Korea and another child reported him, resulting in the child and his family being sent to a concentration camp.

“That’s how the regime control our minds ad behaviours,” Yeonmi explains.

THE ESCAPE

In 2007, Yeonmi (*aged 13 and just 4 stones*) and her sister (16) decided to escape.

“We were starving,” Yeonmi explains, *“and starvation leads to death in North Korea.”*

“I didn’t even know what the concept escape was, but I could see the lights in China and I wondered if we went to where the light was, would there be a bowl of rice.... You can’t

imagine life in North Korea, there’s no words in any language to describe life there, it’s like being on a different planet.”

Yeonmi’s sister Eunmi left one night without telling the family and knowing they’d be severely punished/tortured Yeonmi and her mother left in the pitch black, clambering down the frozen Yalu River (*which divides NK and China*). With patrols above and below, every 100 yards manned by soldiers with guns primed, Yeonmi and her mother knew the odds were stacked against them. They’d paid a North Korean smuggler to bribe some guards

...the child and his family sent to a concentration camp



**“My father never knew
there was all this food
in the world”**

to look the other way, but with no food in their stomachs and a severe intestinal infection, Yeonmi had to use every fibre of her being to put one foot in front of the other - each step over the rough terrain resulting in overwhelming pain.

After countless miles of arduous trekking, the guard made a phone call and whispered, “Run” and she and her mother arrived in China. But they were far from safe.

Once in ‘safety’, Yeonmi and her mother tried to track Eunmi down but some traffickers realised they’d escaped and blackmailed them. One of the men tugged at Yeonmi’s clothing and her mother intervened saying they could rape her if they left her daughter alone. They savagely raped Yeonmi’s mother repeatedly.

“I didn’t know what it was... In North Korea we don’t know about compassion or even love, we aren’t taught it and if you aren’t taught something, you don’t know it. I’m not a psychopath, but we don’t have those feelings because we haven’t been taught them. If I saw someone being hurt on the street now, I’d have compassion because I understand what it is, I’d do everything in my power to help - whatever it took.”

The traffickers sold Yeonmi as

a mistress (sex slave) to a man who would pay the high price for a virgin, but didn’t want her mother. Yeonmi said she’d comply with whatever he wanted if he’d just buy her mother too, which he did for a meagre few quid. Christian missionaries received a tip-off that two North Koreans had just been sold as sex slaves and miraculously managed to rescue them, walking them through the Mongolian border, where they followed the North Star as a guide, 20km across the freezing dessert- finally making it to freedom in South Korea.

“The happiest thing was getting food, being able to eat. Knowing we could have food.”

Without spoiling Yeonmi’s book for you (*which you must read*), mother and daughter were still far from free - the South Korean authorities found them and placed them in a detention centre. Yeonmi and her mum produced their blade (*they carried it so they could slit their own throats instead of being tortured to death by authorities*) and threatened to kill themselves if they were sent back. Almost 3 years after taking that first step to freedom, the pair were released by Mongolian officials. Park and her mother would be reunited with Eunmi but quickly





discovered her father had died; he'd made it across to China thanks to smugglers but was very weak due to life in NK and advanced colon cancer, sadly dying soon after.

"My heart breaks," Yeonmi says, taking a deep breath, "Knowing my father has never known this kind of democracy. I started to think about food. My father never knew there was all this food in the world. It's heartbreaking."

Kim Jong-un - "We viewed our leader as Almighty God."

I'm unnerved by Yeonmi's revelation that she didn't understand compassion or love until she learned it, so ask her "What was your definition of love in North Korea?"

"There's no word for love in North Korea except to love our leader. There's no word for romantic love, when there's no word for such concepts, we can't understand them. We viewed our leader as Almighty God. We were taught that he could read our thoughts so I was constantly terrified to think. We're constantly told how he's starving and working constantly for us and when I was younger, my heart broke for him, yet when I got to South Korea someone explained that he's a dictator with countless big cars and resorts not to mention a very luxurious life."

Didn't it ever dawn on you that he's rotund? I ask.

"[Laughs] not at the time but I remember afterwards seeing a picture and thinking, 'He's the biggest person in the picture He can't be starving. Someone told me he was fat and I didn't know what that meant. If you've never practised critical thinking then you see what you're told to see."

Yeonmi Park is an inspirational woman. At just 27-years-old she has witnessed the horrors of the cruelest dictatorship in the world, escaped (*one of just 200 defectors over 75 years*) and works tirelessly as a human rights activist for her people. She cries as she speaks of the Kippumjo (*The Pleasure Squad*) where young girls are torn from their families to service high ranking North Koreans (*whose 'sell-by date' is their 23rd birthday*), the struggles to maintain her composure as she speaks of the young girls sold

within her mother country for pennies and she tells me how North Korean men are trafficked to Russia for labour and worked to death for next to no pay, building statues as their loved ones are held in ransom. I am curious how a young woman who had to be taught to love, who has witnessed unthinkable torture and never understood the concept of trust could be the beautiful, well-spoken, confident, trusting Columbia University student, wife and mother to a 4-year-old and champion of her people. Yeonmi Park really is an inspiration of our time.

As we exchange small-talk at the end of our chat, Yeonmi tells me, "You know, it only took three generations to turn North Korea into George Orwell's 1984. And the thing is, once people are slaves, they don't know they're slaves. We must all be careful that we don't allow our countries to become like North Korea, and I can see it more and more, not having freedom of speech, like on the internet too, not having freedom to travel, not being allowed to work ... these things are like North Korea. We must be vigilant. I have lived this. I see it.

Despite our serious conversation, I'm overwhelmed by the childlike awe that Yeonmi expresses in the simplest of things, like lights, books, the internet, movies, hot food deliveries (*Yeonmi loves to talk about food - and who can blame her?*) and being a free woman in the United States. Yeonmi tells me about a bootleg copy of the film Titanic she saw at 4-years-old which "*gave me my first taste of freedom.*" Yet, her thoughts are never far from, what she calls "*my people*" - for every laugh or every light piece of conversation, Yeonmi remembers something that takes her back to North Korea.

"I dream North Korea. It's always there. It never leaves," clearing her throat. "*It's the same for every North Korean defector It will never leave us.*"

* Highly recommended read: *In Order to Live: A North Korean Girl's Journey to Freedom* by Yeonmi Park