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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“OVERCOMING NORTH KOREA” BY LUCIA JANG AND SUSAN ELIZABETH MCCLELLAND

CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.



In 1993, a famine began in North Korea caused by the breakdown in the communist country’s food distribution network, the collapse of its main trading partner, the Soviet Union, as well as a brutal series of severe floods and droughts. **Only the elite in Pyongyang, the capital, escaped hunger and Lucia Jang’s family wasn’t one of them.** She survived but million people starved to death by the end of that decade.

Lucia, like many young women, became her family's breadwinner, stealing herself across the Tumen River in and out of China to smuggle and trade goods. **At that time, her abusive husband sold his and Lucia's first-born son for a few won (North Korean currency) and some bars of soap.** Traumatized, surviving on tree bark and handouts, Lucia agreed to be sold to a Chinese man in the hopes that he would be kind to her and send money and food back to her parents. **She felt she had to be trafficked as a concubine to save them from decaying.**

North Korean women, as Lucia discovered, are in high demand. China's decades-long one child policy, the general preference for male babies and the subsequent waves of female infanticide had resulted in a dramatic shortage of women in China. Still, the country views all North Koreans as illegal work migrants not as refugees and doesn't grant them protection of any kind—no status, citizenship, even their marriages are not recognized—against every manner of sexual, emotional and physical abuse. **If they are caught as illegal immigrants, the women are deported back to North Korea where they are imprisoned, tortured and often starved.**

Such was the case with Lucia who suffered a further blow for during one of her prison sentences she became pregnant. North Korea sees babies conceived outside of the country, even those with two North Korean parents, as half-breeds. Pregnant women in prison are forced to abort their fetuses.

But this is the story of Lucia who tricked authorities and escaped North Korea a month after her second son was born. She and the baby traveled through China and, with the help of an underground network of human smugglers, fled across the border into Mongolia, where she surrendered to authorities and was taken to South Korea which granted her asylum and then citizenship.

Today, Lucia is one of the only women to speak publicly about the sex trafficking she has endured. She does so to raise awareness, build compassion, help end human trafficking and human rights abuses in both China and North Korea.

Stars Between the Sun and Moon by Lucia Jang and Susan McClelland (WW Norton and Company Inc.)

Below is an excerpt from the book when after having been deported back to North-Korea, a pregnant Lucia confronts her prison's guards.

When Lucia was a child she believed like everyone else that she lived in the best country in the world. She called the leader Kim Il Sung father, but one so superior that she was not allowed to even look at him. When the famine hit North Korea in the early 1990s, Lucia crossed into China to provide food for her family and eventually sold herself for sex in the hope of saving them. Twice, she was caught and sent to a detention center. The second time she was pregnant.

Excerpts

"What do you plan on doing with the baby?" the prison interrogator demanded.

I had been back in Onsung Jipgyulso for a few days. The two other women in the interrogation room with me, one seven months pregnant like I was, the other far less along, already knew their babies' fates: abortion.

I closed my eyes tight. I felt like the tiger that wished a rope would fall from the sky and take him away. I didn't want to be the sun or the moon, just the stars in between.

"I've made arrangements," I said finally, making it up as I went. "I've made arrangements for the child to be given away after it's born."

Silence filled the room. I thought the interrogator was going to reach out and slap me. But I held my head high. If my child was going to die, I was going to die with it. That much I did know.

"You two," the interrogator yelled at the other women, "out that door." He pointed to a back exit. "You," he barked at me. "Back to your cell."

The cell was empty except for two elderly women and a teenager with the bottom half of a leg missing. I stood by the window and stared out over the barren field. It was a chilly day, the clouds heavy and black. The window was cracked allowing the wind to howl through it.

A shiver ran through me as I felt you, my baby, kick.

I wrapped my arms around my stomach. At that moment, a light snow began to fall. But instead of feeling cold, I felt heat. Taebum, for the first time in a long time, I felt heat move through me.

"Jjanghago haeddulnal Doraondanda . . ." I sang softly. "A bright sunny day is to come back."

*I didn't move from my position until the other inmates had shuffled in from work. The cell was bursting with prisoners. **There were twice as many as when I had first been here. We were boxed in, bumping elbows as we drank our evening soup of mushy corn.** China had been cracking down on us, since there were so many women leaving Chosun.*

"You may have a lucky day coming," the woman on the other side chimed.

I didn't even know the year, let alone the date, I realized. "Why?" I asked.

"Because I've heard that a group called the United Nations has ordered Chosun to stop killing the babies of inmates. It's putting pressure on the Party to release pregnant women, children and the old." My eyes rested on the elderly women in the cell who were coughing and wheezing. They could not eat their soup. Many inmates were sick with diarrhea.

Nothing changed right away. Over the next two weeks, several women died. I cared for the infirm as best I could. When the workers went out in the mornings, I would stroke the heads of the sick, holding their hands when they moaned, their bodies writhing in pain. I used sanitary pads cleaned with soap and cold water as cold compresses for their foreheads when they had fever. In exchange, I took the soup that the sick women were unable to eat. I could feel my baby growing stronger.

On a day in mid-summer an interrogator informed me stiffly that I would be moved to the collection centre near my family's house. I didn't have time to think about whether this was a positive omen because I came down with the intestinal illness so many other prisoners had. I woke in the middle of the night, soaked in sweat, pain gripping my body. **"She's having the baby," a prisoner screamed at the guard pacing back and forth.**

"Wake three other inmates and hold her down," he shout- ed. Four women each took a part of my body, two my legs, the other two my arms. But my water never broke.

"She's not giving birth," one prisoner said. "She's got the sickness."

The pain got worse. I spent hours crouching over the hole in the ground we used for a toilet, but nothing came. I finally made a request of one of my prison mates, who had been detained for a petty crime. She was assigned to prepare our food and so was allowed to leave the prison during the day to get supplies. I handed her one of my pairs of pants. "Try and get five hundred won for these. Then, with the money, buy me some pills to make me well."

Late the next day, the woman slipped me ten pills.

I took three a day, and within a few days I started to regain my strength. I felt the baby kicking again. I was recovering.

A few nights later, I dreamed of the tunnel of poplar trees again. This time I was farther along the tunnel. The light that was drawing me toward it was brighter. When I woke, though my legs wobbled and I thought I would faint from the rush of blood to my head, I was able to walk. I managed to stay upright as a guard led me to the interrogation room. He directed me to sign some papers, and then he said I could go home.

I felt so faint when the sun hit my eyes, I had to lean against a wall. But I eventually managed, without help, to make it to the front gate. A guard opened it for me, and I walked out and into my mother's arms. She draped a coat around my shoulders and let me lean on her as we moved down the streets.

"Why did they release me?" I asked her once we were on the train.

"I don't know. They just told me to come and get you. The head of the local committee is coming by later. She's been put in charge of watching you. It's Mihwa's mother."

At my parents' house, we ate an evening meal of corn rice and cucumber. My mother did what she always had, giving me much of her portion and taking little for herself. I lay back on my mat and was drifting off to sleep when my mother called for me to sit up. Mihwa's mother had arrived.

"You were released because there are too many prisoners," Mihwa's mother explained, settling into a sitting position on the floor beside me. "You can have the baby at home but Sun-hwa, I do not have good news for you. The baby will be killed after it is born."

I clenched my fists in an attempt to contain the anger bubbling up inside of me. I knew my release was too good to be true.

"Sunhwa, a year ago you were sentenced to three years in prison. You were released after nine months on a general amnesty and on your assurance that you would not return to China. You returned, however, so after the baby is born, you will go back to prison to finish your sentence."

"Which prison?" my mother asked. Her eyes were lost, vacant.

"Kyohwaso," Mihwa's mother replied. My mother slumped forward, and my father stood up and started pacing the room. "I have to fulfill my duties," the head of the committee continued. Her eyes bored into mine. "You are under watch. I will be checking in on you."

I nodded to show I understood.

"These are the facts," Mihwa's mother concluded. She shuffled her body right up against mine. "Do something about it," she said so softly, I almost didn't hear.

My body stiffened. I looked at my mother, who shook her head indicating I should not ask questions.

When Mihwa's mother's footsteps had disappeared, my father and mother exchanged glances. My father went into his room, closing the door behind him.

My mother took me by the elbow. "Wash yourself, change into several pairs of pants and tops, and then go to your uncle's house in the mountains," she said.

I gazed into her dark eyes, which were filled with tears.

*"Your father and I knew what Mihwa's mother was going to say. He believes you should finish your sentence and fulfill your revolutionary duties. He doesn't want you to keep the baby. But I know now what it is like to lose a child. **I know your brother Hyungchul is dead. I can feel it. Go, do whatever you want with your baby, but don't come back here with it, ever.**"*