

DEAR LEADER

My Escape from North Korea

Jang Jin-sung

Translated by Shirley Lee

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A LITTLE after midnight, just as I'm settling into bed, the phone begins to ring. I decide not to answer before the fifth ring, and hope it will stop before then. When it rings a sixth time, I imagine my parents waking up, disturbed, and I pick up. I am ready to give whoever is on the other end a good telling-off.

"Hello?" In the silent house my voice sounds more intrusive than the ringing phone.

"This is the first party secretary."

At these words, I jerk upright and jar my skull against the headboard.

"I am issuing an Extraordinary Summons. Report to work by one a.m. Wear a suit. You are not to notify anyone else."

Although in this country we are accustomed to obeying even the strangest command as a matter of course, it's disconcerting that the first party secretary himself has just given me an order. He is the Central Party liaison for our department. Under normal circumstances, I would expect to receive orders from the party secretary of Division 19 or Section 5, in keeping with my position in the party's organizational hierarchy. On top of that, he has used the term "Extraordinary Summons."

This usually refers to the mobilization of troops. When the United States and South Korea perform joint military exercises on the Korean peninsula, our nation responds by conducting nationwide mobilization drills. The call to take part in these is referred to as

an “Extraordinary Summons.” But we are usually notified through deliberate leaks in advance of such a call. Individual Workers’ Party units and sections, under fierce pressure to outperform their rivals, are always seeking to gain an edge: employees of those well connected enough to be in the know remain at work on the specified day, reporting for duty ahead of those who unwittingly went home for the evening.

However, if this were a standard military mobilization summons, I would not have been asked to wear a suit. We cadres who belong to the Central Party, unlike ordinary North Koreans attached to regional or departmental Party branches, know that an “Extraordinary Summons” can also lead to an encounter with Kim Jong-il, our “Dear Leader.”

When someone is summoned to meet him, there is no advance notification. Not even the highest-ranking generals are made aware of the operational details of these meetings. An invitation to meet Kim is relayed through a first party secretary, who is summoned to a party committee room that has been placed under lockdown by the Dear Leader’s personal bodyguards. Under their close surveillance, the first party secretary receives a list of names and issues the individual summons for each cadre, with the logistics of the encounter carried out in strict secrecy. In this situation, the term “Extraordinary Summons” is the code phrase that sets this clandestine process in motion.

But the same phrase can have a third, more perturbing meaning. The Ministry of State Security uses it when carrying out secret purges of high-ranking officials. On receiving an “Extraordinary Summons” at night, a cadre might leave his house alone, taking care not to wake his family, before disappearing into a prison camp or being executed.

Thankfully, I am confident that the third scenario will not apply to me. In fact, I can’t wait to leave the house. Only a few days ago, the first party secretary dropped a subtle hint of glory to come.

As instructed, I put on my best suit and tie. In Pyongyang, there are no taxis available after midnight, and motor vehicles must have a special night license to travel after this time. So although it is pitch dark outside, I hop on my bicycle and pedal to work. Bicycles are one of the main forms of transport, but unlike most bikes, mine is brand new and has been specially shipped to me by a relative stationed overseas.

Outside, there are no streetlights lit. The silence of the capital city is so absolute that I can only sense the presence of passers-by before their dark shapes loom into my vision. The electricity supply is in a perpetual state of emergency, even though there are two power stations serving the city. The ageing Pyongyang Thermoelectric Plant was built with Soviet support in 1961, and the East Pyongyang Thermoelectric Plant was built in 1989, but neither produces enough power to supply more than one district of the city at a time. So, like a roaming ghost, power settles in rotation on sections of Pyongyang for about four hours a day.

One area of the city is always bright, though: the Joong-gu area, which lies at the heart of Pyongyang. This is where Central Party offices, senior cadres’ residential areas, and buildings for foreigners, such as the Koryo Hotel, are located. My workplace, Office 101 of the United Front Department (UFD), lies at the heart of this bright central district. Nearing the compound, I notice that it is more brightly lit than usual, with the grounds as well as the usual guard posts lit up. As I enter the gates, I exclaim to myself, “Yes! I am going to meet the General!”

In the courtyard stand thirty or more soldiers dressed in the dark mustard-colored uniform of the Dear Leader’s personal guards. They wear the characteristic X-shaped leather harness that supports a pistol on each side. Three beige Nissan vans with curtained windows are parked one behind the other, each big enough for a dozen passengers. The party secretary for South Korean Affairs greets

me in person, beside whom the prestige of the first party secretary, who phoned me earlier, pales in comparison. He leads me toward a two-star general with a clipboard, who seems to be supervising the operation. The other soldiers refer to the man as Comrade Deputy Director.

After briefly looking me up and down, the general barks, "Stand him over there!" I look over to where he is pointing and see the nation's most senior cadres in the sphere of inter-Korean relations standing in line: the party secretary for South Korean Affairs Kim Yong-sun, UFD First Deputy Director Im Tong-ok, UFD Policy Director Chae Chang-guk, UFD Policy Deputy Director Park Young-su, and two other cadres from the Department for the Peaceful Unification of the Homeland. The atmosphere is tense, and with six powerful men standing in line like schoolchildren, I feel uncomfortable about greeting them. I go to stand at the end of the line.

"Are we meeting the General?" As I whisper to the man in front of me, a voice yells, "Don't talk! Understand?"

I look indignantly at the soldier, about to demand that he speak to me in a more respectful way, but the vicious light in his eyes quickly puts me in my place.

One by one, Comrade Deputy Director checks our identification documents against his list. We climb in silence into the middle vehicle according to our position on the list. We take our assigned seats. The soldier who yelled at me for whispering is the last to step into the van. I'd thought he had treated me condescendingly because I am only in my twenties, but now I hear him speaking in a rude, officious manner even to Central Party cadres who are twice his age.

"Don't open the curtains! Don't get out of your seat! Don't talk!" he barks. Even more alarming than his insolence is the fact that my comrades meekly reply, "Yes, sir." Even Kim Yong-sun and Im Tong-ok, two of the most senior cadres in the country, are lowly men in the presence of the Dear Leader's personal guards.

Through the open door of the van, I watch the remaining soldiers scramble into the other two vehicles. Soon, the door is pulled shut and the engine starts. As the van begins its journey, my stomach churns with anxiety, but I know that an encounter with the Dear Leader is a wondrously momentous event.

Thick brown curtains seal off the windows and separate us from the driver. Unable to see out of the van, I begin to feel a little carsick. After a two-hour journey in silence, and much to my relief, we finally arrive at a railway station. It is around 4 a.m. We climb out of the van and as I regain my bearings I realize we have come to Yongsung, a First Class station. In a population of over 20 million, there have only been two First Class Citizens: Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. First Class stations are reserved exclusively for their use, and there are dozens of these stations scattered across the country. The station roofs are camouflaged in green to make them difficult to spot through satellite imagery. At ground level, the buildings are unmarked, but heavily armed guards patrol them and they are enclosed by high walls.

Yongsung Station is in the northern outskirts of Pyongyang, usually less than half an hour away from where we began our journey. I recognize my surroundings because I have passed by the place on several occasions. At first, I'm puzzled that it has taken so long to get here, but I can't suppress a grin when I realize that the vans have tried to confuse us by taking a deliberately circuitous route. As we move from the van to a train, we go through another series of identity checks.

The special train reserved for this occasion is different from ordinary trains. The sides of the carriage are painted grass green and the roof is white. From the outside, the markings suggest that it was made in China: above the door handles the word "Beijing" is painted in bright red Chinese characters. But when I step into the carriage, I spot prominent Mitsubishi logos that betray its true origin in Japan. The seats in the carriage have been replaced by single beds and

everything is arranged open-plan, presumably so that the guards can keep watch over us.

As at the start of the journey, the rules are barked out: "Don't touch the curtains. There are blankets under the beds. Remain in your bed throughout the journey. Sleep until the train comes to a stop. Notify us if you wish to use the toilet. Break any of these rules and you'll be removed from the train—immediately."

The guard takes care to put added emphasis on that final word. I feel that if I make one wrong move, I might be thrown off this train and out of my privileged existence altogether. During the long night ride no one speaks a word, not even to ask to use the toilet. There is only the sound of the train rattling along the tracks. I close my eyes and count the rhythmic beats, trying hard to fall asleep.

The special train dispatched for just seven civilians comes to a halt at around six in the morning. We have stopped at Galma, a First Class station in Gangwon province. When I step down from the carriage, the cool dawn air on my face is refreshing. I realize how tense I've been in the presence of the soldiers. Policy Director Chae Chang-guk elbows me as he overtakes me and flashes a grin. He's like a child, unable to contain his excitement.

We are transferred once again, to another waiting van. After an hour's drive, again in silence, we climb out at a small pier surrounded on all sides by cement barriers, where we board a waiting launch. The waves lap gently, but the brackish smell of seawater is overwhelming.

The boat starts with a lurch and a deafening roar as the engine sparks into life. A moment later, I absorb the fact that I am on a boat for the first time in my life. It accelerates recklessly, seemingly intent on tossing me into the waves. I lean forward to hold on to the railing, but a soldier suddenly puts his arms around me from behind and pins down my hands. A shiver runs down my spine. I tell myself that the closer we get to the Dear Leader, the stronger must be our show of faith in him. I glance around and see that each of the six other

passengers is similarly held in place by a soldier acting as a human safety belt. Staring back into the distance, where the two strands of white foam in our wake merge into one continuous stream, I shout at the top of my voice over the engine's roar, "Is this a Navy boat?"

My guard smirks, even as his forehead wrinkles with the effort of understanding what I am trying to say above the racket of the engine. "The Navy? Hah! The Navy doesn't have a boat as speedy as this. This one's ours. It belongs to the Guards Command. It's pretty fast, isn't it?" The Guards Command is responsible for the protection of Kim's household. It comprises one hundred thousand infantry, seamen, and pilots.

Although he has to shout, I notice how my guard has abandoned his officiousness and talks conversationally, perhaps because we are speaking without an audience. This makes me feel a little more at ease. The boat is very fast: a cap blows off the head of one of the guards and flies off into the sea, where it lands on the water. I watch it grow smaller among the waves and then disappear.

After about twenty minutes, we slow down near a tree-covered island. I wonder if we have been going round in circles within a small area, just as we had done on the journey to Yongsung Station. The bow of the boat drops and the island comes into clear view. From the pristine wharf to the manicured woods on either side of the pavement, everything is spotless. It looks as though the place was completed yesterday. I realize I had been expecting to find our Dear Leader waiting for us on the pier with wide-open arms, just as he does in the revolutionary movies. It is a bit startling to see that no one is here to greet us.

The guards lead us to a large hut, where we take our seats in a room that is about three-fifths of a square mile. We are told to remain silent. Everything is white: the chairs, the floor, the walls. There are no windows. Instead, there are squares of green-tinged light shining from built-in wall panels.

At half past noon, more than four hours after we arrived on the island, there is a sudden burst of activity around us. Guards wearing white gloves spray something onto the chair where the Dear Leader will sit.

Comrade Deputy Director makes us stand in line again. We are ordered to take off our watches and hand them in, as part of the security procedure. Each of us is then handed a small envelope. The outer packaging has Japanese characters printed on it. Inside, there is a small cotton wipe that smells of alcohol. Comrade Deputy Director instructs us: "You must clean your hands before shaking hands with the General." He then comes forward, singling me out for a stern instruction: "You must *not* look into the General's eyes." He gestures to the second button of his uniform jacket and says, "You must look here. Understand?"

I wonder whether this is intended to impress on me my inferiority to Dear Leader, but the thought quickly passes. We continue to wait as Comrade Deputy Director finalizes seating arrangements. Again, I'm at the back of the line. There are seven civilians in the room, and more than twenty guards around us. We stand rigidly, staring in silence at a pair of closed gates for perhaps ten more minutes. They are large and white, and decorated with gilded flowers.

When the gates finally open, a guard with the rank of colonel marches through and stands to attention. "The General will now enter the room," he announces.

Everyone and everything turns to stone. Keeping my head still, I focus my gaze on a point halfway up the arch where Kim Jong-il's face will soon appear.

Another minute seems to pass. Unexpectedly, a small white puppy tumbles into the room. It is a Maltese with a curly coat. An old man follows, chasing after the puppy that belongs to him. We raise our voices in unison to salute Dear Leader.

"Long live the General! Long live the General!"

Our combined cheer hurts my eardrums, but the puppy is

unperturbed by the noise, probably used to such fanfare. However, the Dear Leader must be pleased that his puppy has shown such courage, because he bends down to stroke it. He then mutters something into its ear.

I feel let down when I see the Dear Leader up close, because I am confronted by an old man who looks nothing like the familiar image of the People's Leader. Even though we are clapping fervently and cheering for him, he doesn't respond or even seem to notice. He continues to play with his puppy, as if resentful of being surrounded by men who are younger than him. Seeming to read my mind, he looks up and my heart skips a beat. As if we had all been waiting for this moment, we cheer even more loudly.

"Long live the General! Long live the General!"

He glances round the room, then strides in my direction.

I prepare myself for the glorious encounter, but he walks straight past me, halting before a slogan displayed on the wall behind us. In yellow letters on a red background, it reads: *Let's Serve Great Leader Comrade Kim Jong-il by Offering up our Lives!*

He calls out, "Kim Yong-sun!" Party Secretary Kim Yong-sun hurries to his side. Kim Jong-il asks him, "Is this hand-painted? Or is it printed?" In this close proximity, his voice indeed belongs to a great leader. Every syllable resonates with absolute authority.

Seeing Kim Yong-sun falter, the comrade deputy director answers in his place: "Sir, it's hand-painted."

Kim Jong-il says, "This looks good. When I went somewhere last week, I saw slogans printed on enamel. But this hand-painted one looks much better, don't you think?"

This time, Kim Yong-sun is ready with his answer. "Yes, sir, I agree. In fact, I already made inquiries about this. But I was informed that we will continue to produce enameled slogans, as hand-painted slogans require the use of costly imports."

Kim Jong-il ignores him. He steps back a few paces, inspects the slogan for a few more seconds, and gives an order with a quick wave

of his hand: "Replace existing versions of this slogan throughout the country with hand-painted ones."

I attempt some mental arithmetic. How much would this project cost? At that very moment, the General wheels round, catching me off guard, and thunders, "You, boy! Are you the one who wrote that poem about the gun barrel?"

I bark my carefully worded response: "Yes, General! I am honoured to be in your presence!"

He smirks as he approaches me. "Someone wrote it for you, isn't that right? Don't even think about lying to me. I'll have you killed."

As I begin to panic, the Dear Leader bursts into hearty laughter and punches me on the shoulder. "It's a compliment, you silly fool. You've set the standard for the whole *Songun* era."

I find myself unable to respond, and it doesn't help that Kim Yong-sun is glaring at me. Before the General takes his seat, Kim Yong-sun finds an opportunity to scold me. "You stupid bastard. You should have thanked him. You should have responded by offering to write poems of loyalty even from your grave," he hisses into my ear.

When he is done with me, he puts his joyous face back on and rushes to attend to Kim Jong-il. Returning to his own seat, he gently smooths his hands over his buttocks before they touch the chair, just as a woman does with her dress as she sits down. The other cadres are no less formal. Instead of real people sitting on chairs, it is as if sculptures are set around the room, incapable of movement. The Dear Leader's Maltese puppy is the most active being in the room, whimpering excitedly and pacing around its owner's feet.

Kim Jong-il seems not to be interested in small talk and the white Maltese puppy holds his attention. The General remains focused on what the dog is doing, what it might be thinking. But every now and then he shouts, "Hey, Im Tong-ok!" or "Hey, Chae Chang-guk!" and the chosen man rushes toward him to be consulted. It makes for a strange scene, in which he holds the puppy in higher esteem than any of his most loyal men.

Ten or fifteen minutes later, a pair of double doors opens. Men in white dinner jackets and red bow ties appear with salvers held high. At the other end of the room technicians are bent double, humbly moving to and fro on the stage, adjusting the microphone and lighting. The band are seated and strike up; the feast is about to begin. I can't help but feel it's all a bit of an anticlimax, having expected to hear a sublime new saying or pearl of wisdom from the Dear Leader. But as the food and music get under way, I lose myself in the occasion. I become mesmerized.

Every time a new course is brought into the room, the lights in the wall panels change to an eerie new color. When the vegetable dish comes out, the lights go from a vivid grass green to light purple; with the meat dish, the lights go from pink to a deep red. It is astonishing to discover that lighting can be part of a meal's presentation. As for the fish course, the platter it is presented on glitters so spectacularly that I can't taste the food. Tiny spotlights are set around the big gray serving platter, making the fish scales shimmer.

The wine is slightly tangy. My steward, who like all Kim Jong-il's staff belongs to the Guards Command and has a military rank, points to a label on the bottle that reads *Baedansul*. He describes its contents to a label on the bottle that reads *Baedansul*. He describes its contents as an 80 percent-proof liquor developed by the Foundational Sciences Institute. This is the academic body devoted to the study of the Dear Leader's health, and as such also falls under the Guards Command. Three thousand researchers work there, planning and preparing medicines and dishes specifically designed to extend Kim Jong-il's longevity. In order to test the effects of different medicines and foods, they operate a testing unit made up of men selected from a nationwide pool that shares his illnesses and physique. I am proud to understand more than most about this important work, as a friend's older brother works at the institute.

The climax of our banquet is dessert. I am presented with a glass containing a large scoop of ice cream, over which the steward pours clear liquor. He lights the spirit and the flames dance blue and wild.

As I scoop some of it up with a small spoon, flames rise with it. Kim Yong-sun taps me on the shoulder and advises me, "Blow it out first, *then* eat it. Don't have too much, though. It's very strong stuff." He shares the information boastfully.

I lose myself momentarily in the contradictory sensations of heat and cold in my mouth. Then Kim Jong-il waves me over.

When you visit the house or workplace of a cadre who has had the privilege of attending a banquet hosted by the Dear Leader, the wineglass that clinked against his in a toast is always kept in pride of place in a display cabinet. I realize that the Dear Leader wants to provide me with such a treasure. The steward, who has been lingering close by for this moment, quickly hands me a large wineglass. Unprepared, I hastily take it over to Kim Jong-il, who fills it with dark red wine, saying, "Keep up the good work."

As I stand bent double at the waist in a deep bow, my eyes cast down, I can see his feet under the tablecloth. He has taken off his shoes. Even the General suffers the curse of sore feet! I had always thought him divine, not even needing to use the toilet. That's what we were taught at school and that's what the party says: our General's life is a continuous series of blessed miracles, incapable of being matched even by all our mortal lifetimes put together. With this glorious invitation into his circle, I had thought I would enter and partake of a divine dimension in time.

But here I am, looking into his shoes, which have high heels and an inner platform at least two and a half inches high. Those shoes have deceived his people. Although his thin, permed hair adds to the illusion of height, the Dear Leader can't be more than five feet three inches without those shoes.

After his earlier majestic commands, the way the General speaks at the table confounds me too. He uses coarse slang. In all the books and lectures quoting his words that I've read and heard since my childhood, his words serve not only as examples of perfect usage, but also reveal the truth of our homeland. The Dear Leader's speech is

always elegant, beautiful, and, above all, courteous to his people. Yet tonight he muddles subject and predicate. He doesn't even call anyone Comrade, but addresses cadres as "You!" or "Boy!" It's disconcerting.

Towards the end of dessert, the colored lights dim. A woman appears onstage wearing a Western-style white dress that reveals her shoulders. The band starts to play an instrumental prelude, and she begins to sing a Russian folk song.

As she sings, Kim Jong-il starts to twitch. Although the spotlight is on the woman, the protocol of the occasion dictates that we should focus our attention on him alone. We watch as he draws out a gleaming white handkerchief. I blink, and the cadre sitting next to me reaches for his own handkerchief. Oddly, others also begin to withdraw their handkerchiefs. Then the General bows his head a little and starts dabbing at the corners of his eyes. I cannot believe what I am seeing. Here am I, beholding his tears! What will become of me after witnessing such an intimate thing?

My eyes shut tight in awe and terror.

When I open them, I see the most extraordinary thing I have ever seen in my life. My comrades, who have been beaming with the joy of feasting with the Dear Leader, have begun to weep. How did this happen? Can I escape this banquet with my life intact? But before I can think any further, my own eyes feel hot and tears begin to flow down my cheeks. Yes, I must cry. I live my life in loyalty to the General. Loyalty not merely in thought and deed, but loyal obedience from my soul. I must cry, like my comrades. As I repeat these words in my heart, *I must cry, I must cry*, my tears grow hotter, and anguished shouts burst from somewhere deep within me.

Amid my uncontrollable shaking, the song comes to an end. There is no applause, but the room has filled with the sound of wailing. As the lights are slowly turned up, our crying quickly diminishes to whimpers, as if we had practiced together in advance.

Wiping my eyes, I glance round, to look at the faces of the cadres around me. They were crying only moments ago, but they are now

watching the Dear Leader intently, awaiting instructions for the next act of synchronicity. For the first time in my life, loyal obedience makes me cringe.

On my journey back home, I find myself haunted by seeing the General cry. I am aware that North Korea's Propaganda and Agitation Department chose to portray him as full of tears after his father Kim Il-sung's death in 1994, when the state distribution system fell apart all over the country. By early 1995, the rumors that people were starving to death in the provinces were made plausible by what was happening in Pyongyang itself.

When food distribution centers started shutting their doors and the numbers of people absconding from work to find food increased like a virus, the party slogan "If you survive a thousand miles of suffering, there will be ten thousand miles of happiness" was introduced. The state of food emergency was officially referred to as the "Arduous March" and the population was urged to follow the example set by our General, at the forefront of the struggle.

As evidence, the song "The Rice Balls of the General" was played over and over again on television. The song's lyrics claimed that the Dear Leader was traveling hundreds of miles around the country each day to offer support to his people, all while sustained by just one rice ball. Before the Arduous March, television broadcasts had only ever shown the smile of our Leader, as he led us towards a socialist victory. So when they saw the tears of our divine Dear Leader for the first time on television, people began to cry spontaneously, uncontrollably, and en masse.

As I continue on my way homewards, I am profoundly unsettled by my reaction to seeing Kim Jong-il's tears in the flesh. A distressing thought grips me, and it is hard to shake off: those were not the tears of a compassionate divinity but, rather, of a desperate man.

PART ONE DICTATOR