

Dear Leader: My Escape from North Korea

By Jang Jin-sung

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THE STORY THEY COULDN'T HACK: In this international bestseller, a high-ranking counterintelligence agent describes his life as a former poet laureate to Kim Jong-il and his breathtaking escape to freedom.

As North Korea’s State Poet Laureate, Jang Jin-sung led a charmed life. With food provisions (even as the country suffered through its great famine), a travel pass, access to strictly censored information, and audiences with Kim Jong-il himself, his life in Pyongyang seemed safe and secure. But this privileged existence was about to be shattered. When a strictly forbidden magazine he lent to a friend goes missing, Jang Jin-sung must flee for his life.

Never before has a member of the elite described the inner workings of this totalitarian state and its propaganda machine. An astonishing exposé told through the heart-stopping story of Jang Jin-sung’s escape to South Korea, *Dear Leader* is an “impossibly dramatic story…one of the best depictions yet of North Korea’s nightmare” (*Publishers Weekly*).

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Dear Leader: My Escape from North Korea By Jang Jin-sung Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #25729 in Books
- Brand: Atria 37 Ink
- Published on: 2015-01-27
- Released on: 2015-01-27
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.37" h x 1.90" w x 5.50" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 368 pages

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Editorial Review

Review
"Jang Jin-sung demonstrates unique insight into the lifestyle and power structures of North Korea's top elite. The tale, ending with his own dramatic escape, depicts Jang's gradual metamorphosis from total conformist, to serious doubter, to enemy of the state. Dear Leader is a compelling story told with the elegance and poetry of the Orient: a page-turner that will change the way the world sees this enigmatic country."--Susanne Koelbl "Der Spiegel "

"Gripping."--David Pilling "Financial Times "

"A remarkable story of struggle and survival."--Larry Getlen "The New York Post "

"A look inside the mysteries of North Korea by the former poet laureate for the late Kim Jong-il. Likely to fascinate anyone who's read Adam Johnson's Pulitzer-winning novel The Orphan Master's Son."--Jocelyn McClurg "USA Today "

"'Dear Leader is a singular and powerful story, rare not only in its portrait of the inner workings of Pyongyang's elite circles, but rare because a "true writer"--almost unheard of in North Korea--was there to see it and to tell it."--Adam Johnson, author of The Orphan Master's Son

About the Author
Jang Jin-sung is a former poet laureate for North Korean leader Kim Jong-il. Since leaving the country he has become a bestselling author and widely solicited commentator on North Korea. He has been awarded the Rex Warner Literary Prize and read his poetry at London’s Cultural Olympiad in 2012. He now lives in South Korea and is editor in chief of New Focus International, an authoritative website reporting on North Korea.

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6 | IN THE RIFLE SIGHT

YOUNG-MIN and I arrived at the border town of Musan on January 15, 2004. We had traveled a distance of 288 miles. The journey by express train, which should have taken just one day according to the timetable, lasted four extra days. But despite this delay, every single person on board praised the marvel that was the arrival of any long-distance train at its destination. Someone yelled in a characteristically northern accent how, last month, the same trip had been delayed by more than ten days. Young-min and I glanced at each other and smirked.

They say that in January, up north in Hamgyong Province, icicles fall to the ground when you pee. When we city boys from Pyongyang stepped off the train, the sudden exposure to the brutal northern cold came as a shock. Young-min's ears turned bright red with cold. Unlike the large covered station in Pyongyang, Musan Station was a small building about a hundred feet from the tracks. The fencing around us, there to prevent those without travel passes from leaving the station premises, made more of an impression than the station building. The guards blew on their whistles and herded the passengers towards a booth where we were to show our train tickets and travel passes. Young-min and I remained silent, trying to appear inconspicuous, as

we felt our true motives for travel would be obvious to anyone who looked closely at us. We communicated only with our eyes as we walked and, as we drew closer to the guards, we stopped even that.

With the authority granted to us by our Central Party identification papers, we stood at the back of the shortest queue, for Cadres, where only three people waited ahead of us. The other queues, for Military Personnel and Ordinary Residents, stretched far behind. However, the guards seemed to be taking more care over scrutinizing the cadres' passes, perhaps because they had more time to spare on a short queue. In the time the guards conducted one drawn-out interview with a cadre, four people in the line for Ordinary Residents had their documents confiscated without even being given a chance to explain. One of them, even as he was taken away by security agents, struggled to return for his luggage. A guard shouted and cursed at him and, when the man still did not stop struggling, began to kick him with his military boots. If my pass were declared invalid, my fate would be no better.

Finally, it was our turn. I took my identification papers out of my leather briefcase, making sure that the crest of the Workers' Party emblazoned on it in gold was visible. On seeing this, the guard, who had graying hair, tensed and saluted me. I was barely thirty. "Please show me your travel pass, " he said meekly. The special travel pass had already got us through several checkpoints. In North Korea, two types of guards check passengers' travel passes and identification documents every time the train crosses provincial boundaries or city limits; and this applies to both civilian and military passengers.

Although I had passed easily through these barriers, this final checkpoint was the only one that mattered now. As the guard glanced up from my documents towards me, I flinched. Even if my pass looked genuine, I feared that my guilt would show. When he handed back our documents without a single comment, Young-min and I walked as calmly as we could out of Musan Station.

We had chosen to cross the border from Musan, as the Tumen River—which forms part of the border separating North Korea from China—is at its narrowest there. The distance of this crossing determined our fate. If we climbed higher into the mountains, there might be smaller streams that fed the river, which we could cross with less difficulty. But there was no transport that could take us that far. We had been able to find a direct train to Musan because it was home to a large mining industry, and this was the closest we could get to the border.

When cadres miss three days of work, they are registered missing and a search warrant is issued in case of desertion. Even when you are ill, you must notify the relevant authorities about your whereabouts, because someone will be sent to verify that you are where you say you are. This would be our fourth day away from work, longer than we'd planned because of the delay to our train. Pyongyang must have issued a search warrant by now. We were in a race against time, and we were already losing.

As soon as we left the station, we set off towards the Tumen River. Along the way, we got lost and had to ask a local for directions. We had no idea what lay one step ahead. Our plan was to reach the riverbank, then look for a suitable place to cross. Hiding ourselves in foliage, we would then wait for the path to clear, and sprint over the frozen surface of the river.

When we neared the Tumen River, I felt a surge of exhilaration. The river was frozen solid, and could not be more than two hundred feet wide. Crossing the border would present no problem at all! But I panicked when I realized there was not a trace of surrounding vegetation. Where would we hide? There were ranges of hills all around us, just as I had seen on a map. But even the skeletal remnants of trees had been stripped of their bark, I presumed, by those who were starving to death. Even twigs had been gathered for fuel, and the hills were naked.

We had no choice but to continue along the riverbank, on an unpaved track, with nothing but our papers to rely on for protection. If we kept going, a forest might appear to screen our escape—or so we believed out of sheer desperation—and we walked for miles. We passed watchtower after watchtower, set six-tenths of a mile apart in the bare landscape along the riverbank.

Sometimes we saw soldiers' helmets bobbing about inside. Where there was no one in camouflage moving, signs fixed to the ground like abandoned rifles read: NO ENTRY! BORDER AREA! Or: STOP! WE WILL SHOOT YOU! Wherever the width of the river was narrower, there was a garrison with a red flag and a checkpoint. Any vehicle or person wishing to pass through had to be questioned about their reason for travel, have their bags searched and pockets examined. But as soon as we showed our papers, the guards stopped thundering their orders and saluted us. Some even lowered their voices and pleaded for a cigarette.

On the road, in addition to border patrols, we encountered several militia guards who did not wear military uniform or badges of rank but were dressed in camouflage. Whenever we were stopped, we shoved our papers in their faces; and if we thought the confrontation might escalate, we offered cigarettes too.

By sunset, we had traveled almost eighteen miles along the border. Around 10 p.m., when the darkness became absolute and we could no longer see ahead of us, we knew we had to cross. Young-min and I edged closer towards the frozen river.

"Hands up!"

A soldier's voice rang out of nowhere. Young-min gripped my arm so hard he made me jump. I considered punching the soldier rushing towards us and bunched my fists by my side, ready to strike. But he blew a whistle; completely to our surprise, countless lights lit up, their beams converging on us.

Given no chance to explain ourselves, we were brought to guard post No. 6, prodded in the back all the way by cold gun barrels. As we entered the small building, I saw the open door of a cell. Handcuffs hung from its bars.

A soldier addressed us. "This is a border area. Why are you here at this time of night? Show me your identification documents and travel passes. " As he spoke, he signaled with a jerk of his head, and the heavy door thudded shut, trapping us inside the building. Young-min trembled visibly, suggesting that we had been caught in the act of defection.

"My friend here is feeling cold. Let us get warm first, " I said, struggling to keep my composure.

As I reached into the breast pocket of my shirt for our identification papers, I could feel my heart beating. My hand shook as it brushed against my jacket pocket, which held incriminating evidence of treason. I was carrying on my person the poems I had written in secret, having taken them out of my rucksack earlier.

When the first lieutenant reached for my identification papers and saw that they did not belong to an ordinary citizen, he stiffened and sprang out of his chair. Although he was an experienced soldier, he seemed never before to have seen identification papers displaying the gold insignia of a Central Party cadre, nor the blue stamp bearing the secretive authority of the United Front Department.

"Why have you come to the border area?" the first lieutenant asked again. Perhaps my youth seemed incongruous with the gravitas of the emblems, and he looked me up and down. His eyes seemed to ask,

"What do you have there in your other pocket?"

I took a deep breath. "We were sent by the party committee. Our mission is to retrieve some documents from Musan KPA headquarters. But the night's turned cold. We came here in search of a guard post where we could stay the night. "

"No! I saw them trying to set foot on the ice!" one of the soldiers interrupted.

Well versed in the party's ladder of petty seniorities, I instinctively adopted the demeanor of a cadre who had been provoked by an underling. "You shit! How dare you point a gun at me? Do you know who I am? I want to punch your insolent face . . ."

Before I could finish, the first lieutenant cut in: "Connect the phone to Musan KPA headquarters and find out if they're expecting two visitors from Pyongyang. "

I felt faint. Young-min, who had been warming his hands near the stove, shot me a look of despair. A soldier picked up the receiver and dialed. He waited, and then replaced the phone in its cradle.

"Comrade First Lieutenant, there's a power cut down the line. I can't get through. "

On hearing those words, my stubborn will to live was rekindled. I addressed the first lieutenant. "Enough of this pissing about. You can have him try again in the morning. Give us some bedding, and do it now! Hurry up!"

I was desperate and blustering, but it seemed to work. Begging them to let us go would have been an admission of guilt, so instead I asked them to let us stay the night. The first lieutenant faltered and glanced down at my papers once more. He even offered me a chair. As I sat down, the heavy door creaked open and a group of soldiers shuffled in. They were returning from patrol. Gathering round the first lieutenant, they peered alternately at me, at Young-min, and at the identification papers.

A second lieutenant of the patrol came up to me and asked, "Do you know Seo Jung-hwan?" I had never heard the name and felt like I was failing a test. But Young-min jumped up from his chair.

"Seo Jung-hwan from Kimchaek City? The boy whose father is the party secretary for Kimchaek?"

The second lieutenant became noticeably excited. "Yes, that's him! Comrade First Lieutenant, he knows my old classmate Jung-hwan!" I remained seated in a daze. The first lieutenant's face displayed an expression of contempt as he looked at the second lieutenant and Young-min, who had begun to chatter away like old friends. I mustered my courage once more and shouted, "Hey! You really know Jung-hwan?"

"Yes, sir! We go back a long way. "

"How wonderful! An old friend of a dear friend, and so far from home. We've been looking for somewhere to stay for the night. Will you put us up?" Before anyone could protest, I took out a bottle of expensive Western cognac and six packets of Marlboro cigarettes. There is nothing more precious to a North Korean soldier than alcohol and cigarettes. While cash served well as a bribe, cigarettes were a more prestigious commodity, especially if they were a foreign brand. Besides personal items, I had packed my rucksack with three boxes of Marlboro cigarettes and two bottles of cognac, in preparation for just this kind of occasion. As the first lieutenant saw the alcohol and cigarettes, his eyes lit up.

Even the most basic rations for soldiers were intermittent, and not only that, foreign goods exuded an intoxicating aura: tokens of the Other World that exists beyond the borders. One of the soldiers exclaimed that this was the first time in his life that he would get to try Western liquor, and the first lieutenant proceeded to distribute the cigarettes to his men as if they were his own gifts.

Provided with prickly military blankets for the night, we lay awake listening to the snoring of soldiers, as well as to the change of patrols with each passing hour. As each group of soldiers set off, they took over the weapons of the previous shift and armed themselves with spare cartridges and hand grenades. The metallic noises screeched, Death to the traitor! I prodded Young-min lightly, and saw that he too was unable to sleep. Time crept by as we lay awake in the cold.

The next morning, we left the guard post with a letter from the second lieutenant addressed to Seo Jung-hwan. A group of soldiers waved good-bye and we reciprocated awkwardly. As soon as we were out of their sight, we high-fived each other and excitedly recounted moments from the night before, albeit in a low voice. But our footsteps soon turned heavy. The border area was much more tightly controlled and tense than the tranquil countryside we had imagined from Pyongyang.

Young-min spoke first. "Should we go home?"

Facing each other, we slumped down onto a disused section of railway track that stretched along the Tumen River.

"It's too late for that now, " I reasoned. "We've missed too many days of work already and they've probably put out a search warrant for us. You know the party. We can't go back. "

"Then how do we cross?"

It was as if he wanted me to admit defeat on our behalf. Wearily, I looked at our surroundings. In the silence it seemed that we were the only people left on earth. The hills and river were white, covered with snow. Somewhere far away, a whistle blew three times—perhaps another arrest. Just over the river, on the other side of the border, we could hear the lowing of an ox. The sky seemed exceedingly blue and a bird flitted across that borderless space. We could see over the river, but we were helpless to cross it.

Young-min spoke again. "We've come all the way here from Pyongyang. Just across this river—just there—is China. It's right in front of us. How on earth do we cross?"

As he'd pointed out, nothing much lay between us and China, and each side of the border looked alike. Our lands were covered with snow, and so were theirs; except that their mountains were covered with trees like balls of cotton, and ours were sheer and bare. In the summer, our hills would be hellish red and theirs green with foliage. To me, this confirmed that we had every reason to cross the river.

"Let's cross, now!" I was surprised by my own words. Until this moment, I had been focused on moving under cover of night. "Now's the time—the soldiers keep watch at night, but now, it's bright as day, and we can see them before they see us. Let's cross!"

As if we had planned it, I glanced round on the North Korean side and Young-min checked the Chinese side. "No one's around, " he said. "Should we stand up?"

"Now?"

"Yes! Now!"

Although we spoke with confidence, neither of us stood up. What frightened us more than anything was that neither of us had the courage to act. We breathed deeply, and as our humiliating weakness of mind was laid bare, it was also cathartic. The silence recharged our resolve, and we reached for each other's hand to feel the heat of our bodies. We had walked to the edge of this cliff together, and would jump together.

We counted in unison.

"One . . ." "Two . . ." "Three!"

We leaped up and started sprinting across the frozen Tumen River. My heart pounded with every step, and the ice bellowed under our feet. Over thirty, sixty feet? Someone started yelling.

"Hey! Get those bastards!"

I turned to look towards the noise. A group of soldiers stood with their rifles aimed. I saw the barrel, and heard the rifle cock. The roof of my skull seared with pain, where I knew the bullet would enter. I screamed but could not hear my own voice.

Excerpt courtesy of Dear Leader, *37 INK/Atria Books, 2014.*

Users Review

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