

Testimony of  
**Ms. Helie Lee**

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I am honored to be here today. I am especially grateful to Senator Ted Kennedy and Senator Sam Brownback for all of us being here today.

First, I must tell you that I am not an expert or a scholar or a journalist. I am an author, a Korean American, an American, who has written about my family's daring mission to rescue my uncle and eight members of his family from North Korea in 1997. By sharing my family's true-life story, it is my deepest hope that the unfamiliar becomes familiar, that the nameless, faceless North Korean refugees will not seem so foreign, that you will see they are no different from us. They are mothers and sons, sisters and brothers, and children, who also deserve life, liberty and dignity.

During the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, my grandmother's 16 year old son, Yong Woon, was the only one who didn't make it out of North Korea to the South. The last we heard of him was that he had been captured by communist troops as he was trying to flee. Dead? Alive? No one knew.

When the Korean Armistice Agreement was signed in 1953 to stall the bloody war, my grandmother desperately searched for her son. For years, she wrote letters to American ambassadors, Christian missionaries, and even to Kim Il Sung in hopes of securing a tourist visa into North Korea. When she had almost lost hope, a letter arrived from North Korea in 1991, resurrecting this missing son's ghost. The flimsy envelope was emblazoned with the emblem of the Workers' Party --the hammer and sickle, and the pen-- in blood-red ink. Receiving the letter was bittersweet. Sweet, because finally we knew what had become of Yong Woon. Bitter, because my grandmother could not rush to him. North Korea was then and still is the most closed off and repressive regime in the world.

It wasn't until 1997 that our chance to reunite mother and son appear. A Korean Chinese man called my parents in Los Angeles from China, collect. This man offered to arrange a secret reunion with Yong Woon in China. Apparently he had befriended my uncle during one of his business trips to North Korea. He was a smuggler by trade. He would smuggle bags of rice, underwear, socks, dried herbs into the North, where he traded them on the black market for valuable antiques. North Koreans were so desperate and hungry due to the famine they sold whatever they possessed.

Immediately my father and I escorted my 85 year old grandmother

to Northeastern China, to a remote city called Yanji. It was the nearest airport to the China/North Korea border. The long flight from Los Angeles to Seoul to Beijing to Yanji was physically too much for my grandmother. We had to leave her behind in Yanji. My father and I decided that we would go to the watery border alone. Our plan was to sneak Yong Woon across the border into China using the smuggler's contacts, then drive him back to Grandmother. Mother and son could meet for a few precious hours, then we would sneak him back before the North Korean police discovered he had escaped. If discovered, he would be convicted of treason and his entire family, including young children and the elderly, severely punished. This is how the North Korean system operated. This is how the system controlled the people.

Our trek to the border town of Changbai City was a backbreaking journey along an unpaved icy mountainous road. Eleven hours after we left Yanji, we arrived at the watery border. I was stunned by what I saw. I had envisioned the Yalu River, the natural division between China and North Korea, to be miles wide and treacherous. I had imaged barbwire fencing, floodlights, and guard posts similar to the Demilitarized Zone that divided the Korean peninsula in half near the 38th parallel. It was nothing like that. The river was absolutely still and only waist deep in this area. However, there was a tall stone wall erected on the North Korean side, just beyond the rocky riverbank. I suspected the wall wasn't built to keep people from trying to get out; it was there to prevent us, the outside world, from seeing all the decay and disrepair just behind it. But the armed soldiers, posted every ten to fifteen yards along the riverbank, would shoot down anyone who did try to escape. I was so terrified that I couldn't call out to Yong Woon, my uncle. He was squatted near the freezing water, washing himself, trying not to attract attention to himself. Suddenly seeing him spoke volumes of the harshness of North Korean life and the famine became real. My uncle was sixty-two, the same age as my father, but he looked as old as my grandmother. His frame was so bony and his face was gaunt. His eyes and cheeks were hollowed. He was wearing a faded green Mao jacket with the high Mandarin collar and a Lenin cap with the red star. His clothes were much too sheer for the chilly weather and they looked as though they should have been discarded year ago. But what was worse than the starvation and lack of warm clothes was the hopelessness: no reason to live. I wanted so badly to give my uncle my jacket, but the soldiers, eager to shoot, froze my feet. All I could offer my uncle was a message from his mother. In order to communicate with him, we had to bribe the soldiers along the riverbank. A pack of cigarettes, a piece of rice cake, a bottle of liquor, these were enough to buy us protection to speak to our relatives, because even the soldiers were hungry.

In my American-accented Korean, I called out, "Grandmother has never stopped searching for you. She's never forgotten you!"

My uncle never made it across the river that day. The shock of seeing us and being so frail, he fell unconscious. It was heartbreaking. We had failed. I had failed to keep my promise to my grandmother that she would be able to see her son one last time before she passed away. The guilt consumed my father and me when we returned home. Also, we were haunted by all that we had witnessed and the people we had left behind. The memories polluted our privileged lives back in America. We knew we had to go back. There was no other option for us.

With the assistance of several brave individuals, who acted as our guides, drivers, and translators, we planned a risky secret mission. Naively, we thought the mission would take two to four weeks to coordinate and execute. But so many things went wrong. Our guides had taken great care in planning out every detail and mile of the mission, but we had gravely underestimated the power of Kim Il Sung. Half of my uncle's family was so indoctrinated that they could not bring themselves to betray their "Great Leader." They clung onto the belief that their "Great Leader" would somehow provide for them.

Eventually, we got everyone across the watery border and into China. As unbelievable as this may sound, getting my relatives out of North Korea was the easiest part of our mission. A mere bribe, equivalent to 400 American dollars, bought nine lives. Getting my relatives out of China was the difficult and dangerous leg of our mission. North Korean refugees were not embraced. Embassies regularly turned them away fearful of upsetting China, their host country, and the unpredictable North Korean regime. And China, a long time ally of North Korea, had an agreement to repatriate any and all refugees, many times hunting them down, knowing they would face harsh punishment, even execution. For weeks, my relatives nervously hid out in safe houses, always on the run, always fearful of capture. They were so afraid of being caught and sent back that they each carried enough rat poison to kill themselves. They would rather commit suicide than return to North Korea.

Originally we had negotiated a fishing boat to take my relatives from the port city of Dalian down through the West Sea, across the maritime border, but North Korea began to aggressively patrol the seas with high-speed boats. When the fishing boat became too risky, we had to get them out of China by land and into another more friendly country. But to where? There weren't that many safe and convenient options. After much consideration, we decided on the South Korean Consulate in Hanoi, Vietnam. Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Vietnam had reestablished diplomatic relations with Western nations, even the United States, and it had prosperous economic ties with South Korea. It was financially wiser for Vietnam to maintain good relations with Seoul rather than Pyongyang, which had nothing to offer them.

However, there was still a chance that the consulate would not grant my relatives asylum. My uncle's family was from the bottom rung of North Korean society. My uncle was branded as a traitor due to the fact that

his family had converted to Christianity and were land owners before the Korean War. He didn't have top secret information to barter for their lives. He wasn't Hwang Jang Yop, a high member of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party, who had defected that same year.

We needed leverage. Fortunately, we had it. Being a savvy American and having worked in the entertainment business, I knew the power of the media. With the help of a small South Korean television crew, we videotaped everything. It was our intention to use the footage of the escape to issue a plea to the world to pry government doors open. I believe it was this video and the American publication of *Still Life With Rice*, which told the story of my grandmother's separation from her son, the year before that won my relatives their freedom.

Seven months later, after many trips to China by my father and myself, after many bribes, all nine members reached South Korea. Half of them came out through Vietnam, the other half came out through Mongolia.

Today my relatives are living safely and happily. They are the lucky few. They had us to guide and support them. We were willing to risk our own lives to save theirs. But everyday I am filled with guilt remembering those we could not save. Everyday I am filled with pain when I read about the many desperate refugees storming foreign embassies in China in a last ditch effort for life. Those lucky few who receive international media coverage are the ones who make it to South Korea. According to the BBC, about 1600 North Korean defectors have made it to South Korea since 1953. According the *KoreAm Journal*, the figure is slightly higher at 1800. These numbers are shamefully low considering the tens and thousands of refugees that have been reported. America, on the other hand, has thus far received only two North Korean families since the Korean War as reported by *Newsweek* (September 8, 1991). Ambassador, Jang Sung Gil, a diplomat in the Middle East, and his brother, a fellow diplomat, and their families were supposedly courted by the CIA.

What about the regular people, people like my uncle Yong Woon, who are slowly starving to death? Who will save them?

America, a leader of human rights, a great generous nation, it is time to step up to the plate. It is what our nation does best. In the sixties, when China was suffering from a massive famine after Mao instituted the Great Leap Forward (1952), 250,000 Chinese escaped to Hong Kong. Hong Kong appealed for international help. Then President John F. Kennedy enacted an emergency executive order allowing the immediate immigration of five thousand people from Hong Kong to the United States. It is not too late.

In memory of my grandmother, Baek, Hong Yong, I thank you.