

THE
FEARLESS
PASSAGE
OF STEVEN KIM

Carl Herzig
with Steven Kim



WHITAKER
HOUSE

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THE FEARLESS PASSAGE OF STEVEN KIM:
The True Story of an American Businessman Imprisoned in China
for Rescuing North Korean Refugees

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PROLOGUE

Saturday, September 27, 2003

Shackled upright to a wooden bench, the American peered through the scratched, grimy window as the train rumbled across the countryside. Farm after farm rushed by—countless villages whose names he'd never know. The sky was just getting light; it was not yet dawn. They were headed north.

He coughed weakly; the old carriage was thick with cigarette smoke and a sour human stench. They had just pulled out from a station, and a crowd of passengers speaking a dissonant hash of Chinese dialects pushed through the aisle to get to the next car. As they passed, they glared down with contempt at him and the nine other prisoners—three men and six women—all of them North Korean refugees headed to a *laogai*—a gulag, or labor camp—deep in the heart of mainland China.

They had been on the train one day and two nights, after being arrested in Chang'an and held for a night of screamed threats and insults in a concrete cell beneath the Guangdong Province Coastal Military Headquarters in Guangzhou. One of the men, an engineer in his mid-fifties, had been having

trouble breathing. He'd gasped and wheezed, his florid complexion turning redder, then pale, then a bluish grey. They had been afraid he was having a heart attack, and hadn't known if he would last the night. When finally he had collapsed and lost consciousness, hardly breathing, they had called for the guards, who'd entered the cell and dragged him away. They hadn't seen him again.

The American's head throbbed, his back and limbs ached, and his throat burned from thirst. His lips were cracked and crusted with dried blood. None of the prisoners had had anything to eat or drink or even been allowed to use the toilet since boarding the train.

As the daylight increased, hunger turned into weakness. The American could tolerate that, but it was all he could manage to keep from emptying his bowels and bladder where he sat. Each point of pain competed with another. His ankles were red and swollen, manacled and joined together by a one-foot link. When during the long second night he had tried to get up and relieve the pressure, a guard had shoved him back down and locked his chains to the bench.

He rubbed at his wrists, chafed from the iron cuffs, but when he tried to lift and stretch his arms, a guard cracked a matte black baton against his knees and warned him in rough Mandarin, "Bie dong." *Be still.*

"How long?" he rasped.

"Bi zui," the guard told him. *Shut up.*

His mind roiled with stories he'd heard from the rare survivors of Chinese work camps—tales of rape, murder, forced starvation, torture. Young girls and boys rented or sold as sex slaves. Prisoners executed so their organs could be "harvested" and auctioned off to the highest bidder. At first, he hadn't believed the stories; however, as account after account had leaked out from one *laogai* after another, they had gotten harder to deny.

He strained to twist around for a glimpse of his fellow prisoners down the aisle. He could turn his head almost enough to see them, but they were too far away, and his torso was chained and bolted tightly to the bench. The others sat in pairs; only he was kept separate and alone.

The train stopped at one station after another—he had lost count long ago—and a new crowd pushed through after each stop, some settling down at

the other end of the car. National Day, on the first of October, was only a few days away, and the whole train was packed.

The air around the prisoners became closer, stifling. He had lost all sense of touch in his hands and feet, but pain seared through his arms and legs, tore through his back, and cramped his stomach. He nodded in and out of consciousness, rocked by the jostling rhythm of the train. Now and again he fell into a fitful sleep, but he was jerked up every few minutes by the sharp burning of the metal cuffs and shackles cutting into his skin.

Hours later—it was now broad daylight—the guards came down the aisle and allowed the other prisoners, still chained to their partners, to use the toilet, located in a tiny restroom at the end of the carriage. They groaned getting up and then fell again and again as they stumbled down the aisle, supporting each other when they couldn't stand. One of the older women was fading; her eyes were dull and listless as her partner lifted her up and carried her along. The guards screamed and pushed at them to keep moving. The American knew some Chinese but doubted that the others—all North Koreans—could understand. Still, he was certain they'd gotten the message.

When the other prisoners were brought back, seated across from him now, the guards handed each one a few dry crackers and a cup of tepid, watery broth. He could see them concentrating so as not to spill, their hands trembling as they struggled to bring the cups to their dry lips.

Finally, the guards unlocked his chains from the bench and hoisted him up. His knees buckled; he felt sure his ankles would break. One guard on each side grabbed hold under his shoulders, dragged him down the aisle, and tossed him through the open restroom door onto the toilet, then stood there laughing as he struggled to loosen his pants in time.

When he was done, the guards hoisted him out, giving him no chance to wipe himself. He pulled up his pants and fastened them on the way back down the aisle. From the other end of the car, passengers craned their necks and stared with disgust.

The guards dropped him back on a bench across from the others, locked his shackles in place, and gave him two crackers and a cup of the dirty broth. Wetting his parched throat with the liquid, he let small pieces of the crackers

dissolve in his mouth. Soon his head cleared just a bit. His hands and feet were on fire; his body screamed as feeling returned to his limbs.

As he sipped, wanting the broth, as repellent as it was, to last as long as possible, his nostrils flared at a new smell—pungent, garlicky, familiar—cutting through his own stink. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. “Kimchee,” he mouthed—his favorite, a staple from his Korean upbringing and home. He exchanged sad glances with another of the prisoners—a young girl, no more than a teen, who had been arrested along with her mother. A group of passengers moved down the carriage, carrying bowls of rice and the salty, pickled cabbage back to their seats.

He thought of Helen, his wife. Her kimchee was the best. Tears welled in his eyes. He pictured Helen and their three children—Eric, Lisa, and Charles—safe in their big house in Huntington, on Long Island in New York. It was late Saturday night there, he figured. In the morning, they would go to church, and, after services, holding each other by the hand, they’d talk with their pastor, with friends, and with neighbors and other members of the congregation, accepting their love and support.

By now, Helen would know he’d disappeared. And she would worry. But none of them could ever imagine his actual position—what had happened in the last few days—and where he sat now, hungry, dirty, and smelling of his own excrement, shackled to a bench with nine other prisoners on a train hurtling deeper and deeper into a hellish oblivion at the heart of the mainland.

After he’d been arrested, he had tried to phone his office manager from the station house, hoping she would call Helen and tell her that he was in custody. Helen would have known what to do. But the guards hadn’t granted him access to a phone, and then, almost before he’d known it, in the middle of the night, they had snatched him and the others from their joint cell, bound them in chains, and hurried them off to the waiting train.

They were a long way from home, he thought—the North Koreans but especially himself—and none of them knew when, or if, they would see their families again.

He looked up, roused from his despondent reverie. Across the aisle, two pairs of prisoners huddled together, all whispering at once, as if in unison. The guards were down toward the end of the car, eating with the other passengers.

He leaned forward, arching toward the group, straining to hear what they were saying. Through the smoke and the smells and the exhaustion they all shared, he could just barely make out their last words: "...kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen."

Squeezing the tears from his eyes and closing them tight, Steven Kim, the American, silently prayed.

1

NEW YORK

Saturday, May 31, 1975

“Your beginnings will seem humble, so prosperous will your future be.”
—Job 8:7

Though already twenty-seven, Steven Kim felt like an excited teen as he stepped onto the tarmac at New York’s Kennedy Airport. His heart was bursting with an overwhelming sense of possibility, his head swimming with American-Dream visions of unbridled prosperity. He knew some English, if not as much as he thought, and crossed to the terminal with every assurance that a bright future awaited him around the first corner.

Steven had dreamed of this moment for almost twenty years, ever since he and his classmates in South Korea had studied English as a second language in middle school. For him, the United States had always been a nation of salvation; a champion-state of equality, individualism, and democracy; a bastion of both personal and political freedom. In the

late 1960s, he had gone so far as to volunteer to fight alongside American forces in Vietnam.

And the U.S. was a mostly Christian nation, Steven knew. There would even be Korean churches like the ones he'd grown up with back home, established by Korean immigrants generations before, in the early the twentieth century. In South Korea, the number of churches was increasing dramatically, and there were already more Korean Christians than there were adherents to any of the country's other religions. By this point, Steven figured, there must be tens of thousands of Korean Christians in America, and plenty of churches in New York from which to choose.

Most important for Steven, the American flag had become for him, as it had for Koreans in every walk of life, a banner of unlimited economic promise and business opportunity. For them, the U.S. was the place to go if you wanted to become rich. Wages were higher across the board, even at the lowest level, and one's earnings, he believed, in the tradition of Horatio Alger, were in direct proportion to how hard you were willing to work. It was simple *ingwa ïngbo*, cause and effect, based on initiative and *poram*, worthiness. The U.S. economy was less vulnerable to market fluctuations than Korea's, and, in stark contrast to Korea's highly politicized atmosphere, family and political connections in the U.S. were not always required for commercial success. All one needed, Steven thought, were initiative and a willingness to work hard—and he was chock-full of both.

The long path that had brought him to America hadn't been easy, though. He'd been born Kim Seung-Whan to Korean parents in Seoul, South Korea, in 1949, just a year before the outbreak of the Korean War, and had grown up in a world full of violence, poverty, and hunger.

Seung-Whan's father, Kim Ki-Hong, was from Sineuju, a lumber town on the northwestern border across the Yalu River from China, and had spent his youth in the town of Sariwon. After high school, Ki-Hong went to Japan to study photography, and he later moved to China and opened a studio in Beijing, where he lived for over ten years, earning a respectable income as a well-regarded photographer.

During the Second World War, Ki-Hong joined the Chinese Army to fight the Japanese, whose brutal, genocidal occupation of Korea had lasted

thirty-five years, since 1910. When the war ended, he was still relatively young, and his army service earned him the freedom of travel. He chose to return to his “liberated” homeland in the north.

Ki-Hong arrived in Sariwon expecting to help build a new, free Korean society. With the 1945 division of the once-unified country at the 38th parallel, however, he found that one occupying force—the Japanese—had been replaced by another: the Soviets. Conditions were just as repressive as they had been under Japanese rule, in some ways even worse. Many of the Soviet soldiers stationed in North Korea had been criminals and prisoners. Now, disdainful of what they saw as a subhuman foreign populace and free to act on even their grossest desires, they rampaged through the towns and countryside, taking what they liked; raping women and young girls, often in front of their parents, husbands, and children; and pillaging family homes and property. Anyone who protested their behavior was mercilessly beaten or executed on the spot.

Ki-Hong had never considered himself a communist or espoused an overtly political position, but neither had he been averse to the philosophy. Now, however, his hatred of the occupation forces caused him to despise all communists, and he did so with a vengeance, not making a distinction between Soviets and Chinese. He helped organize an underground resistance group called Young Friends against Soviet Soldiers, comprised mostly young North Koreans, whose goal was to protect the citizenry and fight against the new army of foreign invaders. Every night, they went out into the streets to search out isolated Soviet soldiers to kill and confiscate their weapons.

Ki-Hong was one of the leaders of the emerging grassroots resistance, but his position was difficult to keep secret. Other members of the community became aware of his role, and within months, an infiltrator in the Young Friends exposed him publicly and informed the Soviets of his identity. Suddenly Ki-Hong was on the run, a wanted man, facing sure execution if apprehended. Only with the help of a few trusted friends was he able to disappear, eluding the search and, in 1946, escaping to South Korea.

When he arrived in Seoul, Ki-Hong sought out like-minded activists. Still filled with hatred for the Soviets in the north, he searched for the most

anti-communist group he could find and eventually joined the influential West-North Youth League.

As he had in the north, Ki-Hong helped direct the anti-communist campaign. But he no longer needed to conduct his activities underground, since he had the support of the South Korean government. He and his fellow activists searched the country for communist sympathizers and North Korean agents. Eventually, his role was formalized, and after the war he joined the South Korean police. Now it was his job to arrest communists and send them to prison. Fluent in Korean, Chinese, and Japanese, he soon rose to the rank of detective, and he remained there until his retirement.

Ki-Hong soon met and married a South Korean woman, Hong Do-Won. And on April 17, 1949, in Seoul, the couple celebrated the birth of their first child, a son, named Seung-Whan.

One of Seung-Whan's few early or happy memories of his father was riding on the back of his motorcycle down a dusty city street. But Ki-Hong never really committed to either his wife or his child. They rarely ate or enjoyed activities as a trio, and the family didn't hold together for very long. In 1956, when Steven was six, his father left to live with another woman.

For the next six years, until Ki-Hong returned for good, Do-Won was without her husband or the benefits of his income; he didn't send them anything or stay in touch. As a single mother without other means of support, she was forced to work long hours in the nearby textile mills to keep herself and her son housed, clothed, and fed.

Ki-Hong's mother, Grandma Hong In-Sung, remained a part of their lives. A proud woman of strong Christian faith, she looked after Seung-Whan's religious upbringing, taking him to church and Sunday school every week. When he was sick, or pretending to be, he might miss school, but he never missed church; his grandmother would go so far as to carry him there on her back, if she had to. After the war, he later remembered, she would always iron paper money for him to place in the offering basket, even when times were lean.

Despite the witness of Grandma In-Sung, church was more a social opportunity than a spiritual experience for Seung-Whan. He had been born into a Christian family and had attended worship services for as long as he could

remember, so he didn't feel as if there was anything more for him to learn; he just practiced without thinking. Unlike the many South Koreans who converted to Christianity during and after the war, Seung-Whan was hardly conscious of the tenets of his faith; being a Christian was just like being a member of a family, in his eyes—a birthright, not a belief. His converted friends had to learn about who Jesus was and what He had taught—for them, a whole new philosophy—but Seung-Whan never really thought about those things. They were automatic, routine.

“I didn't know Jesus Christ personally,” he said years later. “Jesus Christ—oh yeah, I believe in Jesus Christ, I always said, but inside I didn't really know who He was.”

At age fifteen, Seung-Whan sang in the church choir and helped teach Sunday school, but he wasn't moved by the services or inspired by the knowledge the ministers passed down; he didn't feel anything inside. As he grew older, he continued to tithe money to the church, but in his life outside, he did whatever he wanted, not treating Sundays—let alone any other day of the week—as God's.

Like all South Korean children, Seung-Whan learned English in school and developed a steadfast belief in “the land of the free.” He pushed himself hard in his lessons and made friends with American officers serving as volunteer teachers. To him, the United States was both a land of opportunity and a refuge from communist oppression.

In the early 1960s, when the Vietnam conflict had expanded into a full-fledged battle between the U.S.-supported South Vietnamese government and the communist north, South Korea provided the second-largest contingent of foreign troops. Never having left Korea, Seung-Whan was desperate to see the world, but no one could travel abroad without fulfilling his compulsory military duty. And so, immediately upon graduating, Seung-Whan enlisted with the Korean army, along with 320,000 of his compatriots.

Despite having grown up in a war-torn land, his youthful exuberance blinded him to the dangers of fighting. As luck would have it, he landed a job in the Educational Department of the 36th Regiment of the South Korean Army's Operational Command Post, where he was tasked with preparing annual education timetables for the entire regiment. Although he was safe in

his position, he was restless; he wanted to fight. Four times he applied for a transfer to combat duty, hoping to join the American forces on the ground in Vietnam. His job was vital to the regiment, though, and not everyone had the ability to do it, so none of his four applications were supported or forwarded by his commanding officer. Seung-Whan was destined to serve his nation from the peaceful security of operational headquarters.

Upon completion of his term of duty, Seung-Whan returned to civilian life and decided that he wanted to go back to school. He'd always excelled in academics, and he knew that a degree could serve as a gateway to a more fulfilling life. To his disappointment, however, he wasn't able to afford the tuition, nor could he obtain a scholarship to help cover the expenses. So, he accepted a paid position as tour director with church-run cultural youth group.

Seung-Whan enjoyed his job coordinating appearances for the young performers, and it satisfied his appetite for travel, but it still wasn't what he was looking for in terms of a career. He wanted to succeed financially—to earn “real” money. This, he decided, should be his main focus. And so, after considering the best places in the world to launch a prosperous career, he weighed his options and turned his attention to his capitalist dreamland: the United States.

When Seung-Whan arrived in New York, the Korean and Vietnam wars were over, the last of the American troops having been lifted out of the chaos of Saigon just weeks earlier. The world was entering a new, modern age, based on the evidence all around him, and New York would be the center of global commerce—it was the place to be. He could hardly believe his good fortune as he set foot on U.S. soil for the first time. He had even adopted an English name to fit his new identity—Steven Kim. And he felt sure that nothing could hold him back.

Steven's most pressing challenge was money—he was practically broke. With just a few bills in his pocket and not a penny more to his name, he needed to find a job immediately, that very day. Whatever work he could find, he told himself—whatever he was offered—he would do. *I'll do anything*, he decided as he passed through customs. *If I don't work, I'll die.*

Fortunately, Steven had a contact—a high school friend who had come to the States a few years before and, like so many other Korean immigrants in New York since the beginning of the 1970s, opened a fresh produce store.

In 1960, only around four hundred Koreans lived in New York City, many of them students at Columbia University. By the end of the decade, however, Koreans had become the fastest-growing ethnic group of small-business owners in America's largest metropolitan area.

Early on, the Koreans mostly sold wigs and other Korean-made goods or subcontracted in the garment industry. Then, first in the poorer minority neighborhoods of Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx, Koreans began buying up grocery stores from their American owners, who were retiring at an increasing rate. They also set up shop in vacant, abandoned buildings. Many of these entrepreneurs had come from Korea with experience managing or working in small retail outfits. Now, grocery stores, produce shops, and fruit stands owned and run by recent immigrants from Korea were sprouting up weekly on almost every block and street corner in the residential districts of Manhattan. Some of these businesses operated around the clock seven days a week to take full advantage of the "City That Never Sleeps."

Without question, Steven was ready and willing to do his part. Before the sun had set on his first day in New York, he had a job selling fruit and vegetables in his family friend's produce shop in Massapequa, on Long Island, just an hour's train ride east of Manhattan.

The next morning, the owner walked Steven through the shop, pointing out bins and crates brimming with unfamiliar produce. "What's this long green thing?" Steven asked in Korean. "What do you call that red one?" He was practically bursting with questions and nervous enthusiasm. He could barely wait to start.

"You have your work cut out for you," the owner said. And he was right. But Steven didn't mind hard work. Neither did he mind getting up before dawn to prepare the store for opening, nor staying late into the night, long after the last of the evening customers had returned home, to shut it down. He quickly learned almost all of the hundreds of names for the fruits and vegetables for sale in America, and it didn't take long for his English to improve enough for him to converse comfortably with Korean and American customers alike.