

The Hum Podcast
Episode 19: "I Will Not Be Silent"

[Theme music begins]

[Alice's voice begins to come in over top of music]

Alice: And in delaying his return to North Korea, a hit was put out on my father. Then one night my father found a gun to his head right beside his ear and he felt it's very dangerous situation, then my parents planned to immediately escape.

[Music increases in volume]

Male voice: You're listening to The Hum.

[Music decreases in volume]

Gilad: Do you wear jewellery that tells your story? Delane Cooper is an incredibly talented studio jeweller and has a fascinating process of creating custom luxury pieces. Her design process includes an interview on why you want a piece created. Research, meditation and dreaming allows her to create a distinct piece of jewellery, and not only do you get a one-of-a-kind piece of art, but a unique story where the design feels authentic to the wear. I met Delane two years ago when she designed my partner's engagement ring and I can't

recommend her enough. Connect with Delane at delane.ca for your story to be told through your next piece of custom jewellery.

[Music fades out]

Simona: We are so incredibly happy to have Alice Kim, a twenty-three year old recent grad and masters candidate and also a refugee from North Korea, who's currently living in South Korea, with us today. Alice, thank you so much for making time for us.

Alice: Thank you.

Gilad: We're so happy you could join us here today. You know, your story is very inspiring and it's also very very unique, so from what we know, you were born in Pyongyang.

Alice: Yeah.

Gilad: Which is a place that is usually reserved for privileged people in North Korea and also for the elite class, who's working with the government. We also know you left North Korea when you were very young, so this might be a stupid question, but I'm wondering if you can tell us a little bit about what your early childhood was like, what was life like around you, what were your parents doing, do you have any siblings?

Alice: Actually, I just have my short memory about North Korea cuz when I was so young, I mean now I am so young too [laughs], but I was more, much more younger than now, maybe as

an infant. My parents was high-ranking elites in North Korea for Workers' Party, the leading political party of Democratic People's Republic of Korea, which you know as North Korea. And my dad was general and my mum was high-ranking secretary in Kim Il-sung's inner circle.

Gilad: And this was at the time of Kim Il-sung?

Alice: Yeah, Kim Il-sung had passed away in 1994 right, and before then they - actually they attended Kim Il-sung's political university, I mean the top prestigious university in North Korea and at that time, North Korea prepared the war, the Korean War, next Korean War, so they gather their students, even university students and they - cuz they needed to power to attack to other country, so my parents are so, seem older to be army, then they were in army and Kim Il-sung had - after Kim Il-sung had passed away, and then my parents got the high-ranking elites.

Gilad: How did your - how did your family view Kim Il-sung, like when they were in North Korea, did they - cuz I know when you're living in North Korea, you can't be very open with how you really feel. Like a part of living in North Korea is you basically put your life at risk if you're critical of the government, but I'm curious when they were living there at that time, how did they really view Kim Il-sung?

Alice: My parents talk about that to me. Pyongyang is very good place to live as a North Korean cuz they, there are so many convenient institution or tall building, tall modern building and they don't need to starve. They think, oh North Korea is very good country to their people and Kim Il-sung is the best president ever, they think so. My mum said when Kim Il-sung had passed

away, she cried for two days and she fainted because she's crying so much, and she felt very sad because Kim Il-sung had passed away.

Simona: So it sounds like Pyongyang was very comfortable if you had the privilege of living there, so I think it's really interesting that your parents decided to escape while they had the opportunity to do so. So how did that all kind of come about?

Alice: In 1996, my dad was promoted to a diplomat posting in China and we had to move China, but like all other diplomats, moving abroad mean the family could accompany on one condition: one member of family had to be left behind according to the policy. As an infant, I was prone to illness, so my parents choose to take me instead of my older sister. Oh, I have my older sister. And they had to leave behind my older sister, she was just six at the time, then we move to China because my father's work at the region. My father worked for North Korea, especially for financing something between China and North Korea, but in 1994 Kim Il-sung had passed away, and then the country fell into a famine that last many years and in transitional power, Kim Jong-il implemented policy of Songun in 1994. This meant that the military was now first priority, so my father commented to others that Kim Jong-il's policy has caused more harm than good.

Gilad: He said, so - yeah Kim Jong-il comes in and says the military is the most important thing, and your dad said that it caused more harm than good?

Alice: Yeah.

Gilad: Wow.

Alice: Cuz as the famine continued to destroy the country, so my dad commented about that.

Simona: Was it to someone that he knew or ...

Alice: Maybe just comment, not to directly to government, but soon after, he received to report back to North Korea immediately, maybe someone had disclosed to - has complained to higher authorities and he understood, he became a threat to Kim Jong-il's power and in delaying his return to North Korea, a hit was put out on my father.

Gilad: A hit was put out?

Alice: Yeah, then one night my father found a gun to his head right beside his ear and he felt it's very dangerous situation, then my parents planned to immediately escape.

Gilad: That's so scary.

Alice: Yeah, so my parents had contact with other diplomacy missions, including protest government in Macau, then they agree to assist my father in escaping China and travelling to South Korea, and then arrived in China, we can get plane, airplane from South Korea and flying out over Macau, we arrived South Korea in 1997, end of the 1997.

Simona: So I think some of us may not know that Macau used to be a Portuguese colony within China and at the time, and currently right now, China has an extradition policy with North Korea, so if North Koreans are found to be in China, they have an agreement that they are sent back to North Korea. But luckily at the time when your family was deciding to escape, Macau did not have that - Portugal does not have an extradition so you were, and so they offered you assistance to get your family to South Korea. I think my question is, cuz you still have family in North Korea, how did - did they know that this was gonna happen or did they - were they alerted that this was happening to your family overseas?

Alice: Actually, my family even didn't know about that cuz after we move to China, I mean my parents and me moved to China, my older sister just leave behind in North Korea, then we couldn't contact my older sister and also other, any of my family and after we arrived in South Korea, we tried to find or look for my family, including my older sister, but it couldn't cuz the cost is very high and also we have financial problem in South Korea as a North Korean that visit, so now, even now my family doesn't know my older sister's are alive or not.

Simona: Wow.

Gilad: It's - there's so many parts of your story that make it so interesting, like your - first of all, you're born in 1995, which is just shortly after Kim Il-sung passes away, and you ended up in - you were in Macau in like two years before it became part of China, and now you ended up in South Korea but your family's in Pyongyang. So we've had a couple of guests here, we've had some guests on the podcast in the past who were North Korean refugees from the north, the north of North Korea and I understand that if you're from there, it's easier to communicate with

family from the north because they can get illegal Chinese cell phones, for example, but is there any way at all to communicate with anyone in Pyongyang? Like if, is it - can any refugee from Pyongyang contact their family in Pyongyang?

Alice: Actually it depends on the situation cuz some North Korean refugees in South Korea, they also try to contact with their family who lived behind in North Korea, but they also have to pay many, much cost, that's very high and they - maybe they, almost all of them was not born in Pyongyang, so Pyongyang is more street area in North Korea. So my family - after my family arrive South Korea, maybe my parents guess just my older sister and other my family went to political prison or were just expelled from the Pyongyang, because our family escape the North Korea, so that's why we couldn't contact each other, cuz we didn't know and we don't know where my other family is.

Gilad: One thing that I think is a common misunderstanding is that once North Korean refugees escape and end up in South Korea that everything is okay, you know, the process as a refugee is very hard. You have to get out of North Korea first, and then you have to get into China and then when you're in China, that's also very hard, but then you finally arrive in South Korea, and everyone thinks it's amazing [Alice laughs], that you're safe and life is really good.

Alice: Yeah, that's very weird I think, that's just a dream in North Korea, cuz I have just a short memory about North Korea, so since I lived in South Korea with my parents, I think I'm a South Korean. I was a South Korean, because I know I born in North Korea, but I grew older and older in South Korea, with my South Korean friends and study and play with South Koreans. And also

I don't have any sign of, sign that I'm from North Korea, like different accent or different opinion or different style, but I don't have any sign about that. So I felt no different from anyone else.

Gilad: You're like an invisible North Korean.

Alice: Yeah, I'm just - I'm just Korean [laughs]. But my parents, they have even now have little different accent from South Korea and sometimes their thinking or mind or even culture is very different from South Korea, so by the time we arrived in South Korea, there are so many discrimination even now, so my parents and also even me was being discriminated against from South Koreans.

Gilad: Can you give us some examples, like what happens when they know you're from North Korea or they hear from your parents' accent or maybe not even your example, but other stories that you have heard, like what are some examples of that discrimination?

Alice: For example, my parents couldn't looking for a job, cuz another South Korean they don't want to hire my parent cuz they are North Korean. And to me, when I was elementary and middle school, I would often open my locker to spilling trash out.

Gilad: Trash was falling out of the locker.

Alice: Yeah and in the bathroom stall, kids would pour dirty mold water on my head. That was winter and very cold, but my parents had to work hard, they don't - they didn't have time to take me, so I just walk to my house and one time, classmates hit sharp blade in my desk and I cut

my hand reaching for a book. And as I mentioned, I felt no different from anyone else but one day at school, a friend approached me and accused me of something that I will never forget. He said, North Korean like you survive our South Korean taxes, so you just followed my statement. I could not understand this statement, but what I did experience was one by one, friends became strangers and every classmate pointed at me, began to point to me and whisper in the hallway. And also my teacher, my teacher every year, my homeroom teacher asked me to stand up in front of the class and she said, everyone Alice is from North Korea, so let's have pity on her and treat her nicely, then my origin became fact and the pampering began.

Simona: Having to be like being a child or a teenager is not easy, but to also be constantly picked on because of something you can't control is even worse. I guess your parents have so much memory of living in North Korea and probably had a pretty comfortable life until it stopped being comfortable. What do they, you know, how have they been able to adapt to South Korea, like their every day, what does that look like?

Alice: By the time we arrived South Korea, the elections in South Korea were completed and the president Kim Dae-jung was about to start.

Gilad: And Kim Dae-jung was like liberal, a liberal president.

Alice: Yeah and maybe some of you know Kim Dae-jung won a Nobel Peace Prize for his introduction of Sunshine Policy.

Gilad: Can you tell us a little bit more about what the Sunshine Policy is?

Alice: The policy in order to maximize positive foreign relations with North Korea, so he want to give assistance to North Korea, that is Sunshine Policy. Not attack each other or offensive each other.

Gilad: So it was basically to create a better relationship with North Korea and to send money, I believe.

Alice: Money or other food or financial assistance.

Gilad: Did that help the human rights situation?

Alice: Actually, in order to there positive relations with North Korea, domestic policies and attitudes towards North Korean refugees were greater impacted, so the plight of refugees were sort of under the lock, and also at the same time, the IMF financial crisis fell on the region and drew the country into economic chaos. My family arrive at the worst possible moment, so my parents acknowledge about in a working of secretive governments was no longer about you, and at the time when the South Korea was almost bankrupt, so our needed for financial assistance was most unwelcome, so my parents' credentials and their high-ranking positions were unrecognized and became a source of suspicion. So they just had to work, spend every hour of the day work, working at landfills, gas stations and restaurants and the street for a small amount of money we needed to survive. And also we, after we arrived we live in a small five hundred square foot apartment in tower, but even now we still continue to live in the same

apartment we arrive South Korea, cuz we don't have any financial assistance from the government after that.

Gilad: That's a part of the story that a lot of people don't know and so thank you for sharing that. I'm curious to know, you're at Yonsei University right now, right?

Alice: Yeah.

Gilad: Obviously, your story is playing a very big part in what you're studying. So you're studying about reunification at Yonsei University. I wanna get your thoughts on reunification, how you feel about it, and then also what are your thoughts on how other people think about it? You know, when you see it in the news like South Korea wants it and North Korea wants it, and China and the US and everyone's always talking about it very favorably. Do you really believe that that's all true?

Alice: Yeah, I study in - the full name is Political Science and International Studies, and I'm interested in the reunification of the two Koreas. So I usually think about the reunification are so usually debated with my friends, they are most South Korean and some of them don't know I was a North Korean. I think the reunification is needed to our country cuz after reunification, we can go and develop more than now. I know also there are so many problem to reunification, like financial problem or other international assistance or contracting, but in South Korea we educated since we were in elementary school, the reunification is our like ultimate goal as a Korean, cuz at the first time in history, the arbitrary line should not been there.

Gilad: You mean the DMZ?

Alice: Yeah.

Gilad: The 38th ...

Alice: That is drawn by other people.

Simona: Mainly the United States and Russia.

Alice: Yeah, so I also worry that - and also I want the reunification but nowadays, many South Koreans don't want to reunification because there are so many costs to the reunification.

Gilad: So many costs.

Alice: Yeah.

Gilad: Yep.

Alice: And also they think they - they felt they don't need to reunification cuz they are alive, there are no war, and no war is about the war, and also they live very well before then. So they think why we have to make the reunification, now is okay. And North Korea always make issues about nuclear weapons or Kim Jong-un's like addiction or his yeah, something like that. So they

don't want and also there, even now there are so many discrimination about North Korea, so now young people don't want to reunification.

Simona: Do you think that, let's say reunification happened, would you think about going back to North Korea if you knew you would be safe?

Alice: Actually I didn't think about that cuz I also like live in South Korea. Maybe I'm already accepted the region, but I wanna go once as possible as I can go. In Pyongyang, my original house when I was born. Yeah cuz my mum shared with me about the memory, we were live in Pyongyang and the house's appearance and how we'd live and what our - what I were doing in the house like that.

Gilad: I wanna ask you a little bit about, like right now in the news, it's a very interesting time. So we've been doing this podcast for two years and we've never ever had to say the word Trump. That's the first.

Simona: I feel like we've actively tried to avoid it.

Gilad: So we're not gonna say it again, but he's in the news all the time for - usually never for any good reason ever. But he's also in the news lately because he's been having conversations with Kim Jong-un and there's a lot of talk right now about - and not just now, this is common but nuclear weapons in North Korea and how, you know, we're reaching like some sort of deal. I wanted to get your thoughts, when you and your family see the news and you see this guy, let's not say his name, and Kim Jong-un meeting, what goes through your heads? What do you think

about? Cuz for me it's infuriating that human rights is just not - no one's talking about it. What goes through your heads?

Alice: I think it is a possible and positive sign for North Korea to enter into a dialogue recently. However, it is necessary to question the purpose or intentions of North Korea when it comes to such behavior, because there is some reason I think the first - North Korea does not have a term as its Supreme Commander, so Kim Jong-un leads like his father or his grandfather. He can take power for more than fifty years, so therefore he has a weak incentive to give up his privileges, and also the current attitude and international situation of North Korea is try to get away from international sanctions. Before then, also there were similar international sanctions, but it is not stricting.

Gilad: These are the worst ones, the harshest ones.

Alice: Yeah, the North Korea must have been hit by the sanctions, so it is highly likely that he choose conversation as a temporary measure to maintain his say and avoid sanctions. And finally I think it intends to remove its status as an authoritarian state cuz since very long ago, North Korea want to get a normal status as a normal country, like other country. So that is just for the status and for Kim Jong-un's rise to power I think, and my parents also say about that.

Gilad: So I was living in South Korea in 2011, I was working with a North Korean human rights organization called PSCORE. And it was in December and there was a big announcement, North Korea was about to make a really big announcement and no one knew what was gonna happen. And the announcement was that Kim Jong-il had passed away and I remember being

in this room with like fifteen or twenty North Korean refugees and everybody was so happy, because they all felt - a lot of them felt like they were gonna go home. Kim Jong-un came to power, he was younger, he grew - he was educated in the west, in Switzerland, and people thought that he maybe was going to be a little bit friendlier than his dad. Two questions: my first is what was your family's reaction when Kim Jong-il passed away, what was your real reaction? And second, how has North Korea changed since Kim Jong-il passed and Kim Jong-un took power?

Alice: The first question I answer, seriously my family didn't think about, oh now time to reunification, cuz we already know about the inner high center, the center - center core, you know, working stating reunification is not our need. So my parents says another like president in North Korea lies to his or her power, that is Kim Jong-un. The second question I answer, already Kim Jong-un finished transition of the power from the Kim Jong-il.

Gilad: Transition of power?

Alice: Yeah, even he was so young that time as a leader in the country, he already finished his power - rise to power, so there are no problem about that. That's why he kill Jang Song-thaek.

Gilad: His uncle.

Alice: Yeah, his uncle and also he reorganized his inner circle in Workers' Party.

Gilad: But how has life in North Korea changed? Has - do people still live the same way? If you're a refugee, has that changed? Is you want to be a refugee, if you want to leave, is it easier?

Alice: No, it's - I heard that it's harder than before cuz Kim Jong-un doesn't want other people know about inner - North Korean inner situation, so in the border there are so many trap to catch the North Korean refugees, and also they order, the government ordered to military posts, if you see the North Korean refugees or defectors, just kill.

Simona: Kill them on contact.

Alice: Yeah.

Simona: I think one of the - I think one of the images that sticks out for me most when it comes to North Korea is that, that occasion where family members from North Korea and family members from South Korea can actually come to a space and see each other just for a few hours and then go back to each country, and I think it kind of draws on the same parallel, that it's just an arbitrary drawn border that wasn't drawn by the people of those countries. It was done by someone else. It was really - so you have family separated forever. Is there ever, you know, just knowing that you still have family there or your sister, not knowing what has happened to them, does your family ever feel guilty or regret the decision, even though it meant death if they did decide to go back?

Alice: Actually, I don't know my parents' thinking, but sometimes I think about that. If I remain, I mean, if Kim Il-sung had not passed unexpectedly, would my parents remain North Korean elites? Or if my family enter, had not enter during presidency of Kim Dae-jung and the IMF financial crisis, would my family had celebrated as a North Korean refugee survivors? And also I sometimes - if I or if my parents had not planned to escape, then would my family alive, have alive? So when I was younger I think about, if my parents were high elites, then North Korea is better place to live right. But actually I would find out the fact about North Korea, then I think even like that, my parents' choice make better than harm.

Simona: Thank you for sharing that.

Gilad: So we met you because you're here in Toronto, you're here with an amazing organization called HanVoice. So HanVoice is Canada's largest North Korean human rights organization, they do incredible work. I know that you're here with the Pioneer Project. Can you tell us a little bit more about what you're doing here with the Pioneer Project and what you hope to take back to South Korea with you when you're done?

Alice: Yeah, I'm apply for this Pioneer Program with HanVoice and I really thank you to come here and I can tell about my story to make better work, especially for North Korean refugees. Actually, still - even still now, I have little worries about telling my story cuz if my older sister are alive, the story maybe make my older sister into danger, but I - as my story shows, the policies and government don't look eye to eye with people they intend to affect, so I think I will not be a silent North Korean refugee anymore, cuz as I mentioned, I'm interested in reunification of two Koreas and the arbitrary line that were drawn by other people that changed many lives of

countless families like mine, so I want to - plan to use the policy truth like erase, eraser and pen to redraw the lines.

Gilad: If your dad was in North Korea and he said the same thing, what would happen to him?

Alice: Maybe he directly killed from the government. I would later find out in the first three years of Kim Jong-il's rise to power about more than two thousand North Korean officials were expelled and the biggest purge of government officials in North Korea resistance, so maybe my father became one of the victim of the purging.

[Theme music fades in]

Gilad: My name's Gilad Cohen.

Simona: And I'm Simona Ramkisson.

Gilad: This podcast is edited and produced by Brandon Fragomeni and Alex Castellani. Our associate producer is Ron Ma.

Simona: The Hum is an initiative of JAYU, a charity that shares human rights stories through the arts.

[Theme music fades out]

Gilad: Support us making more podcasts like these by donating at juyu.ca/donate.