

Spiders and Butterflies: A Captive's Diary of
Letters
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Spence,
think)

June 13 (I

Somewhere in

North Korea
They've taken me.

I'm sitting in a dark, dusty, oppressive room, staring at the last letter I wrote to you about a week ago. June 6. Your 25th birthday. It's crumpled at my feet - not my doing, I promise - but my emotional state finds bitter company in its appearance: mangled and torn and stripped of purpose. We both are useless now, that letter and me. I suppose this one will be useless too...who knows if or when I will be able to send it. But I have the despairing feeling that I could be in this basement for a while, and writing to you will keep me sane and force me to look for those elusive silver linings you have that coveted knack for finding.

They took everything, Spence. My notes and interview recordings and itinerary, gone. I've spent so many months in preparation for this journey, and the few weeks I've spent here gathering little anecdotes of the lives of the South Koreans while planning my way across the border now has been for nothing. Nothing. How can I make a name for myself now?

The letter I wrote you blew my cover. Besides wishing you a wonderful birthday, I mentioned that I was close to pinpointing the best route across the DMZ. A lorrie truck driven by the cousin of the Su family who gave me a place to stay in Jatgol. That poor couple and their precious daughter Cho. I should have never included them in either the letter or my plan - it has been much too easy for me to forget the weight my actions carried for the South Koreans throughout this project. I'm trying not to picture the innocent faces of all of the names in my notes that are now in the hands of North Korean soldiers. I fear that these wrinkled words at my feet must have become a death warrant for the Sus. Maybe that's why I was allowed to keep your letter - to remind me of the pain I might have caused, to convince me how far away you are, to haunt me with my failure.

I keep replaying last night in my head. (Was it last night? How many torturous hours did I spend in the back of that truck?) It started with me riding the public bus to the grocery in Munsan. I was thinking of

the river and how it traced the road winding along, almost urging me forward to my destination. The thought of Cho prancing along the shore of the river made me smile. Her name means "butterfly" - so fitting of the carefree and lighthearted child I had come to adore. I loved running errands for the Su family. The chance to see the hustle and bustle of Munsan. The combination on the streets of the South Korean citizens trying to survive life and the American and Korean soldiers whose job was to monitor the DMZ vividly illustrates to me the political situation that brought me out here in the first place. So many people living under the watchful eye of the military. Something so foreign to us Americans. The difference between the South Korea I was looking at and the North Korea of my schemes is that one eye is protective while the other is malicious and oppressive.

The truck stopped suddenly. I could hear the passengers towards the front whispering and could feel the tension in the air stiffen. The driver began shouting in Korean, making everyone who had risen from their seats return to them hesitatingly. Then appeared three gruff-looking men without uniforms at the front of the bus. I tried to remain calm, but it was tough to squelch the anxiety that was trying to overwhelm me. I began to rehearse the story in my head that the Su family had prepared with me so thoroughly. "I am an American medical student working in Jatgol for several months. I am going to Munsan for medicine supplies. I am an American medical student working in Jatgol for several months. I am going to Munsan for medicine supplies. I am..." My thoughts were cut short when the biggest of the men began walking down the aisle and I noticed the three crossed tools drawn in sharpie onto his coat sleeve. The symbol of the North Korean Workers' party. Usually yellow on a red background, but clearly guerilla soldiers did not have many options. Neither did I. Not even my medical cover could protect me from the symbol I knew to avoid at all costs. He ordered everyone off the bus, but not until after making eye contact with me. Standing in a line on the side of the road, I was foolish enough to hope that a passing car would intervene. I felt the canvas bag get shoved over my head as everything went dark, and I was half-led and half-dragged to their car. My fear that I was being put in the trunk was

confirmed when I heard it slam shut above me. Finally, I allowed the tears to fall.

I tried to stay awake and keep my wits about me for as long as possible in that trunk, but as the hours waned so did my resolve. The scratchy canvas tore at my cheeks and nose when I tried to move. At one point I was transferred to a different vehicle, which was when I felt my pack taken from me. Thankfully, I keep this little journal and pen in my pocket for quick access. I was in and out of sleep when I was dragged from that second trunk, pulled into a room, and after a decent amount of yelling, pushed down stairs. Only when I heard a door lock above my head did I feel safe to take off the bag. That's when I found myself where I am now - what I'm assuming is the basement of a North Korean office that used to be a home. Three of the walls are still dirt; I've set up camp against the cold brick of the fourth. It was not long until I noticed the ball of paper that had been thrown down here with me, and as I crawled to retrieve it, I recognized my notebook paper and handwriting. I knew. The dingy, yellow light illuminating - if you can even give it enough credit to deserve that verb - the room from overhead teases my eyes now as I squint to write.

The questions plague me. If I had bothered to learn Korean before I came, could I have escaped this imprisonment? If I had chosen to go to the market on a different day, would that have made any difference? What has happened to Cho? Was it worth it to write to you for your birthday? How was your birthday?

Love Always,

Becca

P.S. Give Mom and Dad a hug for me. Tell them I'm okay.

Spence,
June 16?

The Basement

I'm frightened, Spencer. What is going to happen to me? I've waited a few days, hoping I would be transferred or released or someone would come for me.

But who? You don't know that I've been captured, let alone where I am. How long until someone starts to look for me?

I am tormented by the voices that warned me not to attempt such a project and the faces of those whom I love. Everyone told me this could happen. No, that this probably *would* happen. And yet I persisted. You have always laughed at me for my stubborn, thick-headed ways. Remember that time I was so confident in my ability to drive stick after you spent about five minutes teaching me in our driveway, and then I stalled out on the highway? Twice? You couldn't contain yourself, and the redder my face got the funnier everything became for you. Well, I'm beginning to wish I had listened to our family on this one. Even my journalist friends told me I was crazy - friends who understand the drive to put passion into words. Only you defended me, although I know it was out of love and not rational thought. You know me well enough to know that I was going, no matter what anyone said, so I might as well make the trip with one supporter back home. I'm thankful for that. It hurts me to think that Mom and Dad are probably still mad at me for leaving...and what if I can never tell them I'm sorry? I think you probably have already done it for me. I love you for that.

And my project! That has been the hardest to let go. So many stories untold and voices unheard in North Korea. All I wanted was to give them a platform. A series of testimonials about what its like living under their government! It would have been captivating and heart-wrenching and unprecedented. Not to mention it certainty would have helped me out back home too. And I didn't even make it across the border. Well...I suppose I have...but not on my terms.

I may not have any North Korean stories, but I met a woman in Munsan when I was with Cho's mother, Mi-kum (who helped with the translating). I wrote everything she told me down in my notebook that is also being held captive, but I'm going to try to remember as much as I can. She was older - maybe about 60, and she mad hats for a living. Her hat shop is situated on a little side street next to the open market, and as we walked by, the plethora of brightly colored hats in the window caught my attention. I peered inside, and

noticed the counter and walls covered with hats, hats-in-process, or sketches of hats, and Eun sitting towards the back squinting intently at the hat in her wrinkled hands. The peaceful woman surrounded by such artistic chaos intrigued me, and I asked if we could step inside for a brief detour. Mi-kum nodded as she was distracted by a little blue felt butterfly pinned to the side of a hat, no doubt thinking of her daughter. As we began talking, Eun asked about America and if all men were as handsome as the soldiers who occasionally sauntered passed her window. I smiled as I told her unfortunately, no, and that she better catch one soon before they are smitten by all of the lovely Korean girls. I realized quickly that I had touched on a sore spot when her eyes welled up and the look on her face revealed that her mind was elsewhere. My curiosity got the better of my gracious side, and I asked what was wrong. Without losing either the tears or her distant visage, Eun explained how her daughter had been taken from her at the age of 13 by men marked with the same image of the three tools. She painfully recalled waiting for the girl to return from school, and how an hour after her usual arrival, a panicked boy arrived relating how a car spray-painted with the dreaded symbol had grabbed her as she strolled down the side of the road. An experience I am all too familiar with. The girl loved hats - Eun often wore one and her daughter would steal it and wear it around the house imitating her mother. She would poke feathers and buttons in the hat to decorate it, and then pretend she was a famous actress. That's what inspired Eun to start the hat shop. She sits in her chair against the back wall every day praying that her daughter's face appears in the window.

Spence,
Day 8

The

Basement

I've given up trying to figure out the days. Or a way out, for that matter. There are no windows down here, and I haven't decided yet if that is a blessing or a curse. As much as I would want to glimpse the light and life of the outside world, it would only intensify the reality of my situation. But at least with a

window I would be able to tell day from night. The only thing to go off of is the footsteps and voices above me, but do you think they are more active during the day or night? I can't tell. And some days I hear nothing. I don't think my sleep schedule indicates night or day either. I tend to sleep a lot down here with nothing else to do (even though the cement floor, one crusty blanket, and pillow created from this journal tucked into my the bag that served as my blindfold offer me less comfort than your miserable futon).

I've made a friend today. No, no person has joined me in this pit of despair, but a spider has woven a web across one of the corners of the room. I tried to ask him how he got in here. No response, but worth a shot. If he could talk, we could help each other out, I think. As of yet, has no way to know that his chances of catching any flies down here are slim at best. I can relate to the spider in that we both have wound up on a route that has led to inevitable futility. As the web grows, it reminds me of my red-eye flight out of Atlanta. My last view of the U.S. was of its interconnected thread of cities, each one looking like a web of sparkling and twinkling string woven across a dark expanse. However in America, the web is self-generated. It grows as we grow, it's edges advance as we push our boundaries into new expanse. The epitome of the American ideal of forward progress. In a word, the citizens are the spiders. The web belonging to my disillusioned companion here is different. A possession; a creation of another's construction whose shape and purpose are under the control of its master. Maybe this net of threads is more North Korean than American. This net of threads is meant to trap butterflies, after all.

Spencer,
Day 13

Basement

The

I was thinking this morning (or at least what I assume was morning) about how much I would love some ice cream. Mint chocolate chip. The sweet, refreshing treat with its cheerful green hue would feel odd in

this dismal and stifling room. A prince among paupers with its ostentatious display of luxury and its brazen willingness to flaunt elegance. I, for one, would not mind being a prince for a day. I remember the car ride home from our piano recitals when mom told us we could stop for a treat at one place, and you wanted Cold Stone while I wanted to go to Big Top Candy Shop. And she got so frustrated with our unrelenting arguing that we ended up on the couch at home with freeze pops instead!

If I could go back, I would go to Cold Stone with you - not just for the ice cream but because all of those pointless fights weren't worth it. Then, it was the biggest deal since microwave popcorn. Now, I can't stop replaying my memories with you and mom and dad, and I wish those fights weren't in the collection. Besides being my best friend and confidant, you've always been my hero. From the day you first made me laugh with your teasing, I wanted to be just like you. Loved by my friends like you, and the life of the party like you. The athlete and scholar and leader that you are. I wanted to earn your grades, and to make mom and dad proud like you have always done. I wanted to navigate college and high school with your same grace and success and crooked smile that you constantly wear. It was always such a joy and honor to follow in your footsteps. You're the reason I stood behind that podium and spoke at my graduation - not because of any of my own achievements but because of a drive you gave to me to become the best version of myself that I could be.

If I could go back, I would make sure you know all of that. I would tell you this before I was stuck indefinitely in a basement on the other side of the Pacific.

If I could go back, I would go to Cold Stone and order mint chocolate chip.

Next time you get ice cream, will you save me a bite?

Spence,
Day 18
Basement, where else?

The

Silver Lining #1: These clay walls are now my canvas. I have spent the last few days carving pictures, or what I intend to be pictures, into the thick dirt. At the mercy of the back of this pen and my deplorable artistic skill, the walls are beginning to take the shape of my journey to South Korea and my of my time spent here. I began withdrawing my diploma with three figures behind it: you, Mom, and Dad supporting me through my educational success, and a reminder of my voracious appetite for learning and knowledge. Next, my face with a thought bubble containing the symbol of the North Korean Worker's Party: the formulation of my dream to make a name for myself in my field with an unprecedented piece exposing oppression and injustice through personal anecdotes. Beneath this dream is carved a hand with its palm facing outward next to a stop sign, representing the many voices of caution trying to undermine my growing passion. However because these voices have proved to be wise, I drew an owl on the palm of the hand. And the story continues. A passport, a plane and suitcase full of papers and pens, my first sights of Korea when I landed in Seoul such as the illuminated white tower on the dark black hills and my first Korean street food: Hoddeok pancake and Beondegi (seasoned silk worm pupae). A series of hieroglyphs, I guess. I am working on drawing the Su family now, but it has taken me awhile because I can't seem to get them right. It has to be perfect...they risked everything for me. Along all that I have drawn so far, there is a curly, dotted path of a butterfly. When I get to the image of the bus - the start of the kidnapping sequence - it will change to a spider and thread.

Silver Lining #2: I've decided to name the spider Kim after his North Korean counterpart, and his web is coming along quite nicely. His daily progress has become a performance for me - one of my only forms of entertainment. How sad that sitting and observing a spider for hours can be so amusing. I have had to apologize to Kim for doubting him, for in his web yesterday appeared a tiny, stuck fly or gnat of some sort. Then came the crescendo of the act: Kim moved swiftly, twisting and turning his victim as he coiled his thread tightly around its body. His tact and skill made killing seem graceful, in a morbid way. Second-nature. I empathize with the fly. I can relate to feeling completely bound and terrified for one's life.

The emotion of being unsure of what will happen and having no way of knowing when the inevitable strike will come. I cannot describe to you the extent of how powerless I feel. It's an emotion that completely undermines what it means to be a human being. Do you think that I am the gnat? Do you think my only release from this basement will be my demise? I keep trying to convince myself that I might be the butterfly...that I might soon be allowed to fly freely again. I've heard of trespassers and perpetrators of sedition being sentenced to work camps here. Maybe I'm neither Kim's next meal nor the butterfly, and I'm someone in between the two who is awaiting that transfer.

But I'm not supposed to be thinking of the negatives right now.

Silver Lining #3: (Well, I suppose this one's more of a "new development," but to me, those are silver linings. Anything to break the monotony of this captivity.) A woman brought me my tray of food today! She is the first Korean soldier I have seen. I'm trying not to hold my measly sustenance against her because she has intrigued me. I don't know why, but I had assumed that the WPK did not allow women to be in positions of authority. Even that brief interaction with her has made me re-think my perceptions of this whole situation - I naively these preconceived notions about the horrors of North Korea based on what our history textbooks professes as truth and what our democratic society tells us to believe. To this woman, maybe the WPK has been her opportunity to earn a voice, or a chance to provide for her family. To Americans, and likely to most North Koreans, the suffering generated from their political system certainly outweighs the benefits, but could there be redeeming qualities? I call myself a journalist, and yet I have been so one-dimensional in my approach of this project that I have failed to recognize that other perspectives always exist. If I'm being honest with myself, these thoughts make me uncomfortable. They prompt questions that I am not prepared to answer. But today, even in this basement, I have been presented with the chance to challenge myself and continue to grow as an individual and as an intellectual, and for that I am grateful to the stoic woman who just might be proud to be serving her country.

New Development #2: On the note of "new developments," I have acquired a rather vicious cough. It wasn't bad for the first week or so, but it has gotten to the point where it keeps me from sleeping, and recently when I have fallen into bouts of convulsive coughing, the people above me stomp on the trap door and shout at me. It must be getting pretty loud. Still, it's tolerable. I must rely on my body's impulse to cure itself since it seems that is all that I have going for me. I expect no sympathy from my stomping friends upstairs.

Spencer,
Day 21

Hell, possibly
I think I would welcome a labor camp sentence. I cannot repeat these past three weeks of miserable suspense. Being sent to a labor camp for a period of time would at least give me a change of scenery, a timeline for my release, and most importantly, a breath of fresh air. I can tell you one thing: the reclusive life is not for me. You know how much I love the outdoors! How my happiest memories are of sailing or hiking or biking! I will never forget the rush of traversing the side of the Telluride cliffs in Colorado the summer before freshman year at Colombia. I even find such simple contentment in walking along with you as you play a round of golf. I feel caged, and my spirit aches for that peace. I think I would be okay if I just saw some stars again. Maybe I'll draw some above my head. Yeah. I'll do that.

It turned into my best recollection of Orion's Belt and the Big Dipper. It gets the job done for now.

My cough hasn't gotten any better. I would do anything for some of Mi-kum's hot tea right now. I'm getting a little worried, to tell you the truth. My throat is torn up from it and my stomach and chest are consistently sore. It must look like I'm having a seizure when the fits come. I guess a labor camp would probably not be conducive to these symptoms.

At least I have my new stars. Do you think I can wish on these ones too?

Spence,
Day 26

Not the

Hospital

I'm sorry I've neglected you. Things have definitely taken a turn for the worse. I'm hardly hungry anymore - I'm pecking at my food like a bird, as Dad would say - and I can tell that I am losing weight fast. That's not the worst of it though...I've been coughing up blood. A lot of it. I'm so weak, Spence. And when I cough, which seems to be taking up the majority of my time, I cough until I cry.

That's another thing. I cry a lot now. I haven't been telling you about the depression that has completely overcome me, but please give me grace. I don't think even Walt Disney could avoid its convincing, oppressive grasp. It's too tempting to slip into the despair and despondency. Darkly relieving. Sometimes if I look at the light bulb on the ceiling from the right side, it looks like the stars I drew are its tears. That's comforting too.

It's hard to pick up the pen. This is the most I have exerted myself since the last letter. I spent most of yesterday lying on the floor looking at my mural of pictographs and replaying these past few months. Often I would think of another detail to add, but only the truly necessary ones made it on the wall because moving now is always accompanied by another coughing fit. They're getting harder to endure. One of the guards finally showed compassion and brought a wet wash cloth. For the blood maybe? It's long dry now. But that brief display of compassion frightened me. How sick must I look and sound for them to actually show kindness to me?

I'm always so tired, but I never sleep anymore. Depression will do that to you. Depression and a deathly cough.

Spence,
Day 30

Still Here

I don't think I have much more time, Spence.

How sadly ironic that the first letter I wrote to you with such happiness and faith in my mission has led to many more filled with despair and stained with tears. Did I tell you I unfolded my first letter to you, the one that gave me away, and used the pen to poke the corners into the clay mural? At just the right place. I know you have never seen it our touched it, let alone know of its existence, but it's the only connection I have to you. To family. To home. I wish I could put this journal in the wall. I hope someone reads it one day. I hope that someone is you...that would be a silver lining. It's the physical conclusion to a deceased, romantic dream a girl once had. A eulogy, in a sense. How strange it has been to witness my own funeral.

Dearest Spencer,
Day 32

The

Basement
I love you always.

See you soon,
Becca