

# Escape from Camp 14



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BLAINE HARDEN

Blaine Harden attended Gonzaga University and afterwards became a writer for *The Washington Post*. For twenty-eight years, Harden traveled to Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe on behalf of the *Post*; he also reported for *The New York Times*. He published his first book, *Africa: Dispatches from a Fragile Continent*, in 1990, and six years later, he released his second book, *A River Lost*, about the environmental degradation of the Columbia River. Harden has written about life in contemporary North Korea, and his book *Escape From Camp 14* prompted a widespread discussion about the North Korean prison camp system. He currently resides in Seattle with his wife and two children.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The most important historical event *Escape From Camp 14* discusses is the rise of the Kim Dynasty in North Korea. In the 1940s, a civil war broke out in Korea between Communist forces backed by China and pro-capitalist forces backed by the United States. In the ensuing Korean War, Communist forces gained control over Korea north of the 38th parallel. The new North Korean state was ostensibly Communist, but quickly morphed into a cult of personality state structured around Kim Il Sung, the popular leader of the Worker's Party of Korea. As Kim's reign went on, the North Korean state became increasingly repressive. In the 1990s, Kim was succeeded by his son, Kim Jong Il. During this period, North Korea was plagued by famine, partly due to the incompetence of the North Korean state and its investments in a nuclear weapons program. At present, North Korea is ruled by Kim Jong Il's son, Kim Jong Eun. The country is notorious for its repressive policies and cult-like worship of its leaders. Despite being dead, Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung are still the official leaders of North Korea, along with Kim Jong Eun (the journalist Christopher Hitchens proposed calling North Korea a "necrocracy" for this reason).

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*Escape From Camp 14* alludes to several non-fiction works on a similar theme, including *Night* (1960) by Elie Wiesel. In his memoir of his time in a concentration camp, Wiesel talks about having to sacrifice his moral principles while yearning for his early life with his family. Harden's point is that *Night* is emblematic of the "prison camp memoir" genre, which usually revolves around a troubled young character who experiences

great suffering and then transcends it. Shin, the protagonist of *Escape From Camp 14*, experiences no such transcendence, however—as the book ends, he's still consumed with guilt and self-loathing.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Escape From Camp 14: One Man's Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West*
- **When Written:** 2011-2012
- **Where Written:** Seattle, New York, Seoul
- **When Published:** Fall 2012
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary nonfiction
- **Genre:** Nonfiction, biography
- **Setting:** Camp 14 in North Korea, various North Korea cities near the Chinese border, Shanghai, Seoul, Los Angeles
- **Climax:** Shin and Park escape from Camp 14
- **Antagonist:** The North Korean police state, run by Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and Kim Jong Eun
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient, with many first person asides from Blaine Harden, the author

### EXTRA CREDIT

**To believe or not to believe?** In 2014, following the release of a series of North Korean propaganda videos that contradicted some of Shin's story, Shin admitted that he'd lied or distorted the truth about his early life—meaning that large chunks of *Escape From Camp 14* are false. Harden has yet to revise his book, but he's added a long foreword discussing Shin's claims, and arguing that readers should continue to trust Shin.

**Awards, awards, awards.** Harden has won an impressive number of awards for reporting throughout his career, including the Ernie Pyle Award, the Livingstone Awards, and the American Society of Newspaper Editors Award.



## PLOT SUMMARY

In 2008, the reporter Blaine Harden met with a young man named Shin In Geun. Shin was a defector from North Korea, one of the most brutal, repressive states on the planet. Shin had been born in Camp 14, one of the many labor camps scattered across North Korea. There, he'd lived in nightmarish conditions for more than twenty years, eventually becoming the first known person to escape from a North Korean labor camp. Harden interviewed Shin and published an article on his experiences in the *Washington Post*, and he later decided to

interview Shin further and publish a full-length book on Shin's life.

Shin grew up in the confines of Camp 14, a prison for those who'd angered the North Korean state. In Camp 14, prisoners were slowly worked to death in coalmines, factories, and farms. Shin's mother, Jang Hye Gyung, worked hard to earn her daily quota and bring home food for Shin; however, Shin viewed her as a mere competitor for food, and never felt any love for her. For her part, Jang treated Shin coldly, and often beat him. Shin was raised to be more loyal to the camp's guards than to his own family. He believed that anyone who disobeyed the guards deserved to be shot, and knew that by ratting out his peers, he could win the guards' respect and earn some extra food for himself.

Camp 14 was always going through a food crisis—much like North Korea in general. Under the Kim dynasty, which began in the late 1940s, North Korea became a collectivized economy, controlled by a strong leader who ruled through military force and a cult of personality. During most of Shin's time in Camp 14, North Korea was run by Kim Jong Il, the son of his predecessor, Kim Il Sung. While much of his country starved, Kim lived a luxurious life. He accepted foreign aid from the United States but took the credit for giving his people food, claiming in public that the U.S. was a monstrous nation.

In the camp, Shin attended school, where he learned to read and write. However, the real purpose of school was to prepare Shin for a lifetime of obedient work. Shin was beaten when he broke the rules, and at the age of ten he began working in a mine, picking up pieces of coal. He had no real friends, since he'd been trained not to trust anyone.

At the age of thirteen, Shin came home to find his mother sitting with his older brother, Hye Geun, whom he barely knew. Shin was jealous that his mother was preparing rice (a luxury in the camp) for Hye; he slowly came to realize that they were planning to escape from the camp together. Eager for a chance to ingratiate himself with the camp's guards, Shin ran off to find a guard. Because it was late at night, he first ran to his only friend, Hong Sung Jo, who advised him to find a night guard. Shin told the night guard what he knew about his mother's escape plan, and the night guard assured Shin that he'd take care of everything. The next day, however, guards arrested Shin and took him to the secret prison underneath Camp 14.

For the next six months, Shin lived in the underground prison, enduring torture from the guards. Shin realized that the night guard had claimed all the credit for knowing about Shin's mother's escape, and the other guards believed that Shin was collaborating with his mother. Eventually, Shin was able to convince the guards to talk to Hong, the only person who could corroborate his story. Shin was then placed in a cell with an older man named Kim Jin Myung, who went by the nickname, "Uncle." Uncle was kind to Shin, and showed him how to treat his wounds with salty cabbage. Eventually, the guards took Shin

away from Uncle and put him in a room with his father, Shin Gyung Sub. Shin wasn't close with his father—in Camp 14, prisoners were forced to marry and bear children, but afterwards, the father wasn't allowed to spend much time with his offspring. Nevertheless, Shin's father had been arrested under suspicion of helping his wife escape from camp. The guards brought Shin and his father out of prison and back to Camp 14, where they, along with the rest of the camp, were forced to witness the execution of Shin's mother and brother.

As Shin grew older, he left school and began working at the camp full-time. He first worked at a pig farm for a while. There his life was easier, and he was able to eat more food than usual. However, Shin was then unexpectedly transferred to the garment factory at Camp 14. Here, he was asked to spy on a new prisoner, Park Yong Chul. Instead of snitching on Park, however, Shin became Park's friend. Together, they decided to escape from Camp 14.

One night, Shin and Park slipped away from the rest of the prisoners and ran toward the **electric fence** surrounding Camp 14. Park was electrocuted as he tried to crawl through the fence—within seconds, he was dead. Undeterred, Shin crawled over Park's body and made it out. He then wandered toward a nearby village, where he was able to steal food and a warm coat. For months, he wandered around North Korea, trying to make it to the country's border with China.

At the end of 2005, Shin finally earned enough money to bribe North Korean soldiers at the Chinese border. At the time, North Korea was rapidly becoming a "shakedown state," in which corruption was rampant and bribery was a way of life for many. Shin bribed a series of officers at the border checkpoints and afterwards entered China. There, he traveled around the country, trying to find work in restaurants. There is a fairly large population of North Korean defectors in China, and Shin was able to cooperate with other North Koreans and find ways of supporting himself. While working in a restaurant, he made the acquaintance of a South Korean journalist, who offered to fly him to Seoul. In Seoul, Shin became involved with human rights activists, who wanted Shin to publish the story of his time in Camp 14. Shin ended up publishing a memoir about his experiences, but he hedged and waffled on his past—he felt tremendously guilty about his role in his mother's death, along with the other things he'd done in Camp 14.

After a stint in a South Korean resettlement center, Shin became more interested in fighting for human rights. He joined an American nonprofit called LiNK (Liberty in North Korea) and traveled to Los Angeles to speak out against the prison camps. However, Shin was still frightened of speaking honestly about his time in Camp 14, and he continued to suffer from nightmares and trauma. A kind Christian family adopted him, and he began to learn how to accept and express love for other people. He also began dating a young woman named Harim Lee; however, their relationship ended abruptly. Shin also quit

his job with LiNK, saddening many of his coworkers. To this day, he continues to suffer from guilt and trauma, even though he understands how important it is that he speak out against what he witnessed at Camp 14.

In 2014, the North Korean state released a series of propaganda videos contradicting some of Shin's claims about Camp 14. Following the release of these videos, Shin admitted that he'd been lying about parts of his past. He now claimed that he'd been born in Camp 14, but had actually grown up in the neighboring Camp 18, which absorbed Camp 14 into its limits when Shin was about six years old. Life in Camp 18 was hard, but it was less squalid and bleak than Shin had initially suggested: some prisoners were allowed to leave, and Shin grew up learning about the Kim family, contrary to what he'd earlier claimed. Shin also admitted that, in addition to informing on his mother and brother, he'd signed a document in which he claimed that his mother and brother had committed a murder. Shin had lived with his father during his teen years. Finally, he admitted that before escaping to China, he'd already escaped from his prison camp twice—the first time he was caught almost immediately, and the second time he made it to China, but was captured and sent back.

The text of *Escape From Camp 14* consists of Shin's story as he presented it to Blaine Harden between 2006 and 2012. However, Harden also discusses Shin's recent modifications to his story in an extended foreword to the book. In the foreword, Harden argues that, although Shin isn't perfectly trustworthy, his overall account of life in the North Korean political prison system is accurate.

document stating that his mother and brother had committed a murder, lived with his father as a teenager, and—perhaps most importantly—escaped from prison camp twice before succeeding in making his way to South Korea. As Blaine Harden portrays him, Shin is a complex character, all the more so because he's been reluctant to talk about his life. He's consumed with guilt and self-loathing, to the point where he sometimes omits the full truth, or lies outright. In all, Shin is a deeply sympathetic character, but also a maddeningly unreliable source of information about North Korean prison camps.

**Kim Il Sung** – Kim Il Sung was the first premier, and later president, of North Korea. Following his service in the Korean War, Kim was backed by the Soviet Union to lead the newly created North Korea. During his time as ruler of the country, North Korea experienced widespread famine, partly as a consequence of Kim's repressive policies and refusal to interact with other countries. Kim's son, Kim Jong Il, succeeded him as leader of the country in 1997. Kim is still an official leader—or “Eternal President”—of North Korea, despite the fact that he's been dead for more than twenty years.

**Kim Jong Il** – Kim Jong Il was the leader of North Korea between 1994 and the 2011. During this time, he ruled his country with an iron fist, pursued an aggressive nuclear missile policy, and continued to punish anyone who challenged his authority. Kim used his government's propaganda wing to build a vast cult of personality around himself—to the point where the nation's media portrayed him as a superhuman figure. Kim was also responsible for instituting a series of economic reforms that permitted more capitalism and trading in North Korea—although he was practically forced to do so to avoid another famine like the one his country experienced in the early 1990s. He died in 2011, leaving the country in the hands of his youngest son, Kim Jong Eun.

**Kim Jong Eun** – Kim Jong Eun is the current leader of North Korea, and the son of Kim Jong Il. He was raised in luxury, and studied in Switzerland. In spite of his apparent lack of qualifications to run a country, he ascended to lead Korea after his father died in 2011. Kim's reign has thus far been characterized by a mixture of relatively progressive social and economic reforms, coupled with an aggressive nuclear policy and a cult of personality similar to the one surrounding his father.

**Jang Hye Gyung / Shin's Mother** – Jang Hye Gyung is the biological mother of Shin Dong-hyuk, although she fulfills few of the roles one typically associates with a mother—she doesn't nurture, educate, or, it would seem, love her son. Jang is sent to Camp 14 for reasons that are never explained in *Escape From Camp 14* (as Shin himself doesn't know), where she's forced to marry Shin Gyung Su and have children with him. Jang's life is hard and miserable; she's underfed, and seems to view Shin as her competitor for food (which is exactly how Shin thinks of



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk** – Shin Dong-hyuk, born Shin In Geun, is the protagonist of *Escape from Camp 14*. He was born in Camp 14, one of the many prison camp located in North Korea, to Jang Hye Gyung and Shin Gyung Sub—meaning that, unlike many of the other prisoners in Camp 14, he grew up with no memories of a life outside the camp. Growing up in Camp 14, Shin spent little time with his parents; his main authority figures were the camp guards, who taught him to inform on his peers in return for more food. Shin grew up with almost no concept of love or trust—he survived, indeed, because he refused to love or trust for anyone else. At the age of 13, Shin informed the guards of his mother and brother's attempt to escape from Camp 14; as a result, they were both executed. While at the time Shin was proud of himself for informing on his family, he later came to feel enormous guilt for his actions. Shin claims that he escaped from Camp 14 in his twenties. However, in 2015, Shin recanted many aspects of his life's story: he now claims that he grew up in Camp 18, not Camp 14, signed a

Jang). Jang and her older son, He Geun, plan to escape from Camp 14, but Shin informs on them, and they're eventually executed.

**Shin Gyung Sub / Shin's Father** – Shin Gyung Sub is the father of Shin Dong-hyuk, but a minor presence in the book. At Camp 14, fathers aren't permitted much time with their children—they're forced to live in dormitories with their coworkers and visit their offspring a couple times a year. Shin is arrested and tortured, however, after his son informs on Jang Hye Gyung (his wife) and He Geun (his son). He tries to be a better father to Shin after his wife and eldest son are executed. However, Shin refuses to speak to him.

**Park Yong Chul** – Perhaps more than any other person, Park Yong Chul is responsible for inspiring Shin to escape from Camp 14. Park is a humble, intelligent man, who's sent to Camp 14 after he flees the country and then tries to return. In Camp 14, Park quickly befriends Shin (who's been sent to spy on Park), and entertains him with vivid descriptions of the delicious food and beautiful sights outside the camp. Together, Park and Shin plan to escape from the camp and make their ways to China. Unfortunately, Park dies after he's electrocuted by the **fence** surrounding the camp, but Shin continues on without him.

**Kim Jin Myung / "Uncle"** – Kim Jun Myung, who goes by the nickname "Uncle," is Shin's cellmate during his time in the underground prison of Camp 14. Uncle is a kind, educated man—Shin assumes that he must have been someone important before he was sent to Camp 14. He takes good care of Shin, even treating his wounds resourcefully, and he also tells Shin entertaining stories about life outside Camp 14. In all, Uncle is the first person in Shin's entire life to treat him with consistent kindness and respect.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**An Myeong Chul** – A former guard at a North Korean prison camp, who later defected and spoke out against the cruelty and meaningless sadism of the prison camp system.

**Linda Dye** – Husband of Lowell Dye, and a benefactor of Shin.

**Lowell Dye** – Wife of Lowell Dye, and a benefactor of Shin.

**Gong Jin Soo** – One of Shin's coworkers at the garment factory.

**He Geun / Shin's Brother** – He Geun is Shin's brother, and the eldest son of Shin Gyung Sub and Jang Hye Gyung. He's executed at Camp 14 after Shin informs on him.

**Hong Sung Jo** – One of Shin's only friends at Camp 14 and the only person Shin talks to when he plans to inform on his parents.

**Hong Joo Hyun** – The grade leader in Shin's class.

**Charles Robert Jenkins** – An American soldier who was captured and imprisoned in North Korea for many years.

**Kang Chul Min** – Another prisoner at Camp 14, who works in the garment factory alongside Shin.

**Kang Chol-hwan** – A North Korean defector who lived in South Korea for many lonely years.

**Kim Dae-Jung** – President of South Korea during the early 2000s.

**Kim Hye Sook** – A survivor of Camp 18, and later a noted human rights activist.

**Kim Kwan Jin** – A former member of the North Korean elite, who later defected and spoke out about North Korea's massive insurance fraud system, which continues to finance the Kim family's lavish lifestyle and provide a significant chunk of all government revenue.

**Kyung Soon Chung** – A pastor's wife, who effectively adopts Shin after he moves to the United States.

**Harim Lee** – A young Korean woman who's briefly involved in a relationship with Shin.

**Sergeant Matthew E. McMahon** – An intelligence worker living in South Korea, who interviews Shin and passes his story on to American intelligence officers.

**Moon Sung Sim** – A young girl, the same age as Shin, who later loses her toe in a mining accident.

**Park Choon Young** – A seamstress who's sexually harassed, impregnated by her factory superiors, and eventually killed.

**President Lee Myung-Bak** – President of South Korea from 2008 to 2013.

**President George W. Bush** – 43rd president of the United States of America.

**Ryu Hak Chul** – One of Shin's classmates, who Shin later joins the rest of his class in beating.

**Hannah Song** – Shin's translator and the director of LiNK (Liberty in North Korea), a nonprofit human rights organization.

**Elie Wiesel** – Elie Wiesel was a Holocaust survivor, human rights activist, and writer whose most famous book is [Night](#). Wiesel won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



## TYRANNY AND THE NORTH KOREAN STATE

Blaine Harden's *Escape From Camp 14* is the story of a young man named Shin In Geun, who was born in a North Korean prison camp, and, it's speculated, became the first person to escape from such a prison camp. Through Shin's individual story, Harden also studies the modern North Korean state. Since the end of the Korean War in the late 1940s, North Korea has been under the control of the Kim family. Kim Il Sung ruled North Korea until the 1990s (as a dictator, for all intents and purposes, despite his claims of being democratically elected), and afterwards, Kim's son Kim Jong Il took over. Since 2011, the country has been under the control of Kim Jong Il's son, Kim Jong Eun. The Kim dynasty has ruled North Korea through a variety of tyrannical policies, but at the simplest level it uses two strategies to maintain power: first, a strong cult of personality surrounding its rulers; second, excessive military force. Throughout the book, Harden writes about the relationship between Camp 14—in some ways, a microcosm of North Korean society—and the tyrannical North Korea state. (In 2015, Shin changed his story and claimed that he'd actually spent most of his early life in Camp 18, which absorbed Camp 14 into its limits when he was about six years old—nevertheless, the most recent edition of the book revolves around Shin's experiences in Camp 14.)

In North Korea (according to Shin and Harden's account), the military and police control the population with the utmost brutality and prevent people from disobeying the state in any way. North Koreans can be shot or jailed for seemingly minor offenses, such as using a radio to communicate with the outside world, or questioning the divinity of the Kim family. Moreover, when someone in North Korea is punished, often their entire family, even stretching back three generations, is punished as well. As a result, many of the people in North Korean prisons and labor camps aren't guilty of any crime other than being related to a supposed criminal. With execution or imprisonment such a fundamental part of North Korean society, many North Koreans feel they have no choice but to obey their leaders' repressive laws. At the same time, the North Korean state's propaganda wing tries to make its leaders appear noble, loveable, and even superhuman—convincing people that they should obey the rules out of love for authority, not just fear of it. However, as *Escape From Camp 14* makes very clear, propaganda and the cult of personality can only do so much to fool people. While many North Koreans sincerely believe that the Kim dynasty is kind and loving, it's difficult for them to feel love when they're surrounded by evidence of the Kims' cruelty and selfishness. The core of the North Korean state's power is its military force, not its propaganda wing—or as the political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli wrote, it's important for a leader to be loved and feared, but it's more important to be feared than loved.

In Camp 14, the prisoner population is subject to the same queasy blend of violence and propaganda as the North Korean population in general. Shin and his peers live under constant threat of execution for even the smallest misdeeds—a more intense version of the danger that “free” North Koreans face every day. And although the prisoners are told very little about the Kim family, they're told again and again to trust the prison guards—the same people who threaten to murder them. For Shin, who's born in Camp 14, life is full of confusion. He's been indoctrinated to trust and cooperate with the prison guards more than anyone else, and yet he lives in fear of the guards. In much the same way, the North Korean population is forced to “love” the state, and yet many people live in fear of the same state.

But there's one key difference between Camp 14 and North Korean society in general: while the guards in Camp 14 are mostly successful in controlling their prisoners, the North Korean state is borderline incompetent at controlling its population. North Korea is an incredibly poor country. Even in the elite inner circles of the North Korean state, life is modest compared with most Western countries—the electricity is unreliable and there's little to no hot water. As a result of the widespread poverty in North Korea, the state's military force has become infested with corruption, to the point where many soldiers and police officers live off of bribes and kickbacks. Over the years, millions of North Koreans have risked their lives attempting to sneak out of the country into China—and it's likely that hundreds of thousands have succeeded, often by bribing the soldiers. In short, the North Korean state is powerful, but not powerful enough to enact *all* its totalitarian policies—it can't even keep its own borders secure. Camp 14 is, in many ways, what the Kim dynasty would *like* North Korea to be: a tyrannical, perfectly run society in which nobody dares challenge authority. After Shin becomes the first prisoner ever to escape from Camp 14 and live, he begins to see that the North Korean state, contrary to what he'd always assumed, can't always keep its millions of people under control.



## SURVIVAL, SELF-INTEREST, AND MORALITY

During his time in a North Korean prison camp, Shin In Geun has one priority: survival. He has a family—a mother, a father, and a brother—but he doesn't think of them with even the slightest affection. Indeed, he thinks of his mother as his competitor for food. As a result, Shin is completely self-interested: he'll do whatever it takes to feed himself and stay alive. Through Shin, *Escape From Camp 14* studies the difficult choices that desperate people make in order to stay alive, and the long-term consequences of living a life for which surviving is the only thing that matters.

The book suggests that, in order to survive, desperate people often sacrifice (or, in Shin's case, never even consider) ordinary

moral values. Across all human cultures, there are moral rules that encourage people to help and sympathize with other people. In prison camp, however, Shin is raised without any moral code. He grows up believing that his only purpose in life is to take care of himself; he's even willing to snitch on his friends and family if it means earning more food. At the age of 14, he betrays his mother and brother's escape attempt to the guards, leading to their execution. (Years after *Escape From Camp 14* was published, Shin admitted that he also signed a document implicating his brother and mother in a murder.) Without approving of Shin's harsh, self-interested worldview, *Escape From Camp 14* gives readers some reason to believe that this harsh worldview really *does* help Shin survive in the brutal camps. It's strongly suggested that Shin's decision to betray his family to the guards results in his being rewarded with a transfer to the pig farm, the easiest-going section of Camp 14, where Shin earns more food and gets more rest. On the other hand, acts of kindness are rare in Camp 14: the prisoners' priority is taking care of themselves, and they have little desire to risk their own lives by sharing their food or warm clothes with others. It's telling that the most significant act of kindness in Camp 14 occurs when Shin has been sent to a secret underground prison. There, his cellmate, an older man named Kim Jin Myung, or Uncle, treats Shin's wounds and entertains him with vivid stories about the outside world. Uncle treats Shin kindly because he's got nothing to lose: he's in prison and, it's implied, is going to be executed very soon.

But living life according to the principles of self-interest is no guarantee of happiness, or even survival. First, and most obviously, trying to survive in a North Korean prison camp doesn't mean that you *will* survive: Shin and his peers betray one another in the hopes of earning more food and shorter work hours, but at the end of the day, they're living in a place whose explicit purpose is to work its prisoners to death. Living in the camp, Shin can't ensure his own survival; the best he can do is stall his death. Second, and more tragically, the consequences of a life of pure self-interest eventually catch up with Shin. Shin escapes from his prison camp and makes his way into Seoul and later Los Angeles, but he's plagued with nightmares concerning his time in the camp—in particular, his decision to betray his mother and brother to the guards. Shin spends the first part of his life doing anything to survive and the second part consumed with guilt for his actions. In all, *Escape From Camp 14* suggests that Shin's life has been a tragic "lose-lose" situation: he could have behaved selflessly and died, but instead he followed his own self-interest, survived, and now lives in guilt for what he did to get by.



## INDOCTRINATION AND BRAINWASHING

One of the most important features of life in prison camp is the constant process of indoctrination. The

prison guards don't just terrorize the prisoners; they try to convert the prisoners to the camp's warped ideology. Prisoners are told again and again that they must not keep any secrets from the guards. They're also subjected to constant humiliation—euphemistically referred to as "ideological struggle"—which is designed to brainwash them into feeling helpless, alone, and psychologically dependent on the guards. For prisoners who've been brought in from the rest of North Korea, the process of constant indoctrination is somewhat effective. But for prisoners like Shin In Geun, who was born in Camp 14, it's more than just brainwashing—it's the only education he's ever received. As a young man, Shin obeys the prison guards not so much because he's made a conscious choice to do so, but because he's been trained to do so ever since he was born. Through Shin's experiences inside and outside of prison camp, the book studies the effects of brainwashing on a young mind, and whether brainwashing can ever be completely effective.

For the majority of *Escape From Camp 14*, Shin's indoctrination seems completely effective: he behaves in exactly the way the prison guards want him and his peers to behave. In large part, Shin's indoctrination is effective because it begins as soon as he's born. Because he's born inside the camp to parents who (by camp law) are barely able to spend time with him, Shin grows up learning the rules of the camp—above all, to be loyal to the prison guards. During school, he learns basic reading, writing, and arithmetic—however, the most important lesson he learns there is also the most basic: to obey authority. Shin's only source of nourishment, praise, encouragement, and information is the camp leadership—one could even argue that the camp guards are his "parents." As a result, he grows up completely loyal to the camp ideology, and does things that would disgust a camp outsider, like beating up little children because the guards order him to do so, and even betraying his own mother to the guards. Shin's brainwashing is particularly effective because he doesn't know any world other than Camp 14. Prisoners who're brought to the camp from surrounding North Korea bring with them their own ideas about culture, morality, and politics. By contrast, Shin's notions of what life "should" be like come from the camp itself. (Although in 2015, Shin admitted that, before fleeing to South Korea, he'd escaped from his camp twice before, meaning that he had slightly more contact with the outside than he'd let on. Nevertheless, his contact with the outside world was severely limited, and prison camp continued to be the only world he knew well.)

Even though Shin's indoctrination seems completely effective at first, it ultimately fails to control his behavior. Shin spends years obeying the prison guards, partly because he's been brainwashed into doing so and partly because doing so is the best way to ensure his survival at the camp. But in his late teens and early twenties, Shin tried to escape from his camp three times, succeeding on the third attempt. (Shin later admitted to

the first two escape attempts; *Escape From Camp 14* only acknowledges the third.) Even after two decades of excruciating torture, violence, and indoctrination, Shin continued to dream about the outside world and plot his escape from prison camp. This might suggest that brainwashing, for all the time and effort that go into it, is rarely a foolproof way to control a human being's behavior in the long term—often, the brainwashed person's curiosity, optimism, and desire for change can overcome even the most rigorous conditioning.

But even if Shin's indoctrination fails to keep him from escaping from Camp 14, it continues to affect him long after he leaves the camp. As the book discusses in its final chapters, Shin struggles with some of the most basic aspects of modern life as a result of his time in prison camp. He has trouble making friends, using money, telling people he loves them, and maintaining a conversation—partly because of what the guards taught him about life, and partly because of what they *didn't* teach him. In all, the book gives a mixed impression of brainwashing: it may not be strong enough to control a person's behavior forever, but it leaves an indelible mark on the way that people see the world.



## GUILT

In the final chapters of *Escape From Camp 14*, the key theme is guilt. During his time in Camp 14, Shin In Geun has done some things that, on the surface,

seem almost unforgivable: he's beaten up little children, he's stolen food from starving people, and he's ratted out his mother and brother to the prison guards, leading directly to their murder. Because of his constant sense of guilt, Shin has also concealed various elements of his time in prison camp: at first, he lied to hundreds of journalists, activists, and counselors about his role in his mother and brother's executions, and even after *Escape From Camp 14* was published, he recanted elements of his story, admitting that he also signed a document implicating his family members in a murder they didn't commit. Blaine Harden argues that Shin shouldn't be held strictly accountable for his actions, since he was a brainwashed child, and didn't know any better. He further argues that Shin shouldn't be criticized too harshly for lying about his past—many traumatized people do exactly the same thing in order to preserve their own sanity. However, the moral question of how to judge Shin is too big for the book—or any book—to discuss. Instead of trying to address whether Shin is guilty or innocent of his crimes, the book addresses the ways that Shin tries—and, in many ways, fails—to come to terms with his dark past.

Through the character of Shin, *Escape From Camp 14* shows how guilt can consume a human being. Perhaps more than any single factor, Shin's guilt prevents him from living a normal life. After he escapes from Camp 14, Shin realizes that he was

responsible for his brother and mother's unjust execution. Ashamed of what he did, he begins to suffer from nightmares and panic attacks, to the point where he can barely make it through a normal day. But Shin's guilt doesn't just prevent him from living a normal life; it also bars him from speaking out against the evil he witnessed at Camp 14. After leaving Camp 14, Shin expresses a desire to become a human rights activist, so that other people never have to experience the pain that he experienced. But he quickly becomes reluctant to speak out against the North Korean prison camp system, since doing so would involve telling the truth about his own role in the camp's murderous policies. Rather than come to terms with his past, Shin at first lies about his role in his mother's murder, and even after he admits the truth, he refuses to speak at length about Camp 14.

*Escape From Camp 14* thus comes to a depressing conclusion about guilt: there's not always a cure for it. Shin wants to speak out against the prison camp system—in some ways, he believes that by doing so, he can redeem himself for his past behavior. But at the same time, he doesn't feel comfortable speaking out *until* he comes to terms with his past behavior. As Blaine Harden points out, many real-life stories about the horrors of prison camp (i.e., the ones that end up getting published) end on a note of optimism and transcendence—but of course, there's no guarantee that they should. Many survivors never get over what they did to survive during their time in prison camp—their lives are difficult, endless struggles with their own consuming guilt.



## ACTIVISM AND INDIFFERENCE

Although the majority of *Escape From Camp 14* is about Shin In Geun and North Korea in general, the book also studies the way that North Korea is perceived around the world. In particular, it poses a serious question: why haven't people been more outspoken in their opposition to the North Korean dictatorship in general and North Korean prison camps in particular? In trying to answer this question, *Escape From Camp 14* makes some sobering points about the public's indifference to suffering and about what it takes for activists to get a human rights movement started.

The book's main argument about human rights activism is also its most depressing: much of the time, people are simply indifferent to the pain of others when it doesn't directly affect them. In other countries, there's remarkably little public interest in the brutal prison camps where Shin grew up. In South Korea, the book notes, the public tends to view the North Korean leaders as nuisances, rather than full-fledged war criminals. Furthermore, polls suggest that the bulk of South Koreans view North Korean defectors—many of whom fled from unspeakable cruelty—as irritations, not human beings in need of help. In the United States, a country that prides itself

on its human rights record, the public is also often indifferent to the question of the North Korean prison camps. There are people who've gone out of their way to campaign against the prison camps and treat North Koreans with compassion and sympathy, but the book suggests that many of these people are personally connected with North Korea in some way; for example, after he escapes to China, Shin goes out of his way to protect two other North Korean defectors, even though his actions endanger his own situation. This suggests that, often times, people remain indifferent to the suffering of other people unless they feel a specific connection with those other people—for example, a common nationality.

But it's not enough to say that most people are indifferent to suffering. *Escape From Camp 14* paints a pessimistic picture of the public's indifference to North Korean prison camps, but it also suggest some ways that human rights movements *could* succeed. Above all, the book suggests, a successful activist movement needs bold, charismatic leaders and supporters. At one point, Harden speculates that the reason North Korea's prison camps haven't attracted much outrage is that, so far, no celebrities have fought against them. As strange as it may seem, Harden's point is serious: often, activist movements succeed because famous people draw the public's attention toward the issue. Activist movements benefit from leaders who can use their celebrity, charisma, or eloquence to forge a strong emotional bond between the public and the persecuted. Put another way, activists need to convince people to think of the prisoners in North Korean camps as their close friends and allies—not distant, alien beings living on the other side of the planet. By speaking with passion and conviction, the right speaker could jolt people out of their indifference and encourage them to fight for what's right. If enough people are passionate about North Korea's human rights violations, the book cautiously suggests, then the world's leaders would be more likely to make human rights a high political priority (instead of largely ignoring the issue, as they've been doing for the last forty years). In the end, it's unclear if Shin is brave enough to step up and become the passionate, charismatic leader the movement desperately needs.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### THE ELECTRIC FENCE

The electric fence surrounding Camp 14 is a grim symbol of the repression and brutality that characterized Shin's life in the prison, as well as life for all North Koreans living under the Kim dynasty. When Shin ultimately escapes Camp 14 (or escapes for the last time, in light of his

2015 testimony), his friend Park Young Chul is killed by the electric fence, and Shin uses Park's body to shield himself from being electrocuted as well. In this way the fence and Park's death emphasize the brutal reality of Shin's life—in order for him to survive and escape, it's sometimes necessary for others to die: first Shin's mother and brother, and finally Park.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Books edition of *Escape from Camp 14* published in 2013.

### Preface Quotes

☞☞ Shin had been schooled to inform on his family and on his classmates. He won food as a reward and joined guards in beating up children he betrayed. His classmates, in turn, tattled on him and beat him up.

**Related Characters:** Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** xxxi

### Explanation and Analysis

In the preface to the book, Harden discusses the life of Shin In Geun, a prisoner in Camp 14, a prison camp in North Korea. Shin was born in Camp 14, and as a result, he grew up conditioned to obey the prison guards at all costs. Thus, when the guards ordered him to inform on his peers, betray his family, and even participate in the beating of fellow children, Shin joined in without a second thought. While Shin's actions may seem barbaric or unforgivable to many readers, one should remember that Shin didn't have anything like a normal childhood: his earliest memories are of executions and beatings, and his parents never got the opportunity (or tried) to teach him how to be loyal or brave. Thus, readers should refrain from judging Shin: perhaps it's even fair to say that for many years he didn't freely *choose* his actions at all.

### Introduction Quotes

☞☞ Shin's story seemed to get under the skin of ordinary readers. They wrote letters and sent e-mails, offering money, housing, and prayers.

**Related Characters:** Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 7

### Explanation and Analysis

In the introduction, Blaine Harden talks about meeting with Shin for the first time and later interviewing him for a *Washington Post* article. The article caused a minor uproar among *Post* readers—hundreds of people contacted Harden to ask for more information about North Korean labor camps, which they regarded as a barbaric institution that needed to be destroyed with all deliberate speed.

The popularity of Harden's article illustrates two important points, one positive and one negative. First, it shows that people are especially likely to empathize with the victims of human rights atrocities when the atrocities are structured around a comprehensible human narrative—in this case, the story of Shin's life. Or, in a slightly different sense, people are most likely to take action when they're made aware of the human consequences of genocide, war, or torture. At the same time, however, Harden's article emphasizes the phenomenon often known as the "issue-attention cycle." Although Harden's article aroused a lot of *outrage*, it failed to galvanize American politicians into action—and so North Korea's prison camps survive today. Too often, the public lets its outrage stand in for concrete action—they let articles like Harden's anger them, but then, given enough time, they forget about the issues.

☝ In writing this book, I have sometimes struggled to trust him. He misled me in our first interview about his role in the death of his mother, and he continued to do so in more than a dozen interviews. When he changed his story, I became worried about what else he might have made up.

**Related Characters:** Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 10

### Explanation and Analysis

Blaine Harden has written *Escape From Camp 14* with the assumption that Shin is, at least most of the time, a reliable source of information about the North Korean prison camps. This assumption needs some reinforcement: as Harden admits here, there were many times during his interviews when Shin lied to him. And indeed, since the release of *Escape From Camp 14*, Shin has changed his story

once more. He now claims he grew up in Camp 18, not Camp 14, lived with his father as a teenager, signed a document claiming that his mother and brother committed a murder, and escaped from prison camp twice before he succeeded in making his way to South Korea.

Shin is, without a doubt, an unreliable source of information about Camp 14. However, this doesn't necessarily mean that readers should ignore his testimony altogether—rather, it suggests that readers should understand the sources and limitations of Shin's biases, and learn to read between the lines with his testimony. Doing so is important, because Shin is Harden's only source of information about the prison camps—he can't ask anyone else about them, or fact-check Shin's claims. Thus, Harden suggests that readers operate on the assumption that Shin *sometimes* distorts the truth to minimize his own guilt and complicity in evil, but nevertheless tells the general truth about the structure of the North Korean political prison system.

## Chapter 1 Quotes

☝☝ That evening, Shin went with his mother to an "ideological struggle" meeting, a compulsory gathering for self-criticism. Shin's mother again fell to her knees at the meeting, as forty of her fellow farm workers followed the *bowjido*'s lead and berated her for failing to fill her work quota.

**Related Characters:** Jang Hye Gyung / Shin's Mother, Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 20

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Shin's mother, Jang Hye Gyung, has been raped by one of her guards at Camp 14 (the *bowjido* mentioned in the passage). Afterwards, Jang is forced to continue working as usual, and, when she fails to meet her daily quota, her coworkers yell at her and condemn her for laziness. The ritualistic process by which the prisoners of Camp 14 condemn one another for their failings is called "ideological struggle." The fact that ideological struggle is such an important part of life for the prisoners speaks volumes about power and control in the camps. The prison guards seem to have figured out that the best way to perpetuate their power is to divide their prisoners. If the prisoners learned to work together, they could stage uprisings and defeat the guards—however, by forcing the prisoners to hate and attack one another, the guards effectively guarantee that no long-term alliances will form,

the prisoners will refuse to be loyal to one another, and the guards will continue to hold all the power.

## Chapter 2 Quotes

Without a second thought, Shin joined his classmates in thrashing Ryu.

**Related Characters:** Ryu Hak Chul, Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 32

### Explanation and Analysis

Shin, still a small child, regularly joined his classmates and the prison guards in beating other children (in this passage, a student named Ryu). He believed that beatings and whippings were a regular part of life—something that he had to endure from time to time, but also dole out. To state the obvious, it's unspeakably tragic that a small child grew up believing that violence and sadism were basic parts of life, rather than hideous perversions of it.

The passage emphasizes how the prison's guards maintained power: turning the prisoners against one another in order to keep them loyal to the authorities. Furthermore, the passage shows why Shin continues to struggle with guilt and self-loathing as an adult—and, perhaps, why he continued to lie about his past long after escaping into South Korea. Although Shin participated in beatings to survive as a political prisoner, he's unable to forgive himself for causing so much pain to others.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

From his office in Singapore, Kim Kwan Jin watched in early February 2003 as his colleagues stuffed twenty million dollars in cash into two heavy-duty bags and sent them, via Beijing, to Pyongyang. This was money that had been paid by international insurance companies.

**Related Characters:** Kim Jong Eun, Kim Kwan Jin

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 38

### Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Harden discusses the state of the North

Korean government. The Kim family has ruled North Korea ever since the late 1940s; however, their control over their own people is getting weaker and weaker with every passing year. Indeed, one of the chief sources of the Kims' ongoing power in North Korea is insurance fraud. The Kims have enlisted thousands of their followers to file insurance claims, almost always falsified, with the globe's biggest insurance companies. Then, the money from the insurance claims is presented to Kim Jong Eun, the current leader of North Korea.

It's both horrifying and strangely pathetic that the Kims maintain their wealth and power by lying about industrial accidents to faceless corporations on the other side of the globe. The Kim dynasty has become so weak and incompetent that it's been reduced to fibbing to insurance companies. It's easy enough to see why many political scientists predict that the Kim government will collapse within a few decades.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

Shin said he did not expect forgiveness for what he was about to disclose. He said he had not forgiven himself. He also seemed to be trying to do something more than exiate guilt. He wanted to explain—in a way that he acknowledged would damage his credibility as a witness—how the camp had warped his character.

**Related Characters:** Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 50

### Explanation and Analysis

At first, Shin told Blaine Harden that he was arrested by the prison guards of Camp 14 and taken to a secret jail. Then, he added a crucial detail: the day before he was arrested, he informed on his own mother and brother, telling the guards that they planned to escape. Shin's act led directly to the execution of his mother and brother—a crime that haunts Shin to this day. Then, after Harden's book was published, Shin admitted that he not only ratted out his family, but also falsely implicated them in murder to ensure their execution.

Shin, it must be conceded, isn't always a reliable source of information about the political prison system. He often distorts the facts to alleviate his guilt, make himself seem more sympathetic, or simply to avoid reliving specific traumas. However, Harden fully believes that Shin is telling the truth about what goes on in North Korean political

prisons in general. Furthermore, he emphasizes that Shin *wants* to tell the full truth, and nothing but the truth, about his past—by doing so, he hopes to come to terms with his actions, and tell the world about the great evil that he lived through. Readers need to decide if they buy Harden’s argument—if they can weigh Shin’s testimony, throwing out some of it while accepting the rest.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

☛ Accepting the guard’s word, Shin explained what his brother and mother were planning and where they were. The guard telephoned his superiors. He told Shin and Hong to go back to the dormitory and get some sleep. He would take care of everything.

**Related Characters:** Hong Sung Jo, He Geun / Shin’s Brother, Jang Hye Gyung / Shin’s Mother, Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 54

### Explanation and Analysis

On the night before Shin was arrested, he informed a night guard of his mother and brother’s plan to escape from camp the next day. Shin grew up without feeling any real affection for his family—his only priority was to survive and feed himself, and therefore, he thought of his family mostly as competitors for food. So when Shin found out that his mother was planning to leave Camp 14, he didn’t hesitate to inform on her.

The brutal irony of the passage, however, is that soon after Shin betrayed his family to the night guard, the night guard betrayed *Shin*, claiming all the credit for discovering Shin’s mother’s plan, and therefore leading Shin to be arrested. Although Shin is eventually freed from jail, he lives with his guilt for the rest of his life.

## Chapter 7 Quotes

☛ It was Shin’s first exposure to sustained kindness, and he was grateful beyond words. But he also found it puzzling. He had not trusted his mother to keep him from starving.

**Related Characters:** Kim Jin Myung / “Uncle”, Jang Hye Gyung / Shin’s Mother, Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 63

### Explanation and Analysis

In prison, Shin claims to have shared a cell with an elderly man named Kim Jin Myung, or “Uncle.” Uncle treated Shin with great kindness and sensitivity: he treated Shin’s wounds, entertained him with stories, and gave him advice for the future. In short, Uncle was the only kind person in Shin’s life thus far—the first person who didn’t treat him as a mere competitor for food, and the first person for whom, in return, Shin felt genuine affection.

It’s telling, however, that Shin met Uncle in a jail cell. Uncle treated Shin kindly, Harden implies, because he was in a position where he had nothing to lose. Had Uncle encountered Shin above ground in the prison camp itself, he might not have been so generous to Shin—he might even have betrayed Shin to benefit himself. As depressing as it is to consider, the prisoners were cruel to one another because they had to fight for survival, and therefore had no *chance* to be kind.

## Chapter 8 Quotes

☛ Shin’s brother looked gaunt and frail as guards tied him to the wooden post. Three guards fired their rifles three times. Bullets snapped the rope that held his forehead to the pole. It was a bloody, brain-splattered mess of a killing, a spectacle that sickened and frightened Shin. But he thought his brother, too, had deserved it.

**Related Characters:** Jang Hye Gyung / Shin’s Mother, He Geun / Shin’s Brother, Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 68

### Explanation and Analysis

After he informed on his mother and brother, Shin was tortured and detained for many months, and then brought back to his prison camp. There, he and his father watched Jang and He Geun being executed in front of thousands of other people (since 2015, Shin has given conflicting information about how, exactly, his family members died—initially he mentioned hanging, but later said both were shot).

The scene is, in some ways, the core of Shin’s narrative: the horrific, traumatizing experience that he’s been trying and failing to forget for the last fifteen years. Even at the time, Shin knew that he was responsible for his brother and

mother's deaths—he informed on them, and even signed a document implicating them in a murder. At the time, as stated here, he had been brainwashed enough to think that they “deserved it”—but later on, after escaping from his prison camp, Shin became haunted with guilt over his actions. As a consequence of his guilt, Shin lied about his past to hundreds of journalists, counselors, and human rights activists, and ended up having to revise his testimony, arguably weakening the anti-prison camp activist movement. Even if one accepts that Shin's deceptions have weakened the movement, however, one can also sympathize with Shin's behavior. Like so many victims of trauma, Shin distorted the truth to preserve his self-worth and his sanity.

## Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ Shin's misery never skidded into complete hopelessness. He had no hope to lose, no past to mourn, no pride to defend.

**Related Characters:** Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 75

### Explanation and Analysis

Following the execution of his mother and brother, Shin claims, he was sent back to Camp 14 and put to work. Life was very difficult—he was bullied and beaten for falling behind his work quota, and his teacher hated him because he had gone to the night guard instead of the teacher when he informed on his family members. However, Shin didn't contemplate suicide. His life was miserable by almost any standard, but in a way, Shin was used to living in misery. He'd been born in a political prison camp, so he was used to a hard, hopeless life. Furthermore Shin was not yet haunted with guilt for betraying his family. Thus, Shin never seriously considered ending his life.

## Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ [North Korea] has always depended on handouts from foreign governments, and if they end, the Kim dynasty would probably collapse. Even in the best of years, it cannot feed itself. North Korea has no oil, and its economy has never been able to generate enough cash to buy sufficient fuel or food on the world market.

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 79

### Explanation and Analysis

The North Korean state has always claimed to be strong, proud, and totally self-sufficient. But this claim is largely a lie: the reality is that the Kim family has depended on foreign aid—from the Soviet Union and, ironically enough, the United States. On the few occasions when North Korea has attempted to become energy self-sufficient (for example, in the early 2000s, when it invested in hydroelectric power), the plan was a resounding failure—poor working conditions and countless engineering accidents scuttled many attempts to build workable dams.

The passage emphasizes a point that political scientists have been making for some time: sooner or later, the North Korean state as it is currently is going to collapse. It's not competent or powerful enough to provide its own energy sources, and continues to depend on aid from other countries. Furthermore, the Kim family is so self-interested that it doesn't prioritize providing power or food for its people.

## Chapter 12 Quotes

☝☝ Astonishing himself and his seamstresses, Shin lost his composure. He grabbed a large wrench and swung it as hard as he could, trying to crack open Gong's skull.

**Related Characters:** Gong Jin Soo, Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 93

### Explanation and Analysis

According to Shin, he was unexpectedly transferred to a garment factory shortly after being sent to work on a pig farm. Later, Shin admitted that he had tried to escape from his prison camp twice before successfully making his way into South Korea—this might suggest that Shin was transferred to the garment factory as a punishment for escaping. The fact that Shin distorted the truth regarding his transfer to the garment factory calls into question the contents of this passage, in which Shin stands up for a fellow worker by attacking his superior, Gong Jin Soo. Shin gives no explanation for why he felt the compulsion to defend one of his peers—it's particularly odd that he would do so since, by Shin's own admission, he regularly participated in the

beating of other prisoners. While it's impossible to know for sure what is and isn't true in *Escape From Camp 14* (even the title, Shin later revealed, is inaccurate), it's certainly possible that Shin fabricated or embellished the scene to make his behavior seem more moral than it really was. Such embellishments would be consistent with some others in the text.

- At the mention of his father's name, Shin became angry. Although he had tried to repress it, the resentment he felt toward his mother and brother had grown since their deaths. It had poisoned his feelings for his father. Shin wanted nothing to do with him.

**Related Characters:** Shin Gyung Sub / Shin's Father, Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 96

### Explanation and Analysis

During his time in the garment factory, Shin's supervisor offered him a gift of rice flour, which the supervisor said came from Shin's father. According to the passage, Shin denied the gift, since he was still furious with his father because of his connection to Shin's mother and brother. However, the passage is complicated by the information that Shin was living with his father throughout most of his time in Camp 18, contrary to what he claimed in *Escape From Camp 14*. Thus, it's unclear how estranged Shin was from his father, and how much the estrangement had to do with the death of Shin's mother and brother.

Shin claimed that his resentment for his mother increased after her death, and that this resentment "poisoned" his relationship with his father. However, the passage is frustratingly vague about Shin and his father's relationship—and, especially in light of Shin's later admissions, one has the strong sense that there's a lot more to this story than Shin and Harden are revealing.

## Chapter 13 Quotes

- Intoxicated by what he heard from the prisoner he was supposed to betray, Shin made perhaps the first free decision of his life. He chose not to snitch.

**Related Characters:** Park Yong Chul, Shin In Geun / Shin

Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 101

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Harden discusses Shin's decision not to inform on his fellow prisoner and garment factory worker, Park Yong Chul. Because of his proven usefulness as an informer, Shin was asked to spy on Park and report back on Park's political beliefs. However, when he realized that Park was a decent man, with valuable knowledge about the outside world, Shin decided not to inform on him. Harden characterizes the decision as the first free decision Shin ever made. This would suggest that, in Harden's opinion, Shin isn't morally accountable for betraying his mother and brother—rather, Shin acted out of a kind of necessity, informing on his family because he thought it would earn him more food and, therefore, a better chance at surviving the prison camps (and, moreover, he thought it was *right*, since he had been taught that defying authority was the ultimate evil).

It's not clear if Harden would revise his initial evaluation in light of Shin's recent recanting of his testimony. Given that Shin and his peers lived in Camp 18, where they weren't necessarily going to be worked to death, and given that Shin did indeed have some contact with the outside world, his decision to inform on his family may have been "freer" than Harden implies it was.

- He began thinking about escape. Park made those thoughts possible. He changed the way Shin connected with other people. Their friendship broke a lifelong pattern—stretching back to Shin's malignant relationship with his mother—of wariness and betrayal.

**Related Characters:** Jang Hye Gyung / Shin's Mother, Park Yong Chul, Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 106

### Explanation and Analysis

Park and Shin had a strong friendship; they took care of each other, helped each other through their work, and inspired each other with hope of seeing the outside world one day. As the information is presented in the book, Park was the wise, worldly father-figure to Shin; however, it's

recently come to light that Shin had already been outside the camp twice before he met Park, suggesting that Shin wasn't nearly as naïve as Harden presents him in this chapter. Nevertheless, it's clear enough that Park was an importance influence on Shin. Park inspired Shin to escape from camp one more time, and, perhaps even more importantly, he encouraged Shin to place his trust in another human being, rather than looking out exclusively for his own interests.

## Chapter 15 Quotes

☝ What he remembers most clearly about crawling through the fence was that Park's body smelled like it was burning.

**Related Characters:** Park Yong Chul, Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 118

### Explanation and Analysis

With Park Yong Chul, Shin planned to escape from his prison camp (in the book, Shin claims that he was in Camp 14; he's later admitted that he was in Camp 18 at the time). Park and Shin ran for the electric fence together; however, because Park reached the fence first, he was the first to be electrocuted by the high voltage. When Park fell to the ground, convulsing, Shin didn't hesitate to climb over Park's body. Most of the current flowed through Park's corpse and into the ground—meaning that, in a way, Park's death allowed Shin to escape through the fence without being electrocuted himself.

The passage is disturbing to read because it shows that Shin was so dead-set on escaping from prison that he couldn't spare a second for his dying friend—moreover, it clearly implies that Park's death *allowed* Shin to escape from prison unharmed. In light of Shin's later testimony about his life, readers can better understand why Shin behaved so callously—not just because he wanted to escape from prison camp, but because he'd been informed that he'd be executed in the near future. Therefore, Shin didn't turn back and regroup after the death of his friend—instead, he followed through with his plan and went forward.

## Chapter 17 Quotes

☝ When they finished their noodles, the young man said his family's apartment was just around the corner, but that he was embarrassed to greet his parents wearing threadbare clothes. He asked if Shin would mind lending him his coat for a few minutes.

**Related Characters:** Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 134

### Explanation and Analysis

After Shin escaped from prison camp, he spent months wandering across North Korea. At the time, North Korea was going through major economic changes, one consequence of which was that it was relatively easy to travel between cities via train or truck. Shin was able to travel north toward the Chinese border, and during his train travels, he encountered another man who claimed that his family lived in an apartment where Shin could stay. The man asked Shin to let him borrow his warm winter coat for a few minutes, and Shin lent him the coat without hesitation. A short time later, after the man failed to meet up with Shin again, Shin realized that the man had conned him out of his coat.

In the book, Harden explains why Shin fell for such an obvious trick by pointing out that Shin was naïve about the way the real world worked—he'd never been outside of his prison camp. But in light of the later revelation that Shin *had*, in fact, left the camp before, it's harder to explain why Shin trusted a stranger not to run off with his coat in the dead of winter. Perhaps Shin was still relatively inexperienced about how to deal people outside the camp, and so was overly trusting (whereas within the camp, he wasn't trusting at all).

## Chapter 18 Quotes

☝ [Shin] was lucky: orders from on high had not yet changed the bribe-hungry behavior of the four bedraggled soldiers Shin met at guard stations along the Tumen River.

**Related Characters:** Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 144

### Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter 18, Shin crosses from North Korea into China. According to *Escape From Camp 14* itself, this was the first time that Shin had ever tried to leave the country—however, Shin later admitted that he'd escaped from prison camp twice before, and on his second try, he made it all the way into China before being apprehended. Therefore, it's both harder and easier to believe that Shin was able to cross into China. On one hand, he had more experience bribing guards and avoiding soldiers; on the other, one might assume that the army would have been on the lookout for him, since he'd snuck across the border once before.

Regardless of the details of Shin's story, the passage paints a pathetic picture of the state of the North Korean administration. The North Korean state depended on a strong military to enforce its policies; however, the soldiers who Shin met—and, it's strongly implied, thousands of other soldiers across the country—were so poor and inexperienced themselves that they accepted bribes rather than follow orders. To this day, a significant chunk of the North Korean military population survives primarily off of bribes.

## Chapter 19 Quotes

☝☝ [Shin] was fetching water from a brook near the farm when he met two other North Korean defectors. They were hungry and cold and living in an abandoned shack in the woods not far from the pig farm. Shin asked the Chinese farmer to help them out, and he did so, but with a reluctance and a resentment that Shin was slow to notice.

**Related Characters:** Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 152

### Explanation and Analysis

After he crossed into China, Shin lived with a farmer for several months. During this time, his living conditions were sparse, and yet they were nicer than anything he'd experienced before. After two other North Korean defectors approach him, however, Shin convinced the farmer to take care of them as well—a decision that ultimately led the farmer to grow exasperated with Shin and send him elsewhere. In other words, Shin claims that he made a selfless decision on behalf of his fellow North Korean defectors.

Some human rights activists have criticized Shin's claims elsewhere in this chapter, accusing him of fabricating the

details of how he managed to avoid capture for so many months. However, it's notable that this passage shows Shin behaving selflessly for the benefit of other people who've been through similar experiences. In *Escape From Camp 14*, the characters occasionally behave selflessly, especially when they feel that they have a common bond or a shared experience with the people they're helping. It's implied that Shin helped the defectors because he knew what they'd been through.

## Chapter 20 Quotes

☝☝ The journalist wrote everything down. This was not the kind of conversation Shin was used to. He had never met a journalist. It made him anxious. After a long silence, the man asked Shin if he wanted to go to South Korea.

**Related Characters:** Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 159

### Explanation and Analysis

After moving away from the Chinese-Korean border, Shin made his way into central China and found work at various restaurants. It was during his time as a restaurant employee that Shin crossed paths with a South Korean journalist. The journalist, who'd reported on North Koreans before, asked Shin about his background, and Shin eventually told the journalist that he came from a North Korean political prison camp. With the journalist's help, Shin was able to travel into South Korea, setting in motion Shin's later career as a human rights activist and international figure.

The passage is notable because it emphasizes the role of luck and blind chance in Shin's life story. Had Shin been working at a different restaurant, he would never have met the journalist, and might still be living in China to this day (or the North Koreans might have captured him and sent him back to prison camp, as they'd done before). It thus stands to reason that there could be other North Korean prison camp escapees living in China, but who haven't been as lucky as Shin.

## Chapter 21 Quotes

☝☝ Shin did not have to worry about brokers, and his physical health was relatively good after a half year of rest and regular meals in the consulate in Shanghai. But his nightmares would not go away.

**Related Characters:** Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 166

### Explanation and Analysis

After Shin began living in South Korea, he started to experience vivid nightmares about his time in the prison camp. He relived the experience of watching his mother and brother being executed, to the point where he could barely sleep or make it through the day without feeling severe anxiety.

From a psychological perspective, it's not surprising that Shin began to feel more and more anxiety after he made his way to South Korea. For the first time in his life, he was getting enough food and rest, and he didn't have to worry about being beaten or tortured. As a result, one might argue, Shin advanced in the "hierarchy of needs" to a more abstract problem: his guilt at having played a significant role in his mother and brother's execution.

## Chapter 22 Quotes

☹☹ Shin exaggerated the South's lack of concern about the North, but he had a valid point. It's a blind spot that baffles local and international human rights groups. Overwhelming evidence of continuing atrocities inside the North's labor camps has done little to rouse the South Korean public.

**Related Characters:** Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 172

### Explanation and Analysis

During his time in South Korea, Shin became increasingly involved in human rights causes. After spending so many years in barbaric conditions sanctioned by the North Korean government, Shin wanted to make sure that the camps were closed down—or, at the very least, that the rest of the world knew what went on inside the prison camps. However, Shin quickly found that the South Korean public was surprisingly uninterested in the North Korean prison camp issue. While there were many compassionate, empathetic activists and human rights campaigners in South Korea, the typical South Korean citizen, polls showed, didn't think that the human rights situation in North Korea should be a high priority for South Koreans. Shin was understandably frustrated by his new countrymen's

indifference to the prison camps.

The passage is important because it outlines a challenge for many human rights movements: convincing the general public to care about the pain of others. The best way to do so, Harden strongly suggests, is for emotional, charismatic activists to inspire and even shock the public into action. Harden suggests that Shin could be such a figure for the anti-prison camp movement.

## Chapter 23 Quotes

☹☹ [Shin] told a story about his escape that was short, sketchy, sanitized—and largely incomprehensible to someone who was not steeped in the details of his life.

"My story can be very heartbreaking," he said, wrapping up the session after about fifteen minutes. "I don't want you to be depressed." He had bored and baffled his audience.

**Related Characters:** Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 179

### Explanation and Analysis

After living in South Korea for a few years, Shin became a member of Liberty in North Korea, or LiNK, a human rights group. As a result of his new membership in LiNK, he traveled to Los Angeles, trying to raise awareness of the human rights atrocities in North Korea. Shin's job was to deliver passionate, electrifying speeches that would convince people to care about the political prisoners in North Korea and, implicitly, lobby their politicians to enact policies that might liberate these prisoners. However, Shin's speeches were short and almost incomprehensible. He was shy and, far more importantly, he wasn't ready to tell the full truth about his time in prison. Shin continued to feel guilty about his role in his mother and brother's deaths, and he was reluctant to speak frankly about life in the prison camps because of what the truth revealed about himself (above all, that he was an accessory to murder). In all, the passage captures the agony of telling the truth: for a traumatized person like Shin, who'll probably have to deal with intense guilt for the rest of his life, speaking honestly (much less entertainingly and convincingly) about the past is an enormous challenge.

## Epilogue Quotes

☛☛ That evening, his listeners squirmed in their pews, their faces showing discomfort, disgust, anger, and shock. Some faces were stained with tears. When Shin was finished, when he told the congregation that one man, if he refuses to be silenced, could help free the tens of thousands who remain in North Korean labor camps, the church exploded in applause. In that speech, if not yet in his life, Shin had seized control of his past.

**Related Characters:** Shin In Geun / Shin Dong-hyuk

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 193

### Explanation and Analysis

In the Epilogue to *Escape From Camp 14*, Harden discusses a speech that Shin gave in a church. For once, the speech was emotional, full of gripping details and frank discussions of Shin's own role in the atrocities in the prison camps. The speech was also a resounding success; it moved the

audience and convinced them to care about the suffering of North Korean prisoners.

If Shin could continue delivering speeches of this kind, Harden suggests, then the human rights movement would be much stronger. Human rights movements need strong, charismatic speakers to connect with the general public and arouse people's compassion and outrage. The challenge, however, is that Shin isn't ready to tell the full truth about his time in the prison camps. Indeed, Shin has altered his story several times since *Escape From Camp 14* was first published—to the point where, it's now clear, even the *title* of the book is inaccurate. Shin is locked in a sickening conundrum: he believes he can come to terms with his role in his mother and brother's deaths by getting involved with activism, but he can't speak out against the North Korean political prison system until he's brave enough to talk about his own role in the atrocities. On this uncertain note, *Escape From Camp 14* comes to a close. Perhaps one day, Shin will find the courage to talk about his own past and, in the same breath, resoundingly denounce the North Korean state.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## FOREWORD

The foreword begins, “Early in 2015, Shin Dong-hyuk changed his story.” Shin had become a world-famous witness to the atrocities in the North Korean labor camps; he’d appeared on television, and his testimony had launched an inquiry into North Korea’s war crimes. And yet, as Shin explained to Blaine Harden, the author of *Escape From Camp 14*, some of what he said was a lie. This foreword represents Harden’s attempt to clarify the truth about Shin.

Shin had already recanted some of what he’d told Harden about his mother and brother’s deaths, explaining that he was responsible for informing on them. In 2015, he recanted more. While Shin’s behavior has angered other camp survivors—they claim he’s undermining the human rights movement by making survivors seem untrustworthy—it’s important to recall that Shin has been scarred by his past. Many trauma victims struggle with the truth, and the stories they tell are often shields behind which they hide. In the original edition of *Escape From Camp 14*, Harden acknowledged that Shin was unreliable, but he says that he should have done more to question Shin’s relationship to the truth.

According to Shin’s new version of the truth, he escaped to China not once but twice, and lived in two different prison camps, Camp 14 and Camp 18. Originally, he claimed that he grew up surrounded by children and adults whose only destiny was to be worked to death. However, when Shin was young, Camp 18 absorbed Camp 14 into its limits; afterwards, “his status improved marginally.” He was allowed to see photographs of Kim Jong Il, and some of his peers were released from prison.

*The new foreword to Escape From Camp 14 challenges much of the information in the book that follows. As it stands, Blaine Harden has republished without actually rewriting the book itself; instead, he’s just added this foreword to the most recent edition to acknowledge the distortions and inconsistencies in Shin’s testimony. One day Harden may revise Escape From Camp 14, but for now readers will have to rely on this foreword, and interpret the rest of the book in light of the information it reveals.*



*Shin’s behavior might seem thoroughly untrustworthy: after all, he lied about his experiences not once or twice, but hundreds of times. However, Harden encourages readers to remember that Shin is a survivor of mind-boggling trauma, meaning that it would also be strange if Shin hadn’t had to alter some details of his story. Too often, people assume that it’s easy for people to talk about their traumatic pasts—instead, Harden suggests, readers should be more sensitive to Shin’s pain and guilt. (Although he also acknowledges his own role in making Shin’s untruths as widely spread as they were.)*



*Previously, Shin seems to have exaggerated the squalor of his prison conditions—for example, he gave the impression that he and his peers were going to be worked to death. Now, it would appear that some of Shin’s peers were actually released from prison. But of course, this doesn’t mean that life was easy in Camp 18—even if it was easier than Shin originally described.*



Shin claimed that his finger had been chopped off as punishment for breaking a sewing machine. Now, he claims that he lost the finger after the guards tortured him. He concealed the truth, he claims, because he was ashamed of being “broken” by torture. He also revealed that he’d signed a police statement saying that he’d witnessed his mother and brother commit a murder—a statement that was critical in his family’s executions. Shin also lived with his father as a teenager, contrary to what he’d claimed, and he was tortured at the age of twenty-one, not fourteen, as he’d originally said. But Shin’s distortions of the truth are nothing unusual for trauma victims, Harden says. The problem is that Shin isn’t just a trauma victim: he’s also an international celebrity.

The North Korean government released propaganda videos in 2014, calling Shin a “parasite.” The videos claimed that Shin had been involved in his family member’s murders and that he’d tried to escape to China twice. They also accused Shin of having raped a young girl—an accusation that Shin denies. In one video, Shin’s father, Shin Gyung Sub, claimed that neither he nor his son ever lived in a prison camp, and that Shin had acquired his scars and burns because of a childhood accident. However, even North Korean records support Shin’s claim that he was born in Camp 14 and became a resident of Camp 18 around 1984.

Shin initially told Harden that he’d spent time in Shanghai before arriving in South Korea in 2006. He told many different people, including human rights activists, counselors, and journalists, the same story about his time in Camp 14. The only significant change to the story he told Harden was about his role in his mother and brother’s deaths. But then, in 2014, after the videos, Shin divulged more information, including the fact that he’d lived in Camp 18. This infuriated Kim Hye Sook, another camp survivor who lived in Camp 18. Kim had long suspected that Shin wasn’t telling the truth about himself.

Shin now claims he escaped from Camp 18 twice, once in 1999 and once in 2000, crawling out through the electric fence. The first time Shin escaped, it was his father’s idea; his father told him to make his way to his aunt. Two weeks later, the guards captured Shin and sent him back to camp, where he did forced labor. A year later, Shin escaped again, this time making it to China. In China, Shin was arrested and sent back to North Korea, where he was moved back to Camp 18. He was then moved to a torture facility in Camp 14 for the next six months. He was released and then sent to work on a farm.

*Many trauma victims repress or deny violent episodes from their past. Shin is no exception: he refused to tell people about being tortured and being “broken.” It’s very hard to understand why Shin changed certain aspects of his story—for example, why he felt the need to lie about living with his father for so long. But perhaps readers shouldn’t expect for Shin’s traumatic past to be completely comprehensible; some details of his life are beyond ordinary understanding.*



*The propaganda videos raise the possibility that Shin wasn’t raised in a prison camp at all. While Shin clearly isn’t an entirely reliable source of information, it also seems absurd to trust North Korean propaganda over Shin, especially since Shin’s body itself testifies to the torture that he endured year after year. Even if Shin lied about which prison camp he was in, it’s clear enough that he lived in miserable conditions and was severely beaten and abused for an extended period of time.*



*It’s possible to sympathize with Kim Hye Sook’s point: by waffling and distorting the truth about his life, Shin is making the anti-prison camp movement seem untrustworthy. Shin shouldn’t necessarily be expected to tell the whole truth about his time in prison camp, but he also elected to become a spokesperson for the activist movement, a role for which honesty is essential. In general, Shin’s role in becoming a celebrity is a little more active than Harden gives him credit for.*



*This information significantly alters the plot structure of Escape From Camp 14; in the future, one imagines that Harden will rewrite his book accordingly (though we also might wonder why he republished at all with only this forward added and no major changes to the book itself). Again, the fact that Shin lied about having escaped from camp before does call into question the rest of his story (and the fact that he was allowed to live after escaping from camp the first time suggests that, perhaps, conditions in the prison camp weren’t as deadly as Shin initially claimed, even if they were still miserable).*



Shin has demonstrated his knowledge of Camp 14 many times, suggesting that he really did live there. However, he's changed many details of his escape. He now says he escaped because he was told he was going to be executed soon. This has raised much suspicion: as Kim Hye Sook points out, it seems unlikely that Shin could have made it all the way to China without arousing any suspicion, considering that he was already under suspicion. Shin merely claims that he "knew how to travel anonymously ... because he had done it before."

Shin could play a major role in bringing the world's attention to the suffering and human rights abuses in the North Korean prison camps, Harden says. And while he's changed some parts of his story, that's not necessarily his fault—many traumatized people do the same thing. Harden declares that people should still read Shin's story and understand what his experiences say about "the depravity that North Korean continues to deny."

*It seems unlikely that Shin could have escaped from prison a third time and then made his way into China, especially if he was about to be executed (wouldn't the guards have been expecting him to run?) But even if Shin isn't trustworthy about some details of the prison camps, his overall point is sound: North Korean prison camps need to be shut down.*



*Harden argues that Shin could become a spokesperson for the anti-prison camp movement. One problem with his argument, however, is that human rights spokespeople need to be honest and forthcoming about their pasts—otherwise, they threaten to discredit their cause. There should be no expectation that Shin be a public figure and speak out against North Korea (he has every right to be a private person), but if Shin acts as a public figure in the movement, it's of the utmost importance that he tell the truth. However, this doesn't mean that readers shouldn't also be sympathetic to Shin's situation and understand that traumatized people sometimes change the truth to maintain their self-worth and sanity.*



## PREFACE: A TEACHABLE MOMENT

The book begins, "His first memory is an execution." When Shin In Geun is four years old, his mother walks him to a wheat field, where thousands of others have been rounded up by armed guards to witness a man's execution. Shin can't understand what the guards were saying: this man has been offered a chance to achieve "redemption" but has refused it. Then the guards shoot the man. In Camp 14, where Shin and his mother live, attending executions is mandatory for the prisoners—the guards use them as teachable moments. Shin grows up believing that anybody who disobeys the guards will be shot.

At fourteen, Shin returns to the wheat field, where, once again, the guards have rounded up a crowd of thousands. This time, Shin, with his father, is returning from eight months in a secret prison below Camp 14. Shin and his father have been released on the condition that they never discuss what happened to them: the guards tortured them in order to learn about the failed escape of Shin's mother and brother. Shin has been brutally beaten, but he hasn't confessed—he wasn't involved in the escape, and thus had nothing to confess. At the time, Shin has never dreamed about life beyond Camp 14. He's never heard of America or China, and he doesn't even know what the leader of North Korea, Kim Jong Il, looks like. Shin has been trained to inform on his family and classmates in return for food, and he's even helped guards hurt other children.

*The preface begins with a shocking scene: a little child staring on as guards execute a man. Notice that Harden does not clarify when or where this scene is taking place, or why the man is being shot—with the result that readers experience the execution through the eyes of a confused child. For as long as he can remember, Shin has been trained to be obedient to authority and accept violence as a part of his life.*



*Shin lived in Camp 14 (and, he later admitted, Camp 18) for many more years, during which he was subjected to torture and other cruelty. In part because of the way he grew up, Shin participated in the guards' acts of violence, even beating up other kids. This raises the question of whether Shin is morally accountable for his actions. Shin might seem like a bully for hurting other children, but he's been conditioned to do so from an early age, suggesting that he's not fully accountable for his behavior.*



That day, at the age of fourteen, Shin and his father are forced to stand in the crowd and watch as Shin's mother and brother are killed. At the time, Shin is angry with his family for planning an escape. And, although he won't admit it for another fifteen years, he knows he's responsible for their deaths.

*Shin lives with his guilt for playing a role in his family's execution. Even though readers might be inclined to forgive him for betraying his family (since he was essentially brainwashed into doing so), Shin refuses to forgive himself.*



## INTRODUCTION: NEVER HEARD THE WORD "LOVE"

On January 2, 2005—nine years after his mother's execution, at the age of 23—Shin escaped from Camp 14. He is believed to be the only person born in a North Korean prison camp to escape with his life. A month later, Shin was living in China; two years later, he was in South Korea. Four years later, he was living in California and working as a senior ambassador at Liberty in North Korea (LiNK), a human rights group. In California, Shin—now going by the name Shin Dong-hyuk—likes riding his bike and eating burgers. His body is "a road map of the hardships of growing up in a labor camp"—he's been burned and scarred, and he's missing a finger.

*Because Harden hasn't revised his book since 2015, he presents this information as the truth. In reality, however, Shin had escaped from Camp 18 twice before he made his way to South Korea. It's also impossible to know for sure whether Shin is really the only person born in a prison camp to escape with his life. Shin was conditioned from an early age to be obedient and remain inside the camp—in fact, he still struggles with the torture and abuse he endured as a prisoner. Therefore, it would seem, few prisoners born in a North Korean prison camp would even have tried to flee.*



Shin is about the same age as Kim Jong Eun, who became the North Korean leader in 2011. Kim was raised in luxury; he studied in Switzerland and was named a four-star general, despite his total lack of military experience. It remains to be seen what kind of leader he'll be, Harden writes. Shin, who lived on the other extreme of wealth in North Korea, was born a slave and never learned to read well. He lived in a prison camp whose existence the government still denies.

*In addition to being about a North Korean prison camp, the book studies the North Korean state overall. North Korea is often considered one of the most corrupt and tyrannical countries on the planet: the vast majority of the country lives in abject poverty, but the Kim family itself lives in luxury, turning its back on its population's suffering.*



There are lots of stories about concentration camps, perhaps the most famous of which is *Night* by Elie Wiesel. In *Night*, the narrator sacrifices his moral principles in order to survive in a Nazi death camp, though he remembers his family with love. Shin's story of survival is very different—his mother hit him and his father ignored him, and neither showed him any real affection. He also has no memories of life outside Camp 14—he was born there, and learned the camp's values before learning anything else.

*Harden wants to make it clear that this will not be a stereotypical story about transcending one's pain by remembering one's family. One further implication of this fact is that the book doesn't have a particularly happy ending. Shin doesn't have a happy family to return to, or even to remember; instead, he has to find happiness on his own.*



North Korean prison camps have been in existence for decades, and it's estimated that approximately one hundred thousand prisoners live there. The camp population began to grow after 2011, when Kim Jong Eun took over from his father. According to South Korean intelligence, there are six camps, the biggest of which covers more ground than Los Angeles. Some lucky prisoners are allowed to leave, provided that they can prove their loyalty, but the rest are worked to death.

*North Korean prison camps are (at least according to survivors like Shin) nightmarish places—and yet, as Harden points out again and again, most powerful people around the world aren't aware of their existence, or seem indifferent to doing anything to get rid of them.*



Shin's camp, Camp 14, has a reputation for being the toughest in North Korea. There are dozens of eyewitnesses from North Korean labor camps, including former guards and an escaped colonel, living around the world. These eyewitnesses have reported that a few prisoners are publicly killed each year, and dozens more are killed in secret. Prisoners are forced to mine, sew, or farm, receiving little food. Few survive beyond the age of fifty, and it's estimated that hundreds of thousands have died in the camps so far. Most prisoners were brought there without a trial, and wrongdoers' entire families "through three generations" are brought to the camp, too.

Blaine Harden first met Shin in 2008, in downtown Seoul. With a translator's help, Shin told Harden about watching his mother's hanging. He also mentioned that he'd never heard the word "love," even from his mother—a woman he still hated. At the time, he was living in abject poverty in South Korea; he'd written a memoir about his time in the camps, but it hadn't received much attention. Harden had written about imploding states for the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and he was curious about how the Kim family used terror to control its people.

Before meeting Shin, Harden had been unable to learn much about North Korea. The country ensured that all visitors be shown little to nothing about North Korean society. But after meeting Shin, Harden published an article for the *Post*, using Shin's accounts of life in North Korea's prison camps. The story sparked widespread outrage—people emailed Harden, asking how the U.S. could allow the camps to exist. One couple read the article and offered to adopt Shin; another woman read the story and later fell in love with Shin.

Following the article, Harden decided that he wanted to write a book about Shin's experiences. Shin took a long time to decide if he was interested in working with Harden, however. In the end he said yes, and made himself available for long interviews, in return for which he and Harden would split whatever profits the book earned. Harden had final control over the book's contents, however. Previously, Shin had written a book called *Escape to the Outer World*, which was published in Seoul in 2007. During his interviews with Shin, however, Harden sensed that Shin seemed uncomfortable. Harden admits that he sometimes found it difficult to trust Shin, especially since he changed his story. It's impossible to fact-check a story about a North Korean prison camp, but human rights activists report that Shin's statements are consistent with what they've learned about North Korean prison camps.

*In a way, the North Korean prison camps function like extreme versions of the North Korean state: a small handful of powerful, militarized figures rule the population with regular displays of force while starving the prisoners and preventing them from having any contact whatsoever with the outside world. According to Harden, the threat of being sent to a prison camp hangs over every North Korean's life: furthermore, the Kim dynasty has further discouraged rebellion by punishing the people's entire families.*



*Blaine Harden, the author of this book, was interested in talking to Shin for two reasons: first, his natural sympathies for Shin; second, his general, more abstract interest in "imploding states." North Korea, it's often predicted, will collapse within the next few years: the Kim dynasty doesn't have enough power to control its population for much longer.*



*Harden played a critical role in broadcasting the news about North Korean prison camps: his article for the *Washington Post* brought thousands of powerful people's attention to the issue. But although Harden's article outraged lots of people, it didn't really result in any changes in government policy in the United States. As Harden well knows, freeing the North Korean prison camp population isn't a high priority for American politicians.*



*In this important passage, Harden acknowledges that Shin isn't an entirely reliable source of information about the prison camps, since he's definitely lied in the past about his behavior. Indeed, since publishing his book, Harden learned that Shin didn't even escape from Camp 14 at all—he escaped from Camp 18. Accuracy is especially important when writing about the North Korean prison camps, since there are no fact-checkers or other sources Harden can consult for information. Harden suggests that readers should still trust Shin, but also take his claims with a grain of salt.*



It took three years for Harden to research North Korean society to provide background for his book on the camps. He spoke to South Korean human rights activists, as well as Shin's friends and North Koreans who worked at the labor camps. Some have reported that Shin's life was "relatively comfortable."

When negotiating with the United States, North Korea has always been able to avoid altering its labor camp policies in any way—this is because labor camp reform isn't a high priority for either North Korea or the U.S. As absurd as it sounds, North Korean camps have failed to garner international outrage in part, Harden says, because no famous figure has stepped up for the cause.

Shin is ashamed of what he did to survive in the labor camps. He has refused to learn English, partly because he doesn't want to repeat his story "in a language that might make him important." However, Shin wants others to understand the horrors of the camps. "His burden," Harden observes, "is a heavy one."

*Shin's life has improved since he escaped from camp, of course, but it's an ongoing struggle: he still feels guilty about his role in his family's deaths, and perhaps gets involved in activism to make up for his sins.*



*Many of the most successful human rights campaigns have big pop stars or actors to support them (e.g., Bono or Richard Gere). While this might sound silly, activist movements sometimes need charismatic figures to rouse the public from indifference and convert their outrage into concrete action.*



*In this chapter—an overview of Shin's recent life—Harden never suggests that Shin has "found peace." Instead, he suggests that Shin's guilt is an ongoing struggle, one that may never be resolved.*



## CHAPTER 1: THE BOY WHO ATE HIS MOTHER'S LUNCH

Shin and his mother live in one of the best parts of Camp 14—a "model village," consisting of forty one-story buildings, each of which houses four families. The families have to share a kitchen, and have no beds, chairs, tables, or running water. They're forced to defecate in a special area, since their excrement is used to fertilize the camp's farm. The only food for prisoners is cabbage soup and corn porridge.

As a child, Shin eats the food his mother brought home for meeting her "daily work quota." Sometimes, he eats his mother's food, too—but when this happens, she beats him. At the time, Shin thinks of his mother, whose name is Jang Hye Gyung, as a mere competitor for food, rather than a loving parent. Jang never talks about why she is in the camp. The camp guards forced her to marry Shin's father and have a child; at the camp, sex is forbidden unless guards approve it.

*In Camp 14, Shin and his peers weren't allowed to spend much time with each other; they lived in communal homes and worked long hours. This prevented the prisoners from forming alliances and loyalties that could strengthen them against the guards.*



*Shin grew up without feeling any real affection for his mother—his only priority was surviving, and his mother apparently never showed him any affection, meaning that he thought of his mother as an obstacle to his survival, not a beloved presence in his life. Notice that the guards forbid sex; again, this prevented the prisoners from forming strong connections or alliances.*



Shin's father is named Shin Gyung Sub. Supposedly, the guards rewarded him with a marriage to Jang because he was good at operating a lathe. Marriage is usually seen as a promotion, since it leads to a better job and housing. After her marriage, for instance, Jang was given a farm job, which allowed her to steal extra food. However, Jang and Shin Gyung Sub were only allowed to sleep together a few times; afterwards, Shin's father went back to living in a dormitory and only saw Shin a few times a year. Jang and Shin Gyung Sub also have an older son, He Geun, who Shin barely knows. Shin grows up without feeling affection for his parents or brother.

Growing up, Shin's only source of certainty is the guards, who encourage him to snitch on his peers. However, he also witnesses the head guard having sex with Jang. Jang puts up no resistance, and Shin never speaks to his mother about what he'd seen. A few years later, he witnesses a guard forcing his mother to kneel and raise her arms for more than an hour, until she passes out from exhaustion. Later, Jang is subjected to an "ideological struggle" meeting, in which her fellow workers yell at her for failing to fill her quota.

Shin feeds himself by catching rats, frogs, and bugs. Without these food sources, he could catch pellagra, a common disease at Camp 14. Shin also learns how to find wild berries. But during the winter, he and his peers never have enough food. The eating problems that Shin experiences are common throughout North Korea; malnutrition has lowered the average height and weight of the North Korean population and increased the probability of mental disability. In the 1990s, the U.S. became North Korea's largest food donor, even as North Korea continued to demonize America.

Shin grows up in Camp 14, unaware that his country's government can't feed its own population. He has no idea that tens of thousands of North Koreans have left their homes and walked to China in search of food. Life for Shin is an endless routine of hunger, theft, and beatings.

## CHAPTER 2: SCHOOL DAYS

One day in the Camp 14 school, Shin's teacher searches through the students' pockets and finds five kernels of corn belonging to a young girl. The teacher screams at the girl. Then he takes her outside and beats her in the head until she is dead. Shin has been taught to believe that the prisoners deserve whatever punishment they receive, even execution.

*Shin's father, much like his mother, was a distant presence in his life. Shin didn't feel any real love for his father, and in fact barely spent any time with him. By the same token, Shin's father seemed to think of his son as a distant person whom he barely knew. As a result, Shin grew up without any strong loyalties to anybody other than himself: quite understandably, all he cared about was feeding himself and surviving until the next day.*



*Shin witnessed his mother endure unspeakable cruelty: the guards raped and assaulted her, and her peers bullied her for falling behind on her work quota. And yet Harden gives the impression that Shin didn't feel any strong emotion about this: he watched, blank-faced, as the guards (whom he had been taught to fear but also to respect and obey) raped his mother, unsure what to feel. The "ideological struggle" seems like both a punishment and a kind of brainwashing.*



*Survival was a desperate struggle for Shin; he had to scramble for food every chance he got or risk starving to death. As Harden has suggested earlier, Camp 14 is a more intense version of North Korea itself, a country in which a huge chunk of the population goes hungry every day. The future of North Korea poses an ethical challenge to the United States: should the U.S. continue to send the country food, even though this arguably strengthens the Kim dynasty's control over the country, or should it let North Korea collapse (which will hurt its poorest citizens most of all)?*



*One reason Shin took so many years to plot an escape is that he had no life outside the camp to long for: Camp 14 was his own, self-contained universe.*



*As with the descriptions of Shin's mother being raped in the previous chapter, Shin shows no emotion as he watches his peer being beaten to death. He's surrounded by cruelty to the point where he's desensitized to it, and brainwashed to believe that it is always necessary and justified.*



In school, Shin is given a new pair of shoes every two years and, if he's been good, a bar of soap. The classrooms are bare and undecorated—they don't even have the usual portraits of Kim Jong Il and his father, Kim Il Sung (who, despite having died years ago, is still an official ruler of North Korea). In school, Shin learns basic reading, writing, addition, and subtraction. For exercise, he runs around outside—he doesn't see a soccer ball until he's twenty-three. He learns nothing of history or geography, and has only a vague understanding of his country's rulers.

Growing up, Shin is well aware what lies ahead for him: after finishing school, he'll be working for the rest of his life. Even while still in school, he and his fellow students are required to scrape excrement out of toilets to provide fertilizer. His happiest moments occur when he and the other students are sent to the fields to search for herbs. These are some of the only occasions when he's allowed to relax and play with other students.

Perhaps Shin's only friend is Hong Sung Jo. They play games together between classes, but they also view one another as competitors for food. Shin is a slow worker, and the entire class is often punished for his mistakes, alienating him from Hong.

At ten, Shin begins working in coalmines, where he and his peers have to load coal into ore cars. One day, a girl who is Shin's age, Moon Sung Sim, slips and crushes her toe beneath a steel wheel; the toe is later amputated. In the evenings, the students have to report what they've done wrong that day—Shin and his peers usually invent "sins" to keep their teachers from getting suspicious of any real wrongdoing—and then they're smacked on the head. At night, the boys sleep together in the secondary school dormitory. Weaker boys such as Shin are forced to sleep far from the heated flue.

Shin knows a boy named Ryu Hak Chul who sasses his teachers. One day, he ditches his work assignment to find food; afterwards, Ryu is tied to a tree, and his peers are ordered to beat him. Without thinking, Shin joins his classmates in hitting Ryu.

*As he presents it in the book, Shin's life in Camp 14 was so miserable that something as banal as a bar of soap was a great luxury for him. However, since 2015, Shin has recanted some aspects of his story, suggesting that life in the prison camps may not have been quite as bad as he'd claimed (even if it was still awful). Shin claims he was never taught much about the Kim dynasty during his time in Camp 14, but since 2015, Shin has said that he was taught about the Kims—why he changed this element of the story is unclear.*



*Shin's life was hard, but even in the confines of the prison camp he found a few moments in which to be happy. The fact that the prison guards forced children to scrape excrement from toilets is at once a sign of the guards' authority and the fragility of life in much of North Korea: the country was so poor that it had to harvest whatever fuel sources it could find.*



*Shin had friends, but he didn't—couldn't—allow friendships to interfere with his survival.*



*Shin's peers were constantly having accidents, or being beaten by the guards. They worked long hours in dangerous conditions, so it's no wonder that they hurt themselves. Life in the prison camp was an ugly, Darwinian struggle, with the strong seizing the lion's share of the resources while the weaker children starved or froze.*



*Shin participated in some horrific acts, like beating up small children. Notice, however, that Harden claims that Shin acted "without thinking," suggesting that he was essentially brainwashed from birth, and couldn't make a truly informed decision.*



## CHAPTER 3: THE UPPER CRUST

One day, at the age of nine, Shin is picking up coal that's spilled from a passing railway car. Suddenly, the children of Camp 14's guards begin throwing rocks at the prison children. One rock cuts Shin just below his eye. Afterwards, the teacher yells at Shin and the other students for failing to meet their quota.

The guards' children see Shin and his classmates as "irredeemable sinners" who've betrayed their country. Beginning in 1957, Kim Il Sung created the modern North Korean class system: the highest group, the "core class," consisted of farmers, families of soldiers who'd died in the Korean War, and bureaucrats. The next group was the "neutral class," consisting of soldiers, technicians, and teachers. Then there was the "hostile class," consisting of former property owners and those whose relatives had fled the country or opposed the government. The hostile classes worked in mines and factories, or in prison camps.

The only people allowed to work as guards in prison camps are the relatives of government workers and other core elites, such as An Myeong Chul. An began working at a camp at the age of nineteen; he was required to sign documents saying he'd never talk about his work. However, An fled the country in 1994, after his father, a government worker, committed suicide. He later became a human rights activist—a crime for which his relatives in North Korea were severely punished.

When Harden met An in Seoul in 2009, An seemed intimidating. He spoke about studying martial arts and being taught not to care if his beatings severely injured the prisoners. He also told Harden that guards were allowed to rape the prisoners, many of whom consented to sex because they thought it led to a better life. An claimed that many guards beat prisoners simply because they were bored.

Some "core" families live in Pyongyang in large apartments. In general, the core is believed to consist of approximately 100,000 people out of 23 million. American intelligence agencies have found that core North Koreans who venture outside the country have been involved in counterfeiting, cyberterrorism, and drug trafficking. Members of the core class have also sold weapons in Iran and Syria.

*When Shin and his peers had accidents or hurt themselves, the guards and teachers ignored their suffering; their only concern was forcing the children to meet their work quotas. Indeed, Shin's "teachers'" real purpose was to train the children to obey authority and work hard.*



*The Kim dynasty was ostensibly Communist, at least at first, so it seized property owners' land and wealth and sent many former capitalists to labor camps. In the long run, however, it became clear that the Kim dynasty's only ideology was the family itself. A small inner circle surrounded the Kims—but most of the North Korean population could barely find enough food to survive.*



*An is the rare prison camp guard who's escaped from North Korea, so he can corroborate many of the statements that Shin has made about Camp 14 (and thus confirm that Shin is at least partly reliable as a source). Like Shin, An has become involved in human rights campaigns—also like Shin, partly to atone for the cruel acts he performed in the camp.*



*An's testimony fits with general human psychology as seen in studies like the infamous Stanford prison experiment of 1971. When people are given total power as "guards" over "prisoners" who are seen as worthless and guilty, many of those guards will naturally become cruel and abusive.*



*The core class of North Korea serves an important purpose for the Kim family: they're allowed to travel outside the country and enact the Kims' foreign policy. North Korea is known to be one of the world's leading sources of cyberterrorism and arms dealing, thanks largely to the acts of core families.*



One elite North Korean, Kim Kwan Jin, spoke to Harden about his experiences in Kim Jong Il's inner circles. Kim Kwan Jin studied at elite universities and learned how to maintain North Korea's global insurance fraud, which reaps huge sums on false insurance claims filed with the world's biggest insurance companies. The scheme works well because 1) each one of the claims is relatively small, 2) the world's insurance companies have no way of investigating the claims themselves, since North Korea doesn't allow many visitors, and 3) some insurance workers don't even realize that North Korea is a totalitarian state.

One of the most baffling things about Pyongyang is that the quality of life there isn't very good, even for elites. Elites have fairly big apartments and access to "luxuries" such as fruit and liquor. But the electricity is poor, hot water is scarce, and travel is almost impossible. The Kim family, however, lives in luxury: they own dozens of houses, each with swimming pools, horseracing tracks, water parks, and more.

The present leader of North Korea, Kim Jong Eun, had no real qualifications to run a country. He studied in Switzerland, where he played basketball and liked to draw. However, after Kim Jong Il suffered a near-fatal stroke, the North Korean propaganda industry worked hard to make Kim seem like a great leader. Television programs have portrayed Kim as a kind man who spent time with his wife at concerts and other state events. Kim has instituted reforms, firing some of his generals and proposing economic changes to fight famine. However, he has also approved the launch of three-stage rockets, signaling to the world that North Korea would soon be able to strike the United States with a ballistic missile. Meanwhile, the camps remain open.

## CHAPTER 4: MOTHER TRIES TO ESCAPE

On April 6, 1996, Shin's teacher comes looking for him. Shin is blindfolded and handcuffed, and then driven out of the camp. When his blindfold is removed, Shin is sitting in the underground camp prison. Two officers ask him, "Do you know why you're here?" When Shin says that he has no idea, they inform him that his mother and brother have been caught trying to escape. Shin insists that he knows nothing about the escape.

*Few people know that the Kim dynasty supports itself largely through fraud: core families file insurance claims for property or business damages, and insurance companies around the world are forced to send money back to the Kims. It is startling to consider that major Western companies unknowingly contribute to the Kim dynasty's power (especially considering that the Kims have demonized the Western world in general and the U.S. in particular). It's even odder that some of these companies may be unaware that North Korea is a totalitarian state—and perhaps by publishing his book, Harden can enlighten the public and theoretically take some money out of the Kims' pockets.*



*Even for so-called "elites," quality of life in North Korea is far below the standard in Western countries—with the glaring exceptions of the Kims themselves, who live like kings, with no apparent regard for the starving population.*



*Kim Jong Eun is plainly unqualified to lead a country—his main qualification is his status as the dictator's son. However, the North Korean propaganda machine is very effective, and so even Kim Jong Eun was soon presented and accepted as a brilliant and glorious leader.*



*As he did in the introduction, Harden depicts Shin's experiences without any context or clarification, so that readers are forced to experience the scene through the eyes of a frantic child. (In retrospect, this partly explains why, later on, Shin doesn't immediately tell the guards that he ratted out his mother and brother.)*



Shin told Harden about his time in the underground prison camp many times. He also told the story to South Korean intelligence officers, counselors, and psychiatrists, and he wrote about it in his memoir. There is no way to prove Shin's claims about the prison, since his brother and mother are dead. Personally, Harden believed Shin's story, and included it in his initial *Post* article. During the planning period for *Escape From Camp 14*, however, Shin changed his story. His translator, Hannah Song (the director of LiNK), told Harden that Shin had admitted that he'd lied out of shame. He insisted that he would never forgive himself for his role in his mother's death, but that he wanted to talk about how the camp had warped his character.

*Shin is, it must be said, an unreliable narrator of these events. He discusses the cruelty of the prison guards but mostly refuses to talk about his own cruelty and his role in his family's murder. While it's perfectly understandable that Shin would feel guilty about his own behavior, it can be challenging to read *Escape From Camp 14* because of this—Shin often seems like a big, blank space in the center of the story.*



## CHAPTER 5: MOTHER TRIES TO ESCAPE, VERSION TWO

On April 5, 1996, Shin's teacher tells him that as a reward for good behavior, he can go eat dinner with his mother, rather than spending time in the dormitory. At home, Shin finds Jang sitting with his older brother, He Geun, now twenty-one years old, who works at the camp's cement factory. Shin is offended that his mother is cooking rice (considered a luxury in the camp) for He Geun, since she's never prepared rice for Shin. She doesn't show him any warmth or affection when he comes home.

*Here Harden conveys an emotion that almost any reader can identify with: sibling rivalry. Shin wasn't close with his mother or his brother, but he still expected his mother to treat him well, rather than favoring his older brother. This might suggest that, while it's easy to condemn Shin for his actions, he's no more "evil" than the average person—Shin has merely lived in harsher conditions than most.*



Shin listens to Jang and He Geun talk, and realizes that they're planning to escape. Shin becomes alarmed—he is furious that his mother would endanger his own life and jealous that his brother is eating rice. Shin leaves the house, claiming that he's going to the toilet, and goes to find a guard. It's late at night, and Shin can't find any guards, so he goes to tell Hong Sung Jo, the person he trusts most. Jong advises Shin to talk to the school's night guard, so Shin finds the guard. Before he gives up his information, Shin demands that he be given more food and beaten less—the guard agrees. Shin tells the guard about his mother's planned escape, and the guard assures Shin that he'll "take care of everything."

*In this scene, we come to understand the principle source of Shin's guilt and self-loathing: he sold out his mother and brother for some extra food. It's reasonable to assume, in light of the constant violence in Shin's life, that he must have understood on some level that he was sentencing his family to death, but perhaps readers can at least understand Shin's behavior, even if they can't sympathize with it. Shin was raised to think of the authorities as the ultimate good and his family as merely competitors for food, and he was concerned with his own survival more than anyone else's.*



The next day, guards arrive at school looking for Shin, blindfold and arrest him, and drive him away. But Shin already knew that guards would be coming for him, since he'd tipped them off.

*Even after he informed on his family, Shin was arrested and taken to a secret prison—clearly something went wrong in his plan to be rewarded.*



## CHAPTER 6: THIS SON OF A BITCH WON'T DO

In the Camp 14 prison, guards demand to know if Shin knew about his family's escape plans in advance. Shin is confused—he tipped off the guards about the escape, so he can't understand why he is being treated like a potential accomplice. (Shin later realized that the night guard had claimed all the credit for discovering Jang's escape plan—he hadn't mentioned Shin at all.)

The guards show Shin a document listing his family members' crimes against North Korea. Shin's uncle, the document explains, participated in "disruptions of public peace" and "acts of brutality," along with another of Shin's uncles. As a result, Shin's father has been imprisoned. (Shin's father later told Shin about how, in 1965, he and his family were arrested by security forces.) In Camp 14, the guards pressure Shin to sign the document (listing his family's crimes) with his thumbprint.

The guards then take Shin to a tiny prison cell. The next day, they bring him back for more interrogation. They demand to know why his mother wanted to escape, threatening to kill Shin if he doesn't tell the truth. The next day, the guards hang Shin by the ankles. On the fourth day, he is taken into a room lined with pincers, hammers, and axes. A guard threatens to kill him unless he tells the truth. When Shin doesn't reply, the guards strip him and hang him from the ceiling again. They burn his skin with charcoal and pierce his stomach with a hook. At this point, he passes out.

Shin awakes on the floor of his cell. In the coming days, he is fed corn and cabbage, but his burns quickly become infected. After ten days, Shin is brought for another interrogation. This time, he tells the guard that he reported the escape, but the guard doesn't believe him. Shin begs him to talk to Hong Sung Jo, the only person who can confirm that Shin knew about the escape. A few days later, Shin is moved to another cell, in which there is already a prisoner. Shin has been granted a reprieve—Hong has confirmed his story. The chapter ends, "Shin would never see the school's night guard again."

*The bitter irony of Shin's situation is that, after going out of his way to protect his own interests and betraying his family to the night guard, the guard betrayed him and let him be sent to the prison.*



*It's never entirely explained why Shin is given a dossier on his family's crimes against North Korea—what bearing these "crimes" could have on Shin's mother and brother's attempted escape is unclear. It's also odd that the guards needed Shin to sign anything—surely, in a place where force is law, the prisoners' assent would be irrelevant. However, since 2015, the truth has come out: Shin was signing a document stating that his mother and brother were involved in a murder—that's why the guards needed his thumbprint.*



*The overwhelming question during this scene is, why didn't Shin tell the guards the truth: he had informed on his family members, and could back his story up with witnesses. (According to Shin, this is exactly what he told the guards later on.) Perhaps Shin was terrified and couldn't articulate his thoughts clearly. Or perhaps during his interviews with Harden he wanted to make himself seem to be even more of a victim than he really was.*



*Shin was eventually granted a reprieve for his acts, since he could prove that he informed on his family members. Had he not gone to Hong before telling the night guard (who, it's strongly implied, was demoted or even executed for his deceptions), Shin could have been murdered as a collaborator, along with his mother and brother.*



## CHAPTER 7: THE SUN SHINES EVEN ON MOUSE HOLES

Shin's new cellmate is in his fifties, and his name is Kim Jin Myung—however, he asks that Shin call him “Uncle.” Uncle treats Shin's burns, scraping away the pus and treating the wounds with salty cabbage. For about two months, Uncle and Shin live in the cell together. From their cell, they can hear the screams of other prisoners. Uncle appears to have some special standing in the prison—guards cut his hair and give him water and food. Uncle is the first consistently kind person Shin has ever met. He tells Shin about life outside Camp 14, wowing Shin with descriptions of food. Shin's health begins to improve.

One day, the guards take Shin out of his cell and demand that he inform on Uncle. Back in the cell later, Shin tells Uncle what he's been asked to do—Uncle doesn't seem surprised. Uncle talks a lot, but he never brings up his background or his politics. Harden guesses that he'd probably been a well-educated, important man before going to prison.

After a few more weeks, the guards bring Shin his school uniform and order him to change. Before leaving the cell, Shin grasps Uncle's hands. He's never loved or trusted anyone the way he's come to love and trust Uncle. For years to come, Shin thinks of Uncle more fondly than he thinks of his own family, but after that day, Shin never sees Uncle again.

*Uncle was, in many ways, the most important father figure in Shin's early life. It was here that Shin first began to learn about life outside Camp 14, so it seems that Uncle planted the seeds of Shin's desire to escape (however, it's unclear how this fits in with Shin's later account, in which he also lived in Camp 18 and escaped three times). It's no coincidence that the kindest person Shin encountered in Camp 14 was living in jail: Uncle tended to Shin perhaps because he had nothing else to lose.*



*Uncle was intelligent enough to realize that the guards would try to convince Shin to spy on him. Because he was realistic about life in prison, Uncle was able to continue being friends with Shin. He seems to have accepted that he couldn't entirely trust Shin, and therefore told him nothing incriminating.*



*It's reasonable to assume that Uncle was killed shortly after Shin met him. Shin's brief friendship with Uncle sustains him throughout his time in the prison camp, however, and, it's strongly implied, eventually inspires him to escape.*



## CHAPTER 8: AVOIDING MOTHER'S EYES

The guards take Shin, dressed in his school uniform, into the room where he'd first been interrogated. It is late November, and Shin has just had his fourteenth birthday. To Shin's amazement, Shin's father, Shin Gyung Sub, is kneeling on the floor. Shin Gyung Sub has been brought to prison around the same time as Shin. His leg has been broken, meaning that from now on, he'll have to work as an unskilled laborer, rather than continuing on as a skilled lathe operator. Guards force Shin and his father to sign nondisclosure agreements—if they ever speak of their time in prison, they'll be shot. They are then driven back to the center of the camp, where their blindfolds are removed. There, they see Jang and He Geun, tied up for an execution. Shin's father begins to weep.

For years, Shin has lived in shame about the death of Jang and He Geun. He lied about his role in the atrocity, and continues to remember the look on his mother's face on the day of her murder. At the time, however, Shin believes that his family deserves its punishment for plotting to leave the camp.

*Shin's father was arrested and tortured under suspicion of the same crimes at Shin himself: assisting with his wife's escape from the prison camp. Unlike Shin, however, Shin's father had no alibi to protect himself, meaning that he was more severely tortured. Again, it seems strange that Shin and his father would be required to formally agree not to talk about their time in jail—what would a nondisclosure agreement accomplish that the threat of further torture wouldn't do already? Shin's father, at least, has the ability to weep for his wife—he hasn't been nearly as thoroughly brainwashed as Shin.*



*As with other passages in the book, Harden is vague about what exactly went through Shin's head at the time of the execution: was he happy to see his mother executed? Was he indifferent? At least a little regretful? It seems safe to assume that Shin refused to tell Harden about his state of mind at the time.*



## CHAPTER 9: REACTIONARY SON OF A BITCH

In Camp 14, it isn't uncommon for entire families to be executed. Usually, the executed parents' children are never seen again. However, Shin has suggested to Harden that he was allowed to return to camp because he'd proven himself to be a reliable snitch.

Soon after returning to camp, Shin's teacher—whose name, after two years, Shin still doesn't know—confronts him. He wants to know why Shin didn't go to him with the information about his family's escape. Although Shin explains that he didn't want to wait, his teacher is unsympathetic, and beats him in front of the class.

On his second day back in school, Shin is sent to pull a cart of straw. The work re-opens some of his wounds, but he doesn't dare complain, because his teacher has insisted that he work extra hard to atone for his family's sins. In coming weeks, Shin's peers begin to bully him, taking their cues from the teacher. Before being sent to prison, Shin was friendly with Hong Joo Hyun, the grade leader—a position that permitted Hong to hit anyone in his grade on the school's authority. After prison, however, Hong begins to beat Shin for lagging behind. Once, he beats Shin with a shovel.

Shin begins to hate his parents for giving birth to him within Camp 14. He hates his mother for plotting to escape, and when his father visits him, Shin refuses to speak. Yet Shin never considers suicide during this stretch of his life. Many of Shin's peers commit suicide—death often seems a better alternative than living in constant hunger and fear. But Shin has spent his entire life in the camp, meaning that he has no understanding of what a normal, happy life could be—he has “no hope to lose, no past to mourn.”

Shin catches a lucky break when his cruel teacher is replaced with another man. The new teacher goes out of his way to feed Shin, taking him to the cafeteria after meals and sometimes sneaking food to him. He also gives Shin less work than normal, and stops his classmates from teasing him. Hong Joo Hyun becomes Shin's friend again. Shin begins to gain weight, and his burns heal. It's unclear why the new teacher is kinder to Shin—perhaps he's just kind. It's also possible that the guards realized that they had an incentive to keep Shin, a reliable snitch, alive.

*Shin was spared further torture because he'd proven himself useful to the guards: he could perhaps help the guards preserve order and discipline at the prison camp.*



*Shin's teacher was angry that Shin didn't tell him about his mother's escape plan—however, it's entirely possible that he would have betrayed Shin in exactly the same way as the night guard did.*



*Throughout his time in school following his stay in prison, Shin was made to feel guilty—although this was a very different form of the guilt than the self-loathing he'd later feel for betraying his mother and brother. Instead, Shin was told again and again that he had to atone for his family's sins. Shin even came to accept this idea of his own guilt after having it drummed into his head year after year.*



*At this point in his life, Shin still hated his mother and blamed her for trying to escape rather than feeling shame for betraying her. According to the book, his only standard for what life could be like was the camp itself—therefore, he couldn't understand his mother's desire to return to the outside world. However, since 2015, Shin has stated that he did have some knowledge of the outside world—he was taught about surrounding North Korea and the Kims, and therefore wasn't as naïve as he'd claimed. Perhaps Shin exaggerated the isolation of his camp because he wanted to strengthen the point that he had no sense of normal human society, and therefore, no sense of right and wrong.*



*While it's tempting to think that Shin's new teacher was simply a kinder man than his predecessor, it's also possible that Shin was just being rewarded for snitching on his mother—meaning that, in a way, Shin only survived for the rest of his time in the camp because he betrayed his family to their deaths. However, it's also important to remember Shin's later admission that he exaggerated the severity of his working conditions somewhat.*



## CHAPTER 10: WORKING MAN

In 1998, at the age of fifteen, Shin is working on a hydroelectric dam on the Taedong River. For the entire year, Shin eats three square meals a day—dam workers are treated especially well, since the dam is an important project. One day, Shin notices that a new concrete wall is collapsing. Although he screams a warning, the wall crushes eight people to death. After the accident, Shin’s guards simply tell him to remove the dead bodies and get back to work.

North Korea hasn’t had good electricity in its entire history, despite its thousands of small rivers, which could theoretically power strong hydroelectric dams. Under the Kim dynasty, the government relied on fuel donated by the Soviet Union; since the nineties, however, the government has made hydroelectricity a priority. Dams have prevented total starvation in North Korea, and they’ve also strengthened the government’s claims of being “self-reliant”—even though North Korea has depended on foreign aid throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

The North Korean government has enlisted its propaganda wing to find ways of glamorizing the famines that have periodically broken out since 1990. One propaganda campaign tried to encourage North Koreans to harvest their own excrement to use as fertilizer; another encouraged city-dwellers to move back to the country and become farmers. These attempts haven’t been successful, however.

In Camp 14, the construction of the hydroelectric dam requires thousands of workers. Shin spends all his time near the dam, and he receives better food than usual, but he witnesses many people die on the job. One day in July 1998, a sudden flash flood sweeps away dozens of his fellow workers. Shin is ordered to find the bodies of dead workers, and for each body he finds, he is given an extra portion of rice. He’s also forced to work in the freezing water, picking out boulders. All things considered, working on the dam is preferable to working elsewhere. Shin gets more food than usual and remembers his dam site meals as some of the happiest times of his teen years. He gains weight and regains confidence in his ability to survive. He also enjoys more independence than other camp workers, since he’s allowed to walk anywhere in Camp 14 when he’s not working.

*Since 2015, Shin has admitted that he distorted this portion of his life’s story: he did work on the dams, but only later, after he tried to escape from his prison camp.*



*North Korea’s lack of electricity is perhaps the best proof of its government’s incompetence. Though the Kims claim that North Korea is a proud, independent state, it’s relied on foreign aid from the Soviet Union and later the United States to survive. This reflects the Kims’ almost total self-interest: they live in luxury and seemingly have no long-term plans for their country’s survival.*



*The propaganda wing tried to convince its people to enjoy and celebrate their country’s famines and energy crises—but of course, these campaigns failed: propaganda will almost always be a weaker motivator than self-interest.*



*Shin’s life working on the dam was easier than it could have been elsewhere in the camp, but it’s important to keep in mind that it was very, very far from easy: on the contrary, Shin risked his life almost every day, working in the freezing cold water and toiling in unsafe conditions. It’s important to realize that Shin was given jobs that afforded him more independence and, presumably, more time to think about the future.*



In 1999, Shin's time in secondary school ends, meaning that his teacher assigns him and his classmates to different jobs for the remainder of their lives. Most of Shin's peers, including Hong Joo Hyun and Hong Sung Jo, are sent to the coalmines, and Shin never sees them again. Regardless of the reason, Shin's teacher saves his life by sending him to the pig farm, where there is a lot of food to steal.

*Shin learned very little during his time in "school"—the most important lesson was to obey authority. Thus, when he received his assignment, he accepted it without question. Had Shin been assigned somewhere else, he could have died—again raising the possibility that Shin was only assigned to the pig farm (and, in the end, only escaped from camp) because he betrayed his family and received a reward. However, Shin later admitted that he distorted this part of his life's story: he was transferred to a pig farm in Camp 18 after trying to escape from the camp.*



## CHAPTER 11: NAPPING ON THE FARM

Shin's time on the pig farm is some of his happiest at Camp 14. He doesn't work very hard, and although the foreman sometimes hits him, he's used to harsher beatings. His meals are larger than usual, and he has opportunities to eat corn intended for the pigs. He sleeps in a warm building, and he isn't bullied. He seems uninterested in anything other than his next meal. His memories of informing on his family and being tortured recede into "numbness."

*Even though Shin had more time to himself than he'd ever had before, he didn't know what to do with it. In a way, he seems to have had no "inner life"—his only thoughts were about finding a meal and surviving in the prison for as long as possible. He had never had the leisure of thinking about larger issues of guilt, morality, or the future.*



Meanwhile, North Korea was going through big changes. Famine and flooding destroyed the national economy, and households are forced to trade with one another to survive. During this period, North Koreans (possibly as many as 400,000) snuck across the border to enter China. Kim Jong Il tried to control his people, punishing those who traded goods without government permission. However, corruption was becoming increasingly common at the time, and black market trading continued. Between 1995 and 2003, the U.S. donated more than a billion dollars worth of food to North Korea, for which Kim claimed all the credit. Studies found that, even after food aid, North Korea had higher malnutrition rates than Angola, a country that recently experienced a bloody civil war.

*In the late 1990s, North Korea's population was still struggling to feed itself, and as a result, a huge black market was emerging throughout the country. Necessity is the mother of invention, and the absence of reliable food sources in North Korea led to the establishment of secret underground trading networks—which the Kim family strictly forbade. The rise of corruption in the country testifies to the sinister incompetence of the Kim government: it couldn't feed its people or stop them from feeding themselves.*



In the face of a nationwide food crisis, the North Korean government had no choice but to institute economic reform. In 2002, Kim Jong Il legalized private farming and began offering farmers higher prices for food to incentivize agriculture. Slowly, capitalism began to grow in the country, weakening Kim's "iron grip." Kim retaliated by sending the Korean People's Army to confiscate much of the food grown on new farms. This sparked widespread bribery—farmers just paid off soldiers rather than surrender their food.

*The rise of capitalist trading networks must have infuriated the North Korean government, since they testified to the government's inability to control its own population. Kim had no choice but to allow some limited private industry. Around the same time, the culture of corruption in North Korea reached an all-time high, to the point where the military and police forces accepted and even depended upon kickbacks.*



Unbeknownst to Shin at the time, a system of corruption and “extralegal intercity travel” is growing, and this system will eventually help him escape from Camp 14. At the time, however, Shin doesn’t think about escape at all. Now twenty years old, he believes that he’s going to die on the pig farm. Then, without any explanation, he is transferred to the camp garment factory. There, Shin is under more pressure than usual to meet his quotas. It’s during Shin’s time at the factory, however, that Shin meet a prisoner from Pyongyang, who “would tell Shin about what he was missing.”

*Shin was transferred to the garment factory for reasons he has never fully understood. This reflects a general weakness of the book as a study of the North Korean prison system: Harden’s only source of information is Shin, meaning that Shin can only say so much about the way the prison camp was governed and organized. Shin isn’t sure how much of a “method” there was to life in the camps: he can only offer his own limited perspective.*



## CHAPTER 12: SEWING AND SNITCHING

At the Camp 14 garment factory, Shin is responsible for repairing sewing machines—a tough job, since the machines break down constantly. Often, the repairmen take out their anger on the female garment workers, slapping and kicking them. Shin is encouraged to be brutal with the women in the factory. One day, he sees a coworker named Gong Jin Soo hitting a woman, and Shin retaliates by hitting Gong in the head with a wrench. Shin’s foreman slaps Shin but didn’t punish him any further. From then on, Gong keeps away from Shin.

*This passage represents one of the only times in the book when Shin risks his own life to stand up for someone else. Harden offers no explanation for why, out of the blue, Shin began standing up for other prisoners (when previously he joined the guards in beating others). Perhaps this is one time when Shin distorts the truth to alleviate some of his own guilt—but in any event, Harden (and, presumably, Shin) is so vague that it’s difficult to understand what was really going on here.*



During his time in the garment factory, Shin works alongside hundreds of woman. This creates sexual tension in the factory—especially because Shin is still a virgin (like most of his peers). Sometimes, Shin’s superiors force female underlings to have sex with them—they have no choice but to comply. One especially beautiful seamstress named Park Choon Young is often called into the superintendent’s office for sexual favors. Then it becomes obvious that she’s pregnant, at which point “she disappeared.”

*Attractive women had some of the most miserable lives of anyone living in the prison camp: they were punished for their beauty with constant harassment and sexual advances from the all-powerful guards, and when, inevitably, one of the guards impregnated them, they were (presumably) murdered rather than allowed to bear children.*



In 2004, Shin accidentally breaks a heavy sewing machine it. His foreman, who’s been very patient with him in the past, slaps him and reports the damage. Shin is then called in to the superintendent’s office, and the chief foreman hacks off his middle finger with a knife. Shin isn’t given much medical treatment, but, remembering how Uncle treated his wounds with salty cabbage, he dips his wound in soup, and succeeds in preventing an infection from spreading. The foreman, a patient man, fills in for Shin for two days after his injury, but he disappears soon after. Before disappearing, the foreman gives Shin some rice flour, saying it’s from Shin’s father. Shin refuses to eat it.

*Shin has since denied most of the information in this passage; he lost his finger after being tortured in prison, and he wasn’t estranged from his father—in fact, he lived with his father during most of his teen years. As the passage presents the evidence, however, Shin was clearly angry with his father, and blamed him for his mother’s death in some way. Perhaps Shin lied about living with his father to make himself seem angrier about his mother’s death than he really was.*



Snitching is very common in the factory. A coworker snitches on Shin for sneaking food from the vegetable garden outside. The next day, Shin is called into the superintendent's office, and the superintendent hits him with a stick. Afterwards, however, Shin is asked to spy on his coworkers. Two months later, Shin learns of a worker named Kang Chul Min, who has stolen cloth from the factory in order to repair his pants. Shin reports Kang, and Kang is later beaten for ninety minutes. Shin and the other factory workers are ordered to slap Kang in the face—Shin does so without hesitation.

*Shin was both a valued snitch (since he'd sold out his family) and the victim of other snitches—as a result, Shin seemed to accept and expect that his peers would inform on him for their own selfish benefit, and that he'd just as soon do the same for them. He continued to participate in cruelty and violence at the camp, partly because he'd been trained to do so since he was a child (and again making it confusing why he suddenly stood up for a peer earlier in this same chapter).*



## CHAPTER 13: DECIDING NOT TO SNITCH

Shortly after informing on his coworker, Shin begins spying on a new prisoner named Park Yong Chul. Shin is under strict instructions from the superintendent to befriend Park and learn as much as he can about Park's family and politics. Shin spends lots of time with Park, but Park volunteers no information about himself.

*Park, much like Uncle (another father figure for Shin), was intelligent enough not to give away details of his past to Shin right away.*



As time goes on, Park begins to open up about his past. He tells Shin that he is from Pyongyang—to Park's amazement, Shin has never heard of the city (the country's capital) before. Park begins to tell Shin about his childhood in North Korea's elite circles, and his experiences teaching taekwondo. He even claims to have shaken hands with Kim Jong Il. Shin admires Park for his humility and decency. As he spends more time with Park, Shin learns more about the surrounding world. Park tells Shin about South Korea—a country where, he claims, everyone is rich. Shin begins fantasizing about life outside the camps, and he makes "perhaps the first free decision of his life"—the decision not to snitch.

*Much like Uncle, Park enjoyed entertaining Shin with stories about the outside world, about which Shin knew next to nothing—and certainly planting the seed for Shin's later desire to escape. (It's also interesting to note that despite being a prisoner of the regime, Park still feels that it was a great honor to have shaken his dictator's hand.) The passage is also important because it claims that Shin's first free decision was not to inform on Park. Harden clearly takes the position that Shin isn't really morally accountable for betraying his family to the guards: that decision was the result of brainwashing, not conscious choice.*



Looking back, Shin doesn't believe that he refused to snitch on Park out of decency—rather, he was being selfish, since he wanted Park to help him escape. Shin, who's been raised not to trust anyone, is amazed by Park's trusting nature—he seems to talk about himself without considering the consequences. Park explains that he was demoted as a head taekwondo trainer in 2002. He was then forced to move north, where he and his wife illegally crossed into China. Park there learned about Hwang Jang Yop, the highest-ranking official ever to defect from North Korea. Hwang spoke about the corruption and malevolence of the North Korean government.

*Even in making a seemingly moral and selfless choice Shin admits that he still acted for selfish reasons. Park was a member of Pyongyang's elite inner circle: as a taekwondo supervisor, he met with and trained many powerful people. However, Park eventually decided to leave North Korea, recognizing that his country had nothing more to offer him.*



In 2003, Park tells Shin, he returned to North Korea to vote in the elections. Elections in North Korea are “empty rituals,” with candidates chosen by the government and run without opposition. Park feared that if he failed to vote, the government would declare him a traitor and send his family to labor camps. He was detained as he tried to re-enter North Korea and sent to Camp 14.

In particular, Shin is struck by how elegantly Park carries himself when he eats his meals. Even when he is very hungry, Park refuses to act panicked; instead, he eats slowly and calmly. He also loves to sing, which irritates Shin, who’s heard barely any music in his entire life. One night, Park convinces Shin to join him in song. Together, they sing “Song of the Winter Solstice,” the theme music of a popular North Korean TV program.

In November, the guards announce that they will be treating prisoners who have lice. The guards demonstrate a new lice-killing chemical by applying it to the scalps of five men and five women. Within a week, all ten of them have developed boils, and their skin begins to flake off. The prisoners are taken away, and Shin never sees them again. It’s then that Shin decides that “he had had enough. He begins thinking about escape.” Park makes Shin’s escape possible by inspiring Shin to think about the world outside the camp.

Park and Shin’s friendship was similar to the friendships that emerged at Nazi concentration camps, Harden writes. Often, the people who survived the camps worked in pairs, stealing food and clothing for each other and—just as crucially—looking together to a more hopeful future. It’s surprising how quickly Shin’s friendship with Park changed his worldview. Suddenly, Shin had a friend to help him escape from Camp 14.

*Park’s fatal mistake was to return to North Korea to vote in the elections. Readers might find it ludicrous that Park would have returned to a police state after being lucky enough to make it out alive—however, Park feared that his family would be punished unless he did so.*



*Park impressed Shin in many ways, but above all, he embodied the fascinations of life outside Camp 14—something Shin had barely ever thought about before now (at least according to this account—it’s unclear how this fits in with his later version of events). The lack of music in Shin’s life is just another tragic instance of how deprived and dehumanized he’s been his whole life.*



*As the passage presents the information, Shin’s painful experiences at the garment factory, combined with his friendship with Park, inspired him to escape from camp. However, Shin later admitted that he exaggerated his naiveté about the surrounding world—he’d already escaped from prison camp twice already. Nevertheless, it’s remarkable that Park could inspire Shin to sneak out a third time—proof that hope, friendship, and the desire to live a good life are often more powerful motivators than the threat of further punishment.*



*Throughout his time in the camp, Shin had operated from the assumption that his best chance of surviving was to look out for himself and nobody else. Now, he realized that his best chances to survival hinged upon his working alongside Park. In a way, Shin was still acting selfishly—just trying to maximize his chances of surviving—but he was also learning to trust and respect another person.*



## CHAPTER 14: PREPARING TO RUN

Shin and Park develop a plan to escape from Camp 14. Shin will get them over the **fence**, and Park will lead them to China, where his uncle will sneak them into South Korea. For the first time in his life, Shin has something to look forward to, and he no longer feels as tired at the end of the day. He and Park agree that, if guards find them trying to get over the fence, Park will be able to take them out with his martial arts training. In almost every way, Shin and Park's plan is ridiculous—nobody has ever escaped from Camp 14 and lived to tell about it. However, Park is inspired by the radio broadcasts he heard during his time in China—broadcasts which stress the incompetence of the North Korean state.

Shin plans for the escape by stealing warm clothes and shoes. There is another prisoner in the factory who has assembled an extra set of winter clothes and shoes, but Shin convinces himself that the prisoner deserves to be robbed, since the prisoner informed on many other people. He steals the prisoner's clothes and shoes and hides them with his own possessions. However, Shin doesn't have gloves or a hat to protect himself from the cold.

Before making his escape, Shin decides to visit his father, Shin Gyung Sub, one more time. He's never had a good relationship with his father, although he can never entirely explain why. On New Year's, they eat supper together. Shin's father has made an effort to be a better parent after the death of his wife and son; however, Shin remains cold. Neither father nor son entirely trusts the other—indeed, when Shin's father gave him the gift of rice flour, Shin had discarded the gift. When Shin leaves his father that evening, he doesn't mention his escape plans, and doesn't even give a special goodbye.

## CHAPTER 15: THE FENCE

The next morning, Shin and Park wake up and set to work cutting wood for a fire. It is an extraordinary coincidence that they're working so close to the **fence** that day—as a result of their assignment, they can run to the fence and then move on to tree cover. As they work, Park and Shin notice that the patrolmen around the camp take a long time to pass by. Furthermore, the foreman that day is a prisoner, too, meaning that he's unarmed. However, instead of running for it in the morning, they have agreed to wait until dusk, when it will be harder for the guards to track their footsteps in the snow.

*Park and Shin chose to escape not because they recognized an easy way to do so, but seemingly because they were inspired by the bold, foolish dream of living in the outside world. Park's descriptions of radio broadcasts reiterate why the camp guards—and the North Korean government in general—tried hard to limit citizens' understanding of the outside world. If they'd been able to listen to the radio or watch TV, they would have realized how weak and corrupt their country really was.*



*In order to maximize his chances of survival, Shin had to steal from another prisoner. Shin makes it clear that this prisoner already had a set of winter clothes, though, suggesting that Shin tried to commit the most "victimless" crime possible.*



*Shin claims he was unable to trust or love his father, for reasons that the book never makes entirely clear. Psychologists might say that Shin resented his father as a "defense mechanism" to distract himself from his own sense of complicity in his mother and brother's executions. In any event, Shin didn't trust his father with the information of his escape—probably because he feared that his father would betray him as he'd once betrayed his own mother.*



*Shin and Park planned their escape very carefully, in order to maximize their chances of getting past the fence and minimizing their chances of being seen by a guard. They took advantage of the "perfect storm" of factors: few armed guards, proximity to the fence, a leisurely fence patrol, etc.*



Around four pm, Shin and Park sneak towards the **fence**, which is about ten feet high and consists of strands of electrified barbed wire spaced about a foot apart. They decide that if they can squeeze through without touching the wire, they'd be fine. Shin is ready, but Park whispers, "I don't know if I can do this." Shin refuses to wait; he pulls Park toward the fence, and Park runs after him. Park tries to fit through the barbed wire, but electrocutes himself in the process. As Park's body convulses from the currents, Shin crawls over Park, using his body as an "insulating pad." He can still remember the smell of Park's body—"like it was burning."

*As the passage presents the information, it's odd that Park was the one reluctant to escape—one would imagine that Shin, who'd (supposedly) never been outside the camp, would have been far more frightened of leaving. In light of Shin's recent testimony, however, it seems that Shin was eager to escape because he'd already tried to do so. Park's untimely death seems to not have distracted Shin: he was so set on escaping that he crawled right over Park's body, rather than stopping to mourn his friend and father figure. Indeed, Park's death may have helped Shin get through the fence, so in a way Park was another harsh sacrifice necessary for Shin's survival.*



It's unclear how Shin survived the **electric fence**, but it appears that Park's body transmitted the electric current from the fence into the ground. Shin still experienced a high voltage as he crossed the fence, but not a lethal voltage (the fact that he was wearing extra clothing for the cold weather may have helped, too). As he runs away alone, Shin realizes that he is in trouble: he has no idea in what direction China is located.

*Shin apparently survived the electric fence out of sheer dumb luck. Still, it's likely that he'd never have had the opportunity to escape at all had he not snitched on his family years ago. Now, Shin had to find a way to survive in "free" North Korea—a place almost as dangerous as the prison camp.*



## CHAPTER 16: STEALING

Shin runs away from Camp 14 and reaches a farmer's shed. Inside, he finds corn, a military uniform, and a coat. Shin uses the uniform to disguise himself as "just another ... ill-nourished North Korean" veteran. He follows a road toward a village, where he finds that news of his escape hasn't broken yet. By late evening, he's walked about six miles and entered Bukchang, a mining town. He spends his first night outside the camp sleeping in a pigpen.

*By a remarkable coincidence, Shin was able to find food and warm clothing within a couple hours of escaping from the prison camp—had he not, he might have died in the cold before he ever got far from the fence. Some people have questioned this coincidence, accusing Shin of lying about his past once again.*



The next morning, Shin wakes up early and begins to explore the town. He's amazed to see North Koreans going about their business without any guards. Compared with Camp 14, life in North Korea seems joyful, colorful, and even luxurious. Shin begins to feel "wonderfully free." He breaks into a house and eats three bowls of rice there. Then, he takes the rest of the rice and keeps walking. He sells the rice to a market woman—his first experience with money—and then uses the cash to buy some cookies and crackers. Next, Shin encounters a group of unemployed workers in search of a job. Saying he is from the Bukchang area, he joins the workers, reasoning that he'll have more luck as part of a group.

*Life in North Korea is (probably) rarely colorful or luxurious—but from Shin's perspective, it was paradise. For the first time in his life, Shin could walk where he wanted, eat as much food as he needed, and even buy and sell things to other people. Ironically, the brutality and violence of Shin's early life in the camp prepared him for his eventual escape: almost anyone else would give up in despair after escaping, but Shin, who'd grown up in utter despair, found the strength to keep going.*



In North Korea, Harden writes, people can often walk directly into China or South Korea, provided that they bribe the soldiers (many of whom live primarily off of bribes). In 2012 alone, about 24,000 people defected to South Korea, and there's an enormous North Korean black market for leaving the country. There are even businessmen in Seoul who broker escapes from North Korea, complete with a forged passport and a plane ticket to Seoul. While many people who try to sneak over the border are executed, soldiers often have a stronger incentive to accept bribes.

Shin begins to associate with other homeless workers, modeling his behavior off of theirs. Traders show him places where he can sleep without attracting attention, and Shin makes a point of sharing any food he steals with the other workers, so that he can learn about how to get out of North Korea.

## CHAPTER 17: RIDING NORTH

Shin knows that he needs to move quickly or risk being executed. He walks nine miles to the town of Maengsan, where he learns about a truck that can take him to Hamhung, the second largest city in the country. By coincidence, Shin's "Travel time was excellent." Intercity travel had been almost impossible a few years before, but now, there are so many travel permits for sale on the black market that almost anyone can travel around the country—for a fee. The government doesn't like the culture of bribery, but it isn't powerful enough to stop it—its own military and police forces depend on bribes to survive. By the early 2000s, North Korea is a "Soprano state," with the police using the threat of arrest to "shake down" black market traders.

Shin arrives at the train station in Hamhung, a coastal factory city. There, he climbs into a boxcar headed for the Chinese border. The train is extremely slow, however, and for the next three days he sits in the boxcar with a young man who claims to be headed back to his home in the city of Gilju. He offers to let Shin stay with him for a couple days, where there is food and warmth. Shin accepts. In Gilju, Shin spends the last of his money on noodles. However, the young man convinces Shin to lend him his coat, so that he can impress his family. Shin, still naïve about the way the world worked, lends the man his coat, confident that he'll come back to the noodle shop for him. Hours pass, and the young man doesn't return. Shin is now trapped in a strange city without money or a coat.

*Shin's goal was to sneak over the Chinese border and, eventually, make his way into South Korea. As the passage suggests, doing so wasn't as difficult as the North Korean government claimed: there was a huge black market of bribes and forged passports, which the Kim dynasty was too disorganized to do anything about.*



*Shin was clever about cooperating with fellow wanderers: he shared some of his food with other people, effectively "buying" the information he needed about getting into China.*



*While Shin made his way into China partly because of his own abilities, he also succeeded in escaping North Korea because of pure luck. Had he escaped just a couple years earlier or later, he probably wouldn't have been able to sneak past the border so easily, and he could have either been killed on the spot or sent back to the camp. At the time, however, North Korea was suffused with corruption to the point where almost anybody with the right money could leave the country (at least according to Harden).*



*Shin's time in prison camp had trained him to take care of himself and not to trust other people. Yet when he joined forces with the man in the boxcar, he seems to have trusted him almost immediately—despite the rather obvious evidence that the man was just trying to con him into giving up his coat. According to Harden, Shin had spent his entire life in a prison camp, meaning that he didn't really understand how the outside world worked—and so fell for a trick that seems obvious. However, Shin's behavior is harder to explain in light of the fact that he had, in fact, been outside of the camp before.*



Shin spends the next twenty days in Gilju with no coat, money, or sense of direction. The weather is brutally cold, but he is able to survive by latching onto the city's huge homeless population. A gang of teenaged thieves lead him to the city outskirts, where they dig up daikon (a kind of radish that North Koreans often bury in mounds during cold months). It is during this time that Shin first sees pictures of Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung.

At the time, "marauding for food" was nothing special in North Korea—for many, it was the only means of survival. The American soldier Charles Robert Jenkins, who decided to defect to North Korea during his time in the U.S. army, was imprisoned by the North Koreans and forced to participate in propaganda videos. He married a Japanese prisoner and was only allowed to leave North Korea when the Japanese prime minister organized a prisoner trade in 2002. Harden later interviewed Jenkins, who claimed that during his time in North Korea he always had to contend with thieves and soldiers who tried to steal his food supply.

The food situation in Gilju in 2005 wasn't remotely as bad as it had once been—2004 had been a good harvest year for the country, and few people were actually dying of starvation (even though many were hungry). As Shin spends more time with the gang of teenaged thieves, he realizes that they have no interest in leaving North Korea. One night, he breaks into a house and finds rice and warm winter clothes. He sells the rice and, armed with warm clothes and money, boards a train northward toward China.

## CHAPTER 18: THE BORDER

Onboard the train northward, Shin learns about the Tumen River, a long river that forms much of the China-North Korean border. When the train arrives in Gomusan, a small town about twenty-five miles from China, Shin befriends an old man who tells him about crossing into China. The old man instructs Shin to offer guards crackers, money, and cigarettes, and to tell them that he is a soldier visiting his family.

The next morning, Shin sets out for Musan, a mining town near the border. A few soldiers stop him, but he offers them cigarettes and they allow him to pass on. At the border checkpoints, soldiers ask Shin for cigarettes without even bothering to ask for identification. It is January 2005, and Shin manages to bribe his way past each one of the checkpoints—largely because, at the time, the North Korean government is being fairly lax about border passage.

*Perhaps the fact that Shin hadn't been trained to worship the Kim family explains why Shin was so successful in escaping: he felt no patriotism or attachment to his country's leaders. (In his 2015 account, Shin said that he had learned a little about the Kims and seen pictures of them in the camp—but he still hadn't been exposed to their extreme cult of personality.)*



*The food situation in North Korea was so severe that it threatened ordinary North Korean citizens and soldiers alike. The result was that many Koreans were susceptible to bribery: naturally, they were more interested in feeding themselves than in obeying the letter of the law.*



*Once again, Shin had some remarkable good luck: he was able to find lots of food and enough warm clothing to survive in the freezing weather. Because Shin's quality of life had always been so low, he was able to survive in the outside world, keep his hopes up, and remain focused on escaping to China.*



*Previously Shin benefited from older, almost fatherly figures (Uncle and Park) who gave him advice about how to survive—here, another such figure told Shin how to make his way into China without arousing too much attention.*



*At the time when Shin attempted to cross the border, bribery was at an all-time high, meaning that Shin had a relatively easy time making his way into China. As the soldier's reaction would suggest, Shin was far from the first person who'd offered him a bribe recently.*



Since the food crisis of the 1990s, North Korea has tolerated a fairly open border with China. In 2000, the government promised leniency to those who'd fled the country. Border arrests decreased, and the government began to recognize small-time traders selling food without permits. As a result of these reforms, the country became markedly wealthier and healthier. Then, in late 2004, North Korea began to prosecute defectors more harshly. Shin was extraordinarily lucky: when he crossed the border in January 2005, orders from the government hadn't yet altered border protocol, and he was able to pass through.

Shin reaches the final checkpoint and offers the soldier some cigarettes and candy. The soldier points Shin toward the river, which is frozen, and tells him that people cross it all the time. Shin manages to cross the river, and when he reaches the north bank, he turns back and takes his last look at North Korea.

## CHAPTER 19: CHINA

Shin has just arrived in China. He walks away from the frozen river, toward a nearby village. He remembers what the migrant workers told him: there are lots of ethnic Koreans living near the border, some of whom might be able to give Shin a job. Shin eventually finds Koreans living near the border, but when he asks them for help, they yell at him and tell him to keep moving. He spends his first night in China asleep outside.

The next day, Shin continues to beg Korean locals for food or help; one man gives him two apples. Shin begins walking farther from the border, until eventually he reaches a Chinese pig farmer. The farmer offers Shin a hot meal and some rice. He explains that he's employed North Korean defectors in the past, and offers Shin a job and a bed. In the coming weeks, Shin lives more luxuriously than he ever has before: he eats roasted pork three times a day, he sleeps for as long as he likes, and the farmer treats his burns with antibiotics. When police officers come to the farm, the farmer vouches for him.

North Koreans have been migrating into China for hundreds of years, to the point where China's culture near the North Korean border is heavily Korean. North Koreans living in China are also largely responsible for the influx of foreign culture back into North Korea. In particular, they're responsible for smuggling South Korean DVDs into the country. These DVDs portray a wealthy, happy country—undoing decades of North Korean propaganda that suggested that South Korea was poor and repressed.

*North Korea's government has maintained its power over the last half-century because it's controlled its people's contact with China, South Korea, and the United States. However, in recent years, Korea has had no choice but to open its borders somewhat rather than risk mass starvation or a rebellion. In the 2000s, then, North Korea has had an ambivalent relationship with its border: sometimes tolerating a back-and-forth with China and sometimes forbidding it.*



*Because of persistence, ingenuity, and pure luck, Shin was finally able to escape North Korea—a notable success in his difficult life journey.*



*After he crossed into China, Shin's journey was far from over. He'd escaped from his police state, but he still had to find a way to survive in China and avoid being arrested and shipped back to his country. Though there were other North Korean defectors living in China at the time, clearly not all of them helped him.*



*Many of the North Korean defectors living in the area helped Shin, perhaps because they'd once been helped by others. By many people's standards, Shin's living conditions were Spartan, but, because he'd been living in far worse conditions for much longer, he accepted and even enjoyed his new life on the farm.*



*The passage emphasizes why the North Korean government has tried so hard to limit contact with foreign cultures: even something as simple as a South Korean DVD can undo huge expenditures of North Korean propaganda.*



Since the 1980s, China has been legally obligated to send North Korean defectors back to North Korea. Both China and North Korea have significant interest in keeping their populations separate: China doesn't want poor immigrants, and North Korea doesn't want defectors bringing foreign culture back home.

Shin's relationship with the pig farmer quickly sours. Shin finds two other North Korean defectors, and he asks the pig farmer to take care of them. The pig farmer obliges, but resents having to employ so many extra people. The farmer tells Shin that Shin will have to leave, and he offers to drive him to another job in the mountains. The farmer leaves Shin near a cattle ranch, but Shin quickly discovers that nobody on the ranch speaks Korean.

## CHAPTER 20: ASYLUM

For ten months, Shin lives on the ranch where the pig farmer left him. He works alongside two Chinese cowhands, neither of whom speak his language. Shin has no idea what to do next—Park had been in charge of planning the duo's time in China. However, during his time on the ranch, Shin's legs heal, he learns Chinese, and he grows healthier. He also begins listening to the radio, through which he learns stories about the food shortages in North Korea.

In North Korea, citizens are forbidden to listen to the radio. However, defectors smuggle radios from China into North Korea and sell them on the black market. Some defectors have since claimed that listening to the radio motivated them to leave North Korea in the first place. Shin loves listening to the radio because it feels good to hear Korean; however, because Shin has little to no experience with the world outside Camp 14, many radio broadcasts confuse him. He has nobody with whom to discuss the radio broadcasts, and as a result he becomes very lonely.

Toward the end of 2005, Shin decides to travel southwest, find some friendly Koreans, and get a stable job. He's essentially given up ever moving to South Korea. He collects some money from the ranch manager—much less than he expected—along with a map. Traveling away from the ranch, Shin meets many other North Korean defectors, and Shin realizes that he's not alone. Few people ask for his identification papers. He visits Korean churches and begs for work. Some pastors offer him money, but others tell him to go away.

*China's relationship with North Korea has always been shaky; however, it funded Kim Il Sung during the Korean War, and still works with North Korea to police the borders.*



*Notice that Shin goes out of his way to help the other North Korean defectors, even though his decision to do so ultimately hurts his own interests and results in his being banished from the farm. This might suggest that Shin has learned to act more magnanimously, empathetically looking out for people other than himself.*



*Shin's time on the ranch was useful, because he was able to feed himself, get healthier, and plan his future while learning to speak enough Chinese to get around. As he immersed himself in Chinese radio, Shin began to realize how corrupt and incompetent his own country's government really was.*



*Although Shin's life was, by any objective standard, getting better and better, he also faced new problems in his new situation: he had enough food and shelter to survive, but he had to contend with a crushing loneliness that he'd never felt—and, indeed, had never had the time to feel—before.*



*As before, Shin benefited from a robust network of Koreans living in China, many of whom had fled from the Kim dynasty themselves.*



Shin travels to Beijing, where he tries to find work in a restaurant, but doesn't succeed. However, he never panics—after a lifetime of hunger and cruelty, Shin knows that he'd never come as close to starving as he has in Camp 14. In February, Shin arrives in Hangzhou, where he finally succeeds in getting a restaurant job. He works long hours and soon has enough money for a bus ticket to Shanghai.

In Shanghai, Shin resumes his search for restaurant work. At one restaurant, he happens to meet a journalist who works for a major South Korean media company. The journalist asks him if he wants to go to South Korea. He tells Shin to get into a cab with him, and the cab takes them to the South Korean embassy. At the embassy, however, Shin begins to feel afraid. He sees police officers everywhere, and doesn't understand the concept of seeking asylum. Nevertheless, the journalist makes arrangements, and Shin continues to live in the consulate while he waits for his paperwork to be processed.

After living in the consulate for six months, Shin's papers come through, and the journalist arranges for him to travel to Seoul. There, the South Korean National Intelligence Service interview him about his time in North Korea. (One intelligence worker, Sergeant Matthew E. McMahon, later remembered Shin seeming fragile and traumatized.) McMahon pens a report based on Shin's descriptions of Camp 14, and he passes the report on to U.S. intelligence.

## CHAPTER 21: K'UREDIT K'ADUS

After he speaks with intelligence officials, Shin is sent to a "government-run resettlement center" near Seoul. There, he spends time talking with psychologists and teachers. At first, Shin has a fairly easy time adjusting to his new life outside Camp 14. He enjoys taking field trips to Seoul, and he is happy to receive identification papers making him a South Korean citizen. In classes, he learns about how North Korea launched an unprovoked attack on South Korea—the opposite of what generations of North Koreans have been brought up to believe.

After a month in his new home, Shin begins to have nightmares and traumatic flashbacks to the day of his mother's death. He begins to feel guilty for his role in her murder. Many North Korean defectors go through similar agony, Harden says—they get into fights, sleep badly, and develop paranoia. They find it difficult to trust others since, during their time in North Korea, they were trained to trust no one. Defectors are often dazzled by the wealth and complexity of South Korean life, not to mention the abundance of food.

*Shin kept a relatively clear head, recognizing that his life was getting better and better, even if he now faced a crippling sense of loneliness. As a result, he never seriously panicked.*



*Shin caught another lucky break when he ran into a journalist who wanted to bring him into South Korea and interview him about his time in North Korean prison camp. Had Shin not crossed paths with this journalist, it's likely that the world would never have heard Shin's story—so it also follows that there might be other people like Shin living anonymously in China right now.*



*Shin had survived his time in Camp 14 (or, as he later admitted, Camp 18), but he was weak and psychologically traumatized by what he'd experienced there. Meanwhile, Shin's reports about the state of life in the North Korean prison camps attracted attention within the U.S. government—although, as Harden emphasizes, this attention didn't result in any serious changes in U.S. policy.*



*The book doesn't go into much detail about what went on for Shin during his time in the government resettlement center—perhaps because Shin talked to confidential therapists and psychiatrists about his experiences in the camp. However, it's clear from the passage that Shin began to learn more and more about the North Korean state, and to realize the extent to which it used propaganda to control its citizens.*



*Psychologists have argued that human beings "advance" to increasingly abstract problems as they take care of all their material needs. For example, Shin only began to experience guilt and self-hatred for his mother's death after he'd escaped from the camp and attained a measure of control over his food and shelter.*



Shin continues to suffer from nightmares as his time in the resettlement center goes on. His physical health is fine, but his mental health is deteriorating. He spends more than two months in a psychiatric hospital, after which his nightmares begin to go away. Shin then begins working in a convenience store. He feels extremely lonely. He tries to locate his uncle, whose defection to South Korea resulted in Shin's father being sent to Camp 14, but Shin doesn't have much information on his uncle, and he quickly gives up his search.

Shin begins keeping a therapeutic diary at the recommendation of his counselor. The counselor encourages Shin to publish his diary, and Shin begins spending time at the Database Center, where he works on converting the diary in a memoir. At the Center, Shin meets human rights activists, who ask him hundreds of questions about his time in Camp 14. At first, some human rights activists refuse to believe that Shin has ever been at Camp 14—nobody has ever escaped from a North Korean labor camp and lived to tell about it.

In 2008, Shin is invited to tour the United States and speak about his experiences at Camp 14. During his travels, he learns a huge amount about North Korean history and culture, including the history of the Kim family dictatorship. He reads voraciously but refuses to ask his counselors or advisers for help. And although he travels around the world, he seems curiously unexcited by his new life.

## CHAPTER 22: SOUTH KOREANS ARE NOT SO INTERESTED

On Shin's 26th birthday, four of his friends take him to dinner at T.G.I. Friday's in Seoul. As simple as this event is, it is incredibly moving for Shin—nobody has ever celebrated his birthday before.

Birthday celebrations aside, Shin's time in Seoul is generally sad and lonely. He has a few friends, but he struggles to make money, and he is shy in social situations. Shin's situation is all-too common for North Korean defectors living in Seoul. Another defector, Kang Chol-hwan, lived in Seoul for many lonely years, until the release of his memoir, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*, was published in English, attracting the attention of President George W. Bush. Shin later tells Harden that "only .001 percent" of people care about North Korea in the slightest.

*Shin felt lost and lonely in his new home—he had no friends or family, and he had nobody with whom he could talk about his experiences in prison camp. As a result, it would seem, he quickly fell into a deep depression.*



*In retrospect, Shin's account of his early life is full of lies and distortions of the truth, which he only admitted much later. Even so, readers should be sympathetic to Shin: like so many trauma victims, he concealed the truth to protect himself from reliving his traumatic past.*



*In a way, this chapter marks the end of Shin's story of survival: he "succeeded" in escaping from the prison camp and finding food and shelter in the outside world. But of course, this is only the beginning of Shin's new struggle—to make sense of his own violent past and come to terms with his actions.*



*Shin had been raised in such miserable conditions that something as simple as a birthday celebration was an incredible luxury for him.*



*Shin was lonely in South Korea—a testament not only to his guilt, self-loathing, and alienation, but also to the general indifference to North Korean prison camps in South Korean society. One might think that North Korean suffering would trigger the sympathies of many neighboring South Koreans, but the passage gives the impression that even American politicians were more concerned with North Korean prison camps than South Koreans were.*



It's remarkable how indifferent the South Korean population has been to reports of brutality in North Korea. While there are many admirable human rights organizations in the country, a mere three percent of the country lists North Korea as a primary concern. North Korea mostly attracts attention in South Korea to the extent that it threatens South Korea militarily. South Korean politicians generally have aimed to maintain peace with North Korea, rather than start a war, though this has become increasingly challenging in recent years—North Korean bombings and missile attacks have killed hundreds of South Koreans in the last decade alone. Many South Koreans view the North Korean population as stupid, rude, and useless. Partly as a result, the suicide rate and unemployment rate for North Koreans living in South Korea is alarmingly high.

South Korean society is full of contradictions. Its economic prosperity has made it the envy of East Asia, but its suicide rate is nearly three times that of the United States. Depression is rampant in South Korea—one psychiatrist described it as “the dark aspect of our rapid development.” Furthermore, South Koreans differ widely in their opinions about how to deal with North Korea. In the early 2000s, President Kim Dae-Jung negotiated food shipments into North Korea, an act that won him the Nobel Peace Prize. But after 2008, with the election of President Lee Myung-bak, South Korea suspended nearly all aid. Lee and Kim were alike in one respect, however: their silence on the question of North Korean labor camps.

During their first meeting, Harden asks Shin about the camps. Shin, who's recently watched footage of the Nazi concentration camps, tells Harden that it's only a matter of time before the government tries to destroy the camps, and he hopes that America will be able to use its influence to liberate the camps. Shortly after his interview, Shin accepts an offer to work for Liberty in North Korea, an American nonprofit. He's decided that he wants to be a human rights activist.

## CHAPTER 23: U.S.A.

A few years after the events of the last chapter, Shin stands in front of a small audience in Los Angeles, speaking—as always—about Camp 14. As an employee of LiNK, Shin travels around the country speaking about his experiences. LiNK has encouraged Shin to speak in crisp, well-organized English, so that he can move as many people as possible. But Shin's speeches are poorly organized, and he has to use a translator to communicate with his audiences. His descriptions of Camp 14 are brief and detail-free—some people even find them boring.

*In many ways, the North Koreans living in South Korea are the victims of resounding indifference, not just their own traumatic pasts. If more South Koreans showed sympathy and compassion for their neighbors, then it's likely the rates of depression and suicide among North Korean defectors would be considerably lower (although, of course, there are also many complex reasons for this antagonistic relationship between North and South). The passage paints a bleak picture of humanity's capacity for empathy: it would seem that, by and large, the public can't be bothered to care about the pain of people who are unlike them.*



*In this passage, Harden challenges South Korean politicians' shameful silence on the issue of North Korean prison camps. The brutal reality is that, by and large, governments act in their own best interests—the result is that as awful as the prison camps may be, they haven't resulted in any concrete changes in foreign policy, either in the U.S. or in South Korea: the camps pose no danger to other countries, and therefore, other countries don't do much about them.*



*Shin realized what most foreign politicians continue to deny: one day, the North Korean government will destroy its own prison camps (much as the Nazis tried to destroy their concentration camps before the Allies could get to them). Motivated by a strong desire to help the camps' prisoners, Shin then became immersed in human rights issues.*



*As a human rights activist, Shin had one primary job: speaking honestly and emotionally about what he endured in Camp 14. However, Shin found it extremely difficult to do so—not just because he couldn't speak English well, but because he couldn't be honest with himself about what he'd done in Camp 14 (above all, betraying his own family), and in fact couldn't even say which prison camp he'd lived in. As a result, he shied away from delivering powerful speeches that could galvanize the public into action.*



Harden has asked Shin why he finds it so hard to talk about his life. Shin explains that he still has nightmares about his mother's death. When LiNK tries to convince him to go to therapy, he refuses. He also refuses to consider attending college. In general, his adjustment to life in America isn't easy. Doctors diagnose him with post-traumatic stress disorder. He struggles to understand money. He bonds with his LiNK coworkers, and says that he "loves" them. In general, however, Shin suffers from intense shame and self-loathing.

Shin begins living with a pastor's wife named Kyung Soon Chung, who cooks for him and essentially acts as his mother. He befriends Kyung's children, both in their twenties. Shin learns to love Kyung, and accept her love. He often asks her, "Why are you so nice to me?" and confesses that he's done horrible things during his time in Camp 14. Over time, however, he becomes more confident, and begins to embrace Christianity. He tries to study English, but quickly drops out of his program. His LiNK coworkers and supervisors say that he wasn't ready to adjust to a new life in the U.S.

California is one of the few places in America where a Korean can get by without speaking a word of English—there's a huge Korean population there. Shin learns enough English to get by in Los Angeles, but little more—he spends most of his time speaking Korean.

During Shin's second year in California, he meets Harim Lee, a young woman from Seoul who moved to Los Angeles with her family at the age of four. Harim worked as a translator for an NGO, and in the middle of college, she decided to join LiNK. She prayed that she'd get a chance to meet Shin. When they finally meet, they like each other right away. This creates a problem, though: LiNK refugees and interns aren't allowed to date each other. Shin and Harim ignore the rule, but Shin eventually decides to quit LiNK anyway. He quits partly because of the no-dating rule and partly because he feels his supervisors are expecting too much of him—he doesn't want to learn English. It's unclear what Shin wants to do with the rest of his life, or if he has any idea at all.

## EPILOGUE: NO ESCAPE

In February 2011, Shin flies to Washington State and moves in with Harim and her family. Harden, who lives in Washington, is surprised by this sudden move—he fears that Shin is burning bridges with LiNK for no reason. He invites Shin over for tea.

*Shin tried to adjust to his new life, but kept coming back to the same core problem: he couldn't respect himself knowing that he'd betrayed his mother and brother to their deaths—and it's entirely possible that he only survived the camps because he betrayed them. As a result, his friendships with his new coworkers could only go so far—he wasn't willing to open up too much with anyone else.*



*In the U.S., Shin found many people who treated him with love and compassion, including Kyung. And yet Shin found it difficult to accept that he was worthy of anybody else's time and affection—he had such a low opinion of himself that he couldn't understand why others would be kind to him.*



*Shin continued to hold himself at arm's length from other people: he didn't learn English, he didn't have many close friendships with other people, and—quite understandably—he didn't open up about his past.*



*Shin's relationship with Harim exemplifies many of the issues that continue to haunt him. As a member of LiNK, Shin's duty was to open up to other people about his time in prison camp. However, Shin clearly wasn't ready to do so—first, he had to learn to respect himself. So it makes a certain amount of sense that Shin would leave LiNK to pursue a relationship with Harim: before becoming a successful human rights activist, he had to prove to himself that he could love someone else and accept that person's love in return.*



*Harden seems to have suspected that Shin wasn't investing enough time in forging stable, long-term relationships with other people (i.e., his colleagues at LiNK)—perhaps because, in prison camp, he'd had essentially no stable, long-term relationships.*



Harden has conducted many interviews with Shin in preparation for their book. But Harden is still curious about Shin's life—in particular, he wants to know what Shin wants out of life. He asks to meet Harim's parents, but Harim and Shin make various excuses. Harden realizes that, more than anything else, Shin just wants Harden's "long interrogation" to end.

Harim and Shin form an NGO called North Korea Freedom Plexus. They raise money with the goal of building asylum shelters for North Korean defectors. On behalf of his NGO, Shin travels back to China. When Harden asks Shin if he's worried about being assassinated by North Korean soldiers, Shin claims that he is "always careful." He's become close with Lowell Dye and Linda Dye, the couple who paid for Shin's air travel to the U.S. The Dyes tell Harden that Shin sincerely loves Harim; however, Shin and Harim's relationship ends six months after they move in together.

Shin invites Harden to watch him give a speech at a Korean church in Seattle. There, Shin speaks about having been an informer at Camp 14, betraying his family, and even crawling over Park's dead body. Harden is struck by how emotionally Shin speaks—instead of allowing his self-hatred to silence him, he uses his feelings to speak out against the North Korean state. When Shin's speech ends, the entire church explodes in applause. "In that speech, if not yet in his life," Harden notes, "Shin had seized control of his past."

*In writing his book on Shin, Harden has confronted a series of ethical quandaries—not the least of which is the matter of whether or not he should even write it in the first place. By pressuring Shin to talk about his past, Harden could be said to be sacrificing Shin's happiness for a greater good, forcing him to relive the darkest times of his life. Furthermore, by encouraging Shin to say so much in such a short time, he may have pressured Shin to continue lying about his past, discrediting the entire account and the activist movement associated with it in the process.*



*Shin continued to crusade for North Korean prisoners; however, Harden suggests, he continued to feel a strong sense of self-loathing, as evidenced by his willingness to endanger himself in China (one could even argue that, on some level, Shin was trying to get caught and killed). Meanwhile, Shin ended his relationship with Harim. While the relationship may not have worked out for any number of reasons, Harden implies that Shin is still too fragile and self-hating to pursue a long-term romance with someone else.*



*While Harden is too realistic to end his book on a purely optimistic note, he suggests that, in the future, Shin might find a way to come to terms with his personal demons and become a brave crusader against the North Korean prison camp system. Shin clearly has both the capacity and the desire to speak out emotionally against the prison camp system—and if he can learn to love and forgive himself for what he did as a young, confused man, then he could become exactly the bold, courageous activist that North Koreans need.*





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