



From Hell With Love

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By: Jim Frederick

In January of 1965, Charles Robert Jenkins, a young sergeant in the U.S. Army, abandoned his patrol in South Korea and surrendered to the North, hoping to find a way home. His plan failed: Jenkins spent nearly 40 years in North Korea until the Japanese government negotiated his departure in 2004. In 1980, Jenkins had married Hitomi Soga, a Japanese woman abducted by North Korea, with whom he had two children, Mika and Brinda. They all now live in Japan. In this exclusive excerpt from his autobiography, Jenkins tells how he and Soga met and how he decided to leave North Korea.

THE COURTSHIP

In early 1980, my leaders told me that there would be a woman coming to live with me soon. But she was not a cook and she was not even Korean, though they called her by a Korean name, Min Hye-gyeong. They did not tell me she was Japanese at the time; only that she was Asian, and that they wanted me to teach her English. Her actual arrival did not come until months later. And even on the day she was finally to appear, she was still very late. That's because of the heavy rains that were coming down that made travel nearly impossible. The little bridge closest to my house had washed out, so they had to hook the 280 Mercedes they were driving to a bulldozer and pull it through the 5-m-wide river. Once they were crossing the river, the water came rushing into the car so high that the girl had to pull her feet up onto the seat and perch there like a bird. When they got to the top of the hill, they decided they could not chance driving down the steep, muddy lane that led to my house and chose to walk. But the girl was wearing high heels, so the leader ran ahead to my house to see if they could borrow a pair of my boots. He took a spare pair of leather boots I'd had for years and ran back up the hill to give them to her so she could come down safely.

Finally, on June 30, 1980 at about 10 p.m., there was a knock on my door. When I opened the door and Hitomi Soga walked in, my heart stopped. I didn't even notice the driver and the leader she was flanked by. I had never seen anybody so beautiful in my life. Just 21 years old, she was wearing a white blouse, a white skirt and white high-heel shoes. In those grubby, old surroundings, it was like she was from a dream or an entirely different planet.

She walked in and sat down with my leader and her leader. The four of us had a toast, including the always-required words of praise to Kim Il Sung, and we started talking. We were guarded, and it was awkward. She was especially spooked, since they did not tell her that she was going to

a foreigner's house until she was at the top of the hill. She figured she was going to live with another Japanese girl, or at least a Japanese man. And this was North Korea, after all, where you learn real early not to trust anyone right off the bat. I didn't know much about the abductees, I had heard only rumors, so I figured that even if she were Japanese, which she said within the first few minutes, she could be a true believer, that she must have gone there by her own choice or her family's choice, to study Juche, Kim Il Sung's homegrown communist philosophy of national self-reliance, or something. The leaders left at 11:30 p.m., although I am sure one of them stayed up listening to us. Hitomi's Korean was good, a lot better than mine, and that made me a little suspicious. At that point, who knew who she could have been? She could have been a spy herself.

That first night we stayed up until 3 a.m. talking. Mostly it was small talk about how difficult her trip in the rain had been, where she had traveled from, things like that. As the hours passed and it grew late, I noticed that she was yawning frequently. I asked her if she was tired. She said yes, but she didn't make a move to lie down, even though she was sitting on my bed. I could tell that she was scared that I was going to try to take advantage of her. I tried to reassure her by showing her the extra bedding I had laid down in the corner of the other room. I told her that I would be sleeping in there from now on, and that the bed was hers. She must have been exhausted and relieved, because when she heard that her head hit the pillow, and she was deep asleep within minutes.

Although I was supposed to be teaching her English, both Hitomi and I knew that the Organization wanted us to get married. A man and a woman didn't get thrown together like that unless marriage was part of the plan. Even though our entire courtship wound up taking only a few weeks, the Organization did not force this marriage like they routinely forced marriages between foreigners (and North Koreans, for that matter) in the past. I don't know why, exactly, but I imagine it's because they figured there was no way they could make a young, beautiful woman like Hitomi be with a 40-year-old coot like me unless she really wanted to.

That first week, Hitomi barely came out of her room. She was very shy. In retrospect, she was probably very scared too. I didn't have a cook anymore, so while she was being her most shy, I did most of the cooking. One day I would bring her cabbage soup and rice. The next day, I would bring her rice and cabbage soup. "The same thing, every meal!" she soon started to exclaim. It was true. I'm not much of a cook now, and I was even less of one then. Cabbage soup was about all I could make. One thing I did learn to make over the years, though, is kimchi: I can make the best kimchi you have ever eaten.

At the time, one of my regular tasks was to transcribe English-language radio broadcasts into Korean for the cadres, so I had a Korean-made radio and a tape recorder in my bedroom that I didn't even have to hide. One day that first week, I went into the bedroom and turned on NHK, the Japanese public-radio station, for her. Her eyes got as big as headlights and she started shaking. "You can't do that," she said. "They're gonna kill us! They will cut our heads off!" I said to her that this is my house, and even in North Korea, I'll do as I please. But she never really

believed me. She turned the radio off as soon as I walked out of the room, and she never touched it again.

In as many ways that I could think of, I tried to make her as comfortable as possible. I would bring her cider and small sweets when she was studying in her room alone. Soon we started playing cards. Blackjack was the only game I knew how to play well, so we played endless games of blackjack. And we smoked. A lot. In that first month, we must have gone through 90 packs of cigarettes. One time while we were playing cards alone, I said to her that I had heard that a number of Japanese had been kidnapped and brought there against their will. Without saying a word, she pointed to her nose, to indicate: "I am one of them." Before long, she had told me her whole story. On August 12, 1978, Hitomi and her mother, Miyoshi, went shopping at a small grocery shop and general store down the street from their house. They lived in a town called Mano on Sado, a small island off the west coast of Honshu. It is a very beautiful place, but very isolated, so much so that in feudal times political prisoners were frequently banished there. Hitomi, the eldest of two daughters, was studying to be a nurse. On that day, it was around dusk. The mother and daughter had bought ice cream, among other items, and they were walking home when three men jumped them from behind. That was the last time Hitomi ever saw her mother. To this day, nobody knows what happened to her. The man who grabbed her threw Hitomi over his shoulder like a sack of coal and carried her to a small skiff under a bridge. The boat chugged about an hour out to sea, where Hitomi was picked up and carried onto a larger boat and put down in the hold. Within a few more days, she was in Pyongyang.

After a few weeks of getting thrown in and out of different guesthouses, Hitomi was finally placed with Megumi Yokota. Yokota is a Japanese abductee who was snatched by North Koreans on her way home from badminton practice from her home city of Niigata in late 1977, when she was only 13. For about 18 months, my wife and Megumi were roommates in a small house in central Pyongyang. Back then, according to my wife, the two girls did little else than study Korean language and Juche philosophy. Hitomi says that during the time they spent together, Megumi, who was only 15 at the time, was horribly homesick and cried a lot. Since they had only each other, it should be no surprise that they became best friends. Years later, we learned that Megumi had named her own daughter Hye-gyeong, which was my wife's Korean name. Hye-gyeong is a fairly common name in Korea, but I doubt this was a coincidence. I am certain that Megumi named her daughter after her best friend, my wife.

Around the second or third week Hitomi and I were together, I started teaching her English. Hitomi knew her A-B-Cs, but not much more than that. So we started just with writing, penmanship. But she kept holding the pencil like a calligraphy brush. I would try to correct her form by putting my arm over hers and my writing hand over hers. At first, she was having none of that, flinching at the very touch. But over the next few weeks, as she got more comfortable with me, and more comfortable with my instruction, she would let me teach her this way, with my arm and hand moving hers on how to make the strokes. Not long after that, during a similar lesson, I was teaching her a new word, my hand and arm on hers, my cheek right up close to hers. I turned to look at her, and she turned into me, and we kissed.

I don't know what it was that drove us together. On the face of it, we had very little in common. I do know that we were very lonely in a world where we were total outsiders. And it took us a very short time to realize that we both hated North Korea. One of the leaders, one of the few I ever liked very much, summed a lot of it up in a conversation he had with me during those early weeks with Hitomi. He said, "You and she don't seem like it, but you are actually the same. You both have nothing here. Together, you would each at least have something." I thought what he said was very true. It wasn't much longer after that that I started asking her to marry me on an almost daily basis.

One of those first few weeks after we became a couple, we went to the Pyongyang Shop. Now, I had been going there for years, so when the shop girls saw me walk in with this young, beautiful woman, they could not believe it. Hitomi told me later that she was embarrassed at first, and that early on she found it difficult to be with me. Not because I was old or because of how I looked, but because I was a Western man. She had never seen one before me other than on the television or in movies. She didn't know how to act around me and she was self-conscious about what other people thought. In time, as we fell in love and she became more comfortable with me than with anyone else, she simply decided that she didn't care what anyone else thought. That day at the Pyongyang Shop I told her I would buy her anything she wanted. She chose an umbrella, which, considering the rain-soaked day she showed up on my doorstep, was something she needed.

Not long after that she said yes, she would marry me. I walked down to the police station, the only place with a phone. I rang up the Organization and said, "Come quick, it's an emergency." They came rushing and said, "What is it? What is it? Where is she?" They thought at first that she had run away. I said, "Set a date, Hitomi and I are getting married." They could not believe it. They could not believe that someone like her would agree to marry someone like me. "How did you do it?" they asked. I said it was no big mystery. Number one, I was nice to her and gave her the first of everything. I lit her cigarettes, I gave her the best food, I made her furniture and I gave her gifts. Number two, I told the cadres to get the hell out of the way so that we could actually get to know each other better. And number three, I told her the truth. I told her that she needed me. I told her that we needed each other, and I assured her that I could protect her.

One day not long before the wedding, we decided to play cards after we had finished dinner. I was out of writing paper, so I ripped the white inside lining out of the pack of Keul-rak-sae cigarettes I was smoking and told her to make a scorecard out of that. She was hunched over the table writing on the paper for a minute or two and started giggling. "What are you laughing about?" I asked her. "How could there be anything funny about a scorecard?" Still giggling, she got up, turned around and ran into her bedroom. I unfolded the piece of paper she had left and it said, in English, "I love you." I got up and went into her room. "Is this true?" I asked. She nodded. I said, okay, if you mean it and this is still true in the morning, give me the note again then. I left the note on her bed and shut the door behind me. Usually, Hitomi was never able to move around the house without me waking up. It was small, and for her to get anywhere to get outside to go to the bathroom, for example she had to go through my room first. For the first time

I knew of, however, she was able to successfully sneak into and out of my room, because when I woke up the next morning, there the note was, sitting on my pillow.

Our wedding was on August 8, 1980, just 38 days after we first met. There was no real ceremony to speak of. During the day we went into Pyongyang to have our picture taken and in the evening we had a celebration dinner at home. The food was nothing special, to be honest. Pig's feet, dumplings, rice and cabbage. The biggest accomplishment of the day, however, was that with some flour, eggs and sugar, we managed to improvise a wedding cake. We first took about 10 eggs and 230 g of sugar, put them in a bowl, and beat them for 20 or 30 minutes until it all began to foam and froth. Then we added 230 g of flour, stirring real slowly. We lined a pan with a kind of heavy butcher paper as usual, we didn't have enough oil to line the pan with and poured the mixture into it. We didn't have an oven, so we set the pan in a boiling pot of water so it floated like a boat. Then we covered the pot and let it cook for about 40 minutes. We pulled the pan out, let it cool, and then cut and pulled the paper away. It was drier than hell, and there was no icing, but that was our wedding cake.

I had saved up about 600 or 700 won, so I was able to buy a nice bottle of cognac for the wedding. Our leader, chief of staff, an old cook, the political commissioner, the political commissioner's aide and their driver all attended our wedding celebration dinner. My wife wore a traditional Korean dress that night, and she looked radiant. She wrote vows in the Korean language and I read them. I wish I could say they were all that romantic or as beautiful as the poetry she now sometimes writes in Japanese, but since this was North Korea, most of it had to be so much party bullshit: how we would live as a family for the greater benefit of the nation and the party and the people and the Great Leader. We also had to sing a song glorifying Kim Jong Il. At that time we didn't care it was propaganda, we were just happy to be singing.

Soon after we were married, my wife bought a bottle of sake from the Pyongyang Shop. It was big, and it was the good stuff, so it was very expensive. It was a treat and a treasure to sip that sake, and my wife and I made that bottle last for months and months. Every day or two we would have a little bit, but we savored it, so we would pour each other just the smallest of sips. I loved the pale, cold taste, and to this day sake is my favorite drink. Once the sake was gone, I used that bottle to hold cooking gas and it sat out on the balcony of our apartment for years afterward. I liked having that bottle around because it was an artifact from the days that our marriage had just begun and it was a piece of Japan, the homeland that my wife so desperately longed for, here in our house.

Knowing how badly my wife missed Japan, it wasn't long after we were married that I asked her what the Japanese word for "good night" was. Thereafter, every night before we went to bed, I would kiss her three times, and tell her "*Oyasumi*." Then she would say back to me, "Good night," in English. It became a ritual from which we never varied. We always wished each other a pleasant night's sleep in the other's native language. We did this so we would never forget who we really were and where we came from. Even though we were in love and thankful to be

together, we did this to remind ourselves that this place was not really our home, and that no matter what happened, she was still Japanese, and I was still American.

In a meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi in September 2002, Kim Jong Il admitted for the first time that North Korea had kidnapped Japanese citizens. The next month, Soga and four other Japanese abductees were flown to Japan for a visit. After Soga did not return, Jenkins was told that his wife was being held captive. Jenkins feared he would be imprisoned by the U.S. if he went to Japan. In 2004, Koizumi broke the deadlock.

MEETING KOIZUMI

On the morning of May 22, Mika, Brinda and I were picked up by a high cadre from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and taken to an old country house of Kim Jong Il's about 20 km outside of Pyongyang. That's where we were to meet with Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi.

We arrived at about 9 a.m., three hours early, and were taken into a big waiting room, where there was fruit on a silver platter and lots of soft drinks on a side table. Just before noon, someone announced that Koizumi had arrived. He came in with an entourage of about seven or eight people. No North Koreans came into the room. They waited just outside with the larger contingent of Japanese. Koizumi walked in and I shook his hand. I told him it was a great honor to meet him. He sat down across from me and my daughters. There was a note-taker in the corner, two translators at Koizumi's side and a couple of other Japanese diplomats hanging around the edges of the room.

Then we launched in on what turned out to be a pretty testy debate. Remember that my family and I were still operating under the assumption that Hitomi was being held in Japan against her will. We had none of the information that the rest of the world considered common knowledge. I had no understanding about how hard my wife was working on my behalf and how strongly all of Japan had rallied to her cause of reuniting her family. Every day now, I thank God for my wife, the Japanese people and the Japanese government, and I know I am a free man because of them. Today, I have nothing but the highest respect, admiration and gratitude for everything Koizumi has done for me and my family, persevering on our behalf even when it was politically risky for him to do so. But at that time, I was madder than hell at him.

As he sat down, Koizumi reached into his briefcase and handed me a letter written by my wife. I took it but did not open it right away. "You know why I am here, don't you?" he asked. "Yeah," I said, "you are here because you have my wife." Mika is a feisty one and she jumped in almost immediately, asking, "Why haven't you let her come back like you promised?" Koizumi said, "I could never send her back to a country that had stolen her in the first place." "But this is where her home and her family are," she said. Koizumi responded, "I am here because I am trying to reunite her with her family." While Mika and Koizumi and were fighting, I was able to read my wife's letter. In it, she told me to think very hard before making my decision, but she thought I should come with Koizumi.

I thought about the letter as I refolded it, and at the time I pondered how much of it had been coerced, or if she was just saying what she knew Japan wanted to hear. I told Koizumi that my wife was kidnapped right now, in Japan. Koizumi said that was not true. "She does not want to come back to North Korea," he said. "She wants you to come to Japan." I told him that if I went back with him, then I was going to go to jail for a very long time a prospect I was not too happy about. Koizumi told me that he could not promise anything, but that he would do everything in his power to ensure I would receive fair and compassionate treatment from the U.S.

At that point, one of his men passed him a note, which he read. He then ripped a piece of paper from a small notebook of his own. Looking at the note he had been passed, he wrote a new one in his own hand. He then passed me the note he had written across the table. It said, in English, "The Prime Minister of Japan will assure you that he will do the utmost that you can live together happily with Mrs. Jenkins in Japan." I read it, folded it, put it in my jacket pocket, and did not say a word.

Following this, Koizumi said, "Kim Jong Il has said you can go." Mika piped up again. "Is that really true?" she challenged. Koizumi assured us it was. Throughout the whole meeting, Brinda didn't say a word. I was glad, because the thing she was most likely to say was, "Let's go to Japan!" and that would have caused all kinds of trouble. The North Koreans originally told us we would have about 10 minutes with Koizumi, but the whole conversation wound up taking an hour. At the end of it, I told him that I appreciated all of his efforts, and he certainly gave me a lot of new stuff to think about, but there was simply no way that we were going to be able to go with him to Japan that day.

Realizing we had hit the end, he signaled for one of his people to come over and introduce a new topic. "There is one more thing we could try," said this Japanese diplomat. "Would you be willing to meet your wife in a third country, maybe China, in a little while, where you could all discuss further what, as a family, you would like to do?" I said yes, that sounded like a very good idea, let's do that. As we were parting, the Japanese gave us a few gifts: a disk of cartoon videos for the girls, an inspirational book in English about a Japanese who overcomes adversity despite being born without any arms and legs, and a carton of Mild Seven cigarettes for me.

As we were walking out, I told Koizumi that I loved Japan when I visited Yokohama in 1960 and 1961. He threw up his hands in celebration, as if to say, "That's great!" Through his interpreter, he said that he was sorry it didn't work out this time, but he held out hope that I would be able to come to Japan someday. I said, "We shall see."

After that, they moved me back to a guesthouse as everybody tried to arrange the meeting with Hitomi. Word got back that my wife wouldn't do the meeting in China. Someone suggested Singapore.

I said no way, since I thought it was too close an ally of the U.S. Finally, someone said, "How about Indonesia?" Indonesia sounded like a fine choice to me.

During this time, Brinda was already bugging me to leave and not come back. Whenever we were alone, she would tug on my arm and say, "Let's go. Let's get out of here. Let's go to Japan." I would always tell her to be quiet, that she couldn't say such things out loud. Mika was different. She believed more of the propaganda back then. I don't know why, but she was a bit more indoctrinated at that point, so I had to be careful about what I said around her.

I tried to prepare for both possibilities. I had to make it look like I was coming back, yet also be ready if we didn't. The trick was to bring things that were important but didn't look important. In the end, all I was really able to bring were my wedding license and a few dozen photographs. The night before we left, I had dinner with a high cadre at guesthouse in Pyongyang. He gave me five bottles of ginseng liquor to give away as gifts, a carton of Marlboro cigarettes and \$2,000 cash in U.S. dollars. The next morning they woke me and my daughters and we paid our respects to the giant statue of Kim Il Sung. We then went to the airport and got on the Boeing 767. Onboard, there were Japanese and Korean government people. They had set up a smoking section about mid-way back of the plane. One of the Japanese diplomats said it was a special concession for the chain-smoking Koreans. About halfway through the flight, I was smoking and one of the leaders joined me. "It will be good to see your wife," he said. "Yes, it will," I said. "You have a lot of family in Japan," he said. "I suppose I do," I said. "It is good to have family," he said. "Yes, I suppose it is," I said. I didn't know exactly where he was heading with this, but I had a feeling. The ashtray was a plastic cup half-filled with water. As he leaned over to drop the butt into the cup, he said to me very quietly, "If you don't come back, there is nothing we can do."

Once we touched down in Jakarta, my wife was there on the tarmac, along with throngs of media. She met me on the stairs of the plane and, as I stumbled down the steps, I fell into her arms and she planted a big kiss on me. I was a little surprised, but not as much as I have been told the Japanese were, who it seems found this extreme display of affection a little shocking. As a joke these days, she denies she did this, saying that I grabbed her, but my daughters always interject, "Mama, that's a lie! They have pictures! The whole world saw it! You grabbed him!" The bus ride into the city took two hours. I did not wait long before getting down to business with my wife. We sat side by side, not looking at each other while we talked. "Why didn't you want to have this meeting in China?" I asked. "If we met in China," she said, "I may have been sent back to North Korea." So I asked, "You don't want to go back to North Korea?" "No," she said quietly but firmly. "But I thought you did," I said. "The Organization told me that you have been trying and wanting to come back this whole time." "Gae-so-ri," she said. "That is dog talk." Well, I thought, that's it, then. The decision has been made. We are not going back.