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North Korea's Princess:

The Strange Life and Dangerous Future of Kim Yo-jong



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Glossary of Names (detailed as relevant):

The Kim Family

Kim Il-sung = Grandfather – ‘Great Leader’

Kim Jong-il = Father – ‘Dear Leader’

Song Hye-rim = Actress – First Mistress

Kim Yong-suk = Wife to Kim Jong-il

Ko Yong-hui = Dancer – Second Mistress – Mother to Kim Yo-jong

Kim Ok = Last Mistress and Personal Secretary

Jang Song-taek = Uncle (By marriage to Kim Kyong-hui)

Kim Kyong-hui = Aunt (Kim Jong-il’s Sister)

Kim Jong-nam = Eldest Son – Son to Song Hye-rim (First Mistress)

Kim Sul-song = Eldest Daughter – Daughter to Kim Yong-suk (Wife)

Kim Jong-chol = Second Eldest Son – Eldest Son to Ko Yong-hui (Second Mistress) – ‘Pak-chol’ or ‘Chol-pak’ (Alias in Switzerland)

Kim Jong-un = Third Eldest Son – Second Son to Ko Yong-hui (Second Mistress) – Ruler of North Korea – ‘Pak-un’ or ‘Un-pak’ (Alias in Switzerland)

***** Kim Yo-jong = Youngest Daughter – Daughter to Ko Yong-hui (Second Mistress) – ‘North Korea’s Princess’ – Pak Mi-hyang (Alias in Switzerland)**

Others

Ri Sol-ju = Wife of Kim Jong-un

Choe Song = Husband of Kim Yo-jong – Son of Choe Ryong-hae

Choe Ryong-hae = Vice Chairman of the Workers’ Party of Korea – Vice Chairman of the State Affairs Commission – Director of the Organization Guidance Department

Ri Jae-il = Member of Kim Jong-il’s Personal Secretariat – Previous Director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department

Kim Ki-nam = Former Vice-chairman of the Workers’ Party of Korea – Former Director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department

Ri Yong-mu = Vice-Marshall of the Korean Peoples’ Army – Vice Chairman of the National Defence – Married to Kim Il-sung’s Sister

Choe Hwi = Deputy-Director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department

Kim Yong-nam = Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Peoples’ Assembly

Through it all she must have loved him. It is, after all, hard to *really* hate a parent.

From the Gobi desert, humidity had been growing for weeks, stretching from China, across the Yellow Sea, the Bay of Korea, and into an early Pyongyang winter. Further north, cold, dry Siberian air, running east across the tundra from Lake Baikal, suddenly changed direction and flowed down into the Korean peninsula. The two atmospheres crashed together on the 28th of December, 2011, as a three hour funeral procession was snaking its way toward the Kumsusan Memorial Palace. The lead car, an imported Lincoln Continental carried a massive passport-style photograph of the dead man, the next car only a wreath of flowers. All the action was further back. Enclosed by a military escort, was a single black vehicle with matching black coffin balanced on the roof.

The eight people walking with the casket, struggling into the blizzard, included an army chief, political leader, a military general, a party secretary, a member of the State Security Department, the Chairman of the Peoples' Assembly, and an uncle by marriage. Of course her brother was there too, but Kim Yo-jong was forced to watch from the sidelines as the business of mourning her father was taken away from her. At a ceremony before the funeral convoy began moving toward Kim Il-sung Square, she stood, arms flat to her sides, on the edge of the stage, sandwiched between a state premier and a munitions official. And when, finally, she was allowed her moment, when the body had returned to the palace (doubling as a mausoleum), Yo-jong was once again relegated to obscurity, walking tourist-like around the roped-off velvet perimeter; just another face in a long line of bureaucrats. She was 24 years old at the time.



(Kim Yo-jong at her Father's Funeral)

Dictators are almost always incorrigible womanizers. The Dear Leader of North Korea, Kim Jong-il, was no different. Jong-il was noticeably shorter than his father, the Great Leader, and had a strange sense of fashion that saw him return to wearing – outdated even by North Korean standards – monochromatic, Mao-styled jumpsuits. More often than not pairing these drab grey outfits with women's designer sunglasses, his emasculation and effeminacy were never hidden. A life lived in the shadows of a loud, gregarious father, seemed to have squeezed his personality tight; leaving no place for any meaningful form of self-expression, and certainly none for anything recognisable as charisma. The shadow of the Great Leader bore down so heavily upon the Dear Leader that through 18 years in charge of North Korea – as an unchallengeable demi-god ruling over a population trained to see him as their final defender against an aggressive outside world – he only found the courage to

speak publically on one occasion. Instead he looked inward, finding satisfaction in wealth, toys and sex.

Today some of this legacy lives on. The ‘pleasure squad’ – a harem of teenage prostitutes – still lingers in the hallways of the presidential palaces as a fairly unguarded secret. But a pregnant mistress is something more; the dishonour is more difficult to ignore. Before Jong-il married Kim Yong-suk, he already had an heir to the throne. Kim Jong-Nam – later to become a chubby, cartoonish playboy, exiled to China and beyond – was born to Song Hye-rim, a relatively successful North Korean actress (she would later die in exile). But in Korean tradition, families – specifically fathers – choose brides. Hye-rim just wasn’t marriage material. Instead the daughter of a high-ranking military official, a real member of Pyongyang’s elite, was handpicked. Kim Yong-suk became first-lady to the North Korean state, and soon gave birth to a daughter Kim Sul-song. As arranged marriages go, it was typical – business-like. The Dear Leader didn’t have a say in the marriage, but as always he did control the direction of his sex-life. Quickly estranged, and shuttled overseas with her daughter (Kim Sul-song lives in Paris to this day), Yong-suk would die knowing that her memory would be moved into the background, as her husband, then with a new mistress, Ko Yong-hui – a dancer at the Mansudae Art Troupe – began building a structure of inheritance around three new children. The eldest, a boy, Kim Jong-chol, seems to have caught the same affliction as the first son, Jong-nam. After Jong-chol returned from boarding school in Switzerland, he wasn’t the same person. His mind was on music, romance, and the outside world (as seems to be the custom, he is now also living out his days in exile; occasionally popping up at Eric Clapton concerts around Europe). The next child had been to the same school in Switzerland, at the same time as his older brother, but had returned ruthless, determined, and importantly, nostalgic for his nation. When the Dear Leader was announced dead to the weeping masses, state media was quick to point out that his son, Kim Jong-un, was now the “*Great Successor*”ⁱ. Behind this mess, she walked. Young, and the wrong gender to be considered a threat to the throne, Kim Yo-jong, the last child of the Dear Leader, watched as her family convulsed around her; twisting, fighting, exiling and assassinating.



(Kim Jong-chol at school in Switzerland)

As grandfathers tend to be, Kim Il-sung – from whom all this chaos trickled-down – was a traditionalist. As the head of the family, and also – as he saw it – the standard bearer for all Korean culture, the Great Leader found the last crop of bastard children hard to stomach. So Kim Yo-jong was ostracised from birth, shuttled away with her mother and two brothers to a residence on Changgwang Hill. She was still in central Pyongyang, and had impressive views of the city. To the west was the People’s Palace of Culture; North she could gaze up a tributary to the Pothong river, past the perpetually under-construction, triangular, Ryugyong hotel and catch sight of the USS Pueblo floating as a tourist attraction to celebrate its 1968 capture and the ‘defeat’ of the

Americans; but it was to the East that meaning could be found. The Mansudae Art Theatre, the old stomping ground where her mother had first caught the eye of her father, dominated the view; a gift of sorts to a dancer-come-mistress, who was then sitting out her days – children in tow – in what was luxury; but still, unmistakably, a prison. The captives all knew when the doors of their cell would open, and when they would be welcomed back into Pyongyang's elite – they were waiting for their grandfather to die.

Kim Jong-il was himself an eldest son. And he knew what importance it held, he knew that it was down to this chance event that the North Korean state would fall to him; an extravagant gift of inheritance. Importance falls downward, in Korean society, from this pinnacle. Second son, third son etc. Then first daughter, second daughter, and so it goes. There is no place in all of this for the off-shoot, illegitimate family. (Though Kim Jong-Nam, as eldest son to Jong-il, faced similar isolation and secrecy; he was, after all, also illegitimate). They are an embarrassment that needs to be kept as quiet as possible. Lucky for Kim Yo-jong, her father, Jong-il, had a soft spot for his final generation of children; often seen cooing over his young daughter, calling her his "*sweet, sweet Yo-jong*" and "*Princess*"ⁱⁱ. Where house arrest is considered too cruel, and when assassination out of the question, the Kim dynasty has a tried-and-tested back-up plan for dealing with problematic family members – send them overseas.

It started in the early 1990's, with meandering vacations to China, Japan and Europe. As nice as it must have been to make their own choices, including removing the dress uniforms of the Korean Peoples' Army that they were often forced to wear, it was clearly, also, an unpleasant experience. Anyone that has ever tried their hand at extended travel, and knows the adventure of it, the freedom in every moment, also knows the deep loneliness of it all. The mind, suddenly loose from routine, tends to focus inward; you think, you doubt, you romanticise. It can be a hell. Her mother likely saw this in the three children, and the nomadic experiment was soon over. A longer term solution was needed. One-by-one, gradually the children were sent to the Swiss mountains, to an isolated, and unmistakably elite, boarding school near Bern – the 'International School of Bern'. Jong-chol tested the waters, and by all accounts loved the experience. He played soccer and basketball, tasted western culture, learnt German, French and English; and importantly found friends with whom he could relate (the children of other wealthy, dysfunctional families). And soon enough, their Grandfather, the Great Leader, was dead. But what he left behind was famine, and a period of unparalleled suffering and social upheaval. Their father, Kim Jong-il, was now in power, but was also in no position to start pushing through any changes that might make him seem like something other than a traditionalist. He needed the regime, still loyal to the dead man, to believe, at least for the time being, that the son was a second coming of the Great Leader. Kim Jong-un waited two years for this to play-out; as Jong-chol was finding himself in the Bernese Alps, his little brother's arrival was delayed by the 1994 leadership transition, and the uncertainty of it all. Waiting for an indication that their fortunes would change, that the Dear Leader would assert himself and bring his family in from the cold, soon grew tiresome. So in 1996, Jong-un flew out to join his brother. Yo-jong, four years younger than Jong-un, enrolled only six months later. From their new Swiss homes, the three siblings waited; expecting a message, a clear signal that they could finally return to Pyongyang, and step out of the shadows.

But when the two younger siblings arrived in Switzerland, they found an older brother who wasn't too keen to see them. After three years by himself, going by an alias of 'Pak-chol' or 'Chol-pak', big brother Jong-chol had fought through early shyness, made a loyal group of friends, and had even managed to largely jettison the hulking bodyguard who was tasked with keeping him safe. Having found a niche for himself, and managing to convince those around him that he was the son of a South Korean *Chaebol* family (large business conglomerate) and not a brutal dictator, Jong-chol saw the arrival of his little brother, renamed for the purpose as 'Pak-un' or 'Un-pak', to be a problem; a monstrous cramp on his style. By the time that Yo-jong – under the alias Pak Mi-hyang – turned up, it had already been played-out. Instead of attending the International School of Bern, she instead joined Jong-un at 'Liebefeld-Steinhölzli'ⁱⁱⁱ. It was a similarly elite school, and was still in Bern,

but had the benefit of being nowhere close to Jong-chol. Lonely, and again cruelly discarded by his own family, Jong-un found in his little sister a safety net, a source of comfort and loyalty that he struggled to find elsewhere. Unlike Jong-chol, the younger siblings had in each other someone they could always fall back on, and find company, friendship and security. As nice as this sounds, it is also what stops people taking risks, trying new things and making new friends. Yo-jong and her needy older brother, Jong-un, spent nearly four years together studying in the Alps – they lived out of the nearby North Korean embassy, kept their bodyguards close, and made little effort to make the most of this rare opportunity to experience a new life. Together in their emotional isolation, they became inseparably close. Through this, a guilty father would send them regular presents from home – dancers and musicians to entertain and ease the boredom. The only trips that Yo-jong seems to have made during this time were to meet her mother in other parts of Switzerland – and occasionally France – who was then being treated for a fairly aggressive form of breast cancer.



(Earliest Known Picture of Kim Yo-jong)

In 2000, it was over. Yo-jong, along with Jong-un, returned to Pyongyang not because they graduated, but because they were ordered back. The famine was over and their father felt more secure in himself, but he had a problem. The eldest son, Kim Jong-nam, more interested in women, riches and fame, was spending very little time back in North Korea, and showing very little interest in taking over the country (or at least ruling in the same way as his father and grandfather). Kim Yong-chol had caught a similar affliction. The life he had made for himself, of close friendships, music, and travel, was soon the only life he wanted. The thought of returning to the stultifying, hierarchical North Korea was anathema to all that he had become. The eldest sister, and only legitimate child, Kim Sul-song, had moved to France ‘to study’ along with her mother (increasingly slighted by her husband), and had never returned. It was suddenly all down to Kim Jong-un – a nation that had never accepted him, suddenly had its arms open, pleading for his homecoming. And where he went, his loyal sister followed.

But once back in Pyongyang, she was on her own. Her brother, then nearly 18, was shuttled off to Kim Il-sung University, where, now surrounded by students forced to adore him and desperate for his favour, he settled into a groove that escaped him in Switzerland. Yo-jong was only 14, and due to her interrupted schooling had only completed the international equivalent of the sixth grade.

Torn away from her brother, Yo-jong falls off the map, both inside and outside North Korea. Very little is known about her during the next few years. She attends secondary school in Pyongyang, and after a few years alone to think things over, seems to have developed a taste for the family business. This is at least according to her father, Kim Jong-il, who bragged to international visitors in 2002 that his younger daughter was fascinated by diplomacy and politics, and that he saw her pursuing a career within his country's politburo. She likely didn't finish secondary school, but moved on to university nonetheless.

It is often said that nothing matures a child more than the death of a parent, and so it seemed to go for Yo-jong. In 2004, the breast cancer finally overcame her mother. With so few close friends or family in her life, this must have come as a knife slash in time. And for a period afterwards, she seems to have been tempted towards the dilettantism of her two eldest brothers, Kim Jong-nam and Kim Jong-chol, enrolling in sporadic and unrelated coursework at a still undisclosed western European university. This was a very brief flirtation; her heart just wasn't in it. Before long she was back in Pyongyang, and with a new independence, of sorts. Instead of following her brother into Kim Il-sung University, North Korea's elite institution, Yo-jong instead chose to attend Kim Il-sung Military University in Mangyongdae-guyok; the outer limits of northern Pyongyang. Only begrudgingly returning to Kim Il-sung University in order to take certain computer science courses that were unavailable at the Military College. It is hard to grasp just what these years were like for her, or what plans she was building for herself, but she re-emerged publically in 2007 as a seemingly committed member of her father's regime. Holding relatively minor positions within the ruling party, it was plausible that Yo-jong was building toward a political career in her own right, that she had found passion during her university days, and was then set on living it out. If this were true, then it all came crashing down in 2008 when her father, Kim Jong-il, an unhealthy specimen of a man – spending most of his time in bed or drinking imported liquor – suffered two ischemic strokes, only months apart. And suddenly, it was on!

To pass down the leadership of a business or company, from family member to family member, is always a dangerous exercise. Hierarchies build over time, people develop skills and prove their worth, all with the incentive of promotion. The decision to parachute in a relative, simply because they are a relative, sends a booming message through the organisation. Previously held incentive structures are over, the highest position is now never achievable, and the highly talented will likely be governed by, and will need to ingratiate themselves to, their inferiors. To muddy the process further, Korea still holds some residual hangovers from its Confucian heritage, meaning that the more senior someone is (in age and experience), the more deserving they are of reward and respect. This becomes ever more problematic when the organisation in question is a nation, and the position at the top has a god-like import. So from the moment her father's lifestyle caught up with him, and his sluggish blood vessels finally blocked-up, Yo-jong's future was no longer her own. Her new job, one that would have no apparent end, was to help to ease some of the tumult that would be dug-up by the next hereditary succession. She was no longer being positioned for a career, but rather as a buttress around who was likely then to be next in line for the throne – her brother, and closest confidant, Kim Jong-un.

In 2009, Yo-jong made her first overt appearance on North Korean state media^{iv}. Her father was up and moving, if only a little, and spending more-and-more time in the scenic beach city of Wonsan. In a carefully orchestrated media event, with no discernible deeper policy objective, and with an ailing Dear Leader not managing to prop himself up for the photograph, his two sons Jong-chol and Jong-un, took centre stage. Either side of them were two ageing, but unmistakably high-ranking bureaucrats. On their right was, Ri Jae-il, a member of Jong-il's Personal Secretariat, reporting on matters of art and media, and for a time, Director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department. On their left was Kim Ki-nam, a hold-over from his father's rule (someone who had helped Jong-il with his own succession), a one-time Vice-chairman of the Workers' Party of Korea, and then holder of a Directorship of the Propaganda and Agitation Department. Standing sheepishly on the outer rim of the photograph, rigid and alert, with a small but comfortable gap between her

and the men, was Yo-jong. This was all at the Wonsan University of Agriculture – but none of it mattered. The sole purpose of the photograph was the drip-feed of Jong-il's 'Little Princess' to the broader public, and to send much sharper message to anyone in a position of power that might still begrudge the idea of hereditary succession. Kim Jong-un would be the next, failing that Jong-chol, and their sister Yo-jong would support the process from the bureaucracy that was being forced artlessly down the viewer's throat – the Propaganda and Agitation Department.



(Visit to Wonsan University of Agriculture; Kim Yo-jong, Far Right of Picture)

The trajectory of Yo-jong's life was never smooth, and soon enough she fell off the map again. Everyone was looking at her brother and the increasingly circus-like propaganda that was building around him; clutching breathlessly for excuses to mention his name. As the Dear Leader was turning increasingly frail, they were trying to make up for lost time, trying to build a cult of personality around the next Kim. Kim Il-sung had a decade of nationalistic, anti-Japanese, freedom-fighting, myth behind him when he first seized the North Korean state as his own. Kim Jong-il had longer. From the 1970's he was being unambiguously talked-up to god-like status, and positioned for power. Maybe he had bought into the propaganda and couldn't imagine himself suddenly on his death bed, maybe he was wavering over who his successor would be, or maybe, as his eldest son Kim Jong-nam later claimed from exile in Macau, he was considering doing away with hereditary rule altogether. Regardless, when the decision was made to anoint Kim Jong-un, there was only a couple of years available to make it all stick, and to spare the young man the fate of most failed dictators and deposed kings.

On-the-spot guidance is a staple diet of North Korean propaganda. These are essentially highly orchestrated field trips by the North Korean leadership, where prominent officials, more often than not the Supreme Leader himself, walk around factories, work places and military sites, casting off casual observations, that are then later spun, and glorified into invaluable, industry changing theses'. This became Yo-jong's immediate lot in life, dutifully following her father, brothers and other important officials, as played-up for the camera; though always in the background,

photographed to the edge of scenes; an omnipresent, yet entirely forgettable presence. In one of her more prominent moments, this time at a photo session for the Third Conference of the Workers' Party of Korea in September 2010, Yo-jong was pushed, if only slightly, back into the media spotlight^v. She had spent time working in the National Defence Commission, and then in her father's Personal Secretariat, and was finally being offered a morsel of individual recognition. Always in the background, this time she stood directly behind Ri Yong Mu, Vice-Marshal of the Korean People's Army, her great uncle by marriage, and importantly Vice Chairman of the National Defence Commission. This was resume building North Korean-style. Yet in this moment at the Workers' Party Conference, she was placed insultingly next to Kim Ok. Another member of the Personal Secretariat, Kim OK was also her father's then-mistress, de facto wife, and stain to the memory of Yo-jong's mother, Ko Yong-hui. All-in-all this was a rather clumsy, and clearly futile attempt by Kim Jong-il to protect his new mistress, and he must have known this. If after his death the succession went well, and Kim Jong-un was ushered into power with Yo-jong by his side, then there could be no place for mistresses, or even other wives. Other women would mean other options, other centres of power, maybe other children; an unacceptable headache for a new regime. So as far as any official propaganda would be concerned, there was only ever one first-lady during their father's rule. History would be airbrushed, and counter-narratives, such as Kim Ok, would be killed or exiled. In his final months, perhaps an increasingly sentimental Dear Leader was finding the reality of ruling North Korea a little hard to bear.

Dutiful as ever, Yo-jong continued to live her life for her father and brother. Still working just behind the scenes, sneaking quietly into the edges of official photography, in May and then August 2011 she, by some accounts travelled with her father as he paid homage to the traditional sponsors of the North Korean state; the two countries that have historically found the maintenance of the Kim dynasty to be in their national interest – China and Russia. Without the support of these two overseers, his son's ascension would be difficult; with them actively opposed or working against it, it would be impossible. There were lessons here for Yo-jong that might otherwise have slipped-by under the weight of everyday propaganda. Her country could pretend otherwise, and would no doubt continue to do so, but through it all, still needed some friends outside its borders. Beyond the mock-up of a fake enemy (they conclusively, already had this), diplomacy would need to play a role in the longevity of the family's regime.

The state narrative of North Korea, the story that keeps the Kim's in power and the population uncomplaining, is built as much around international politics as it is domestic. In the mid-1990's, soon after the first transition of power from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il, the country and the regime was in crisis. Always looking at themselves through the lens of South Korea and the need for reunification, official propaganda had been building an idea that their Southern brothers and sisters were impoverished in comparison, and desperate to join with the North once again. In 1994, a series of steadily compounding mistakes in planning all cleaved together into a nationwide famine, and this lie suddenly became impossible to believe. Something was needed to explain away this economic inferiority, and justify the continuation of the regime. This would be *Songun* – or 'Military First Policy'^{vi}. The everyday suffering of North Koreans was now due to aggressive international enemies, particularly the United States, trying desperately to destroy the Korean race. In this battle for survival, the Kim dynasty was all that was still keeping the wolves from the door. But it would have to come at a cost – money and resources would be diverted from the people for the military effort. They would have to take care of themselves. And it worked! North Korea found its modern identity in a right-wing race based nationalism, and importantly in an ever menacing external enemy. For all the talk of *Juche*^{vii}, of independence, of self-determination, North Korea was increasingly defining itself by the outside world.

On the 17th of December, 2011, Kim Jong-il suffered what state media would describe later as a "*severe myocardial infarction along with a heart attack*"^{viii}, and died fairly immediately. But none of this was announced until the 19th. For two unbelievably tense days, the North Korean succession plan hung not on the whims of the Kim family, but on the regime elite who briefly held

the power to shift the direction of their country. Kim Jong-un, with Kim Yo-jong at his side, waited and worried. Whatever the internal machinations were, this inexplicable delay in announcing the Dear Leader's death eventually came, and through all the fanciful media reports of animals coming to Pyongyang to express their grief and the ice of Lake Paektu cracking "*so loud, it seemed to shake the Heavens and the Earth*"^{ix}, there was also the announcement of the "*Great Successor*" and the comfort of "*absolute surety that the leadership of Comrade Kim Jong-un will lead and succeed the great task of revolutionary enterprise.*"^x Formalities were needed, and Yo-jong compliantly followed her brother around, crying on command, for the 11 days between their father's death and the funeral. Knowing full-well that despite being important enough to appear in public, she was still so far from power that she was not even named as one of the 242 members of the funeral committee. As her brother cemented his power, this would change. Three days after the funeral, on New Year's Eve, as his father was being embalmed for posterity at the Kumsusan Memorial Palace, Kim Jong-un, wasting no time, took official control of the North Korean army; and Yo-jong was finally on her way.



(Kim Yo-jong shadowing her brother at her father's funeral)

Through the circus of it all, and the Machiavellian fear, Yo-jong had lost one of the last remaining certainties in her life. The people that 'shared' her social circle, were always coming-and-going. Exile assassination, even defection was common – her aunt defected in 1998 – but for a child that had spent so much of her life in isolation, only ever flirting, when permitted, with new crowds, this was different. Seven years after burying her mother, her father was now dead; she was starkly more alone in the world. Looking around her, there was very little remaining. Her two eldest siblings were becoming strangers to her, Jong-chol, her eldest maternal brother was suddenly in the uncomfortable position of having to lay low, so as to not risk undermining the transition of power (he did not return to North Korea for the funeral). And Jong-un, understandably busy running the country, had also recently married a modern-minded wife, Ri Sol-ju, who not content to play the traditional Korean house-maker, was increasingly becoming political, accompanying the new leader on official visits.

In this shrinking world, Yo-jong had two remaining bulwarks. Family members that had been with her from the beginning, who had been tasked with easing through the transition, and who had stepped into the void left behind by her mother's death, and now her father's – her aunt, Kim Kyong-hui, sister to Kim Jong-il; and her uncle by this marriage, Jang Song-taek. Song-taek, a

talented, if not brutal, political dealer, was assigned to the central role of consolidating Jong-un's power. Leaving Kyong-hui, the more delicate job of playing surrogate mother to Yo-jong, and finding her a place within the dynastic succession. Short on options, they returned to the path that Kim Jong-il had set Yo-jong down, a path members of her family, the mythicised Paektu bloodline, only ever payed lip service to – resume building. With her aunt by her side, Yo-jong returned to her position at the National Defence Commission. Beyond this day job, she freelanced as her brother's tour manager, escorting him around the country on state visits, whenever the space could be found. Whilst learning the inner-details of government bureaucracy, she was also, by not leaping ahead too far, too fast, ingratiating herself to non-family members of the regime. But perhaps most importantly, she was keeping public, and getting noticed.

Grooming Yo-jong for a position as a central party cadre, her aunt eventually managed to pull the right strings, and place her niece in a new position overseeing state security. In December 2013, Yo-jong was photographed at a Workers Party congress sitting next to Choe Ryong-hae, a statesman of unchallengeable character due to his years as a resistance fighter with Kim Il-sung, his political service to Kim Jong-il, and now his station as near to being second in command under Kim Jong-un as North Korea's convoluted hierarchy offers. Yo-jong now had a foot inside the inner sanctum and, through Choe Ryong-hae, access to new on-the-job training at the famed Organization and Guidance Department. What Choe Ryong-hae got was a future bride for his son, Choe Song. And it came at just the right time. The engagement to Choe Song, gave Yo-jong a new, expansive safety net, at the exact moment that her brother pulled her old one away. On December 3rd, 2013, her uncle Jang Song-taek was unceremoniously dismissed from his official positions. A few days later, images and mentions of him were being edited out of old news reports. On December 8th, at a made for purpose, expanded political meeting of the central party, Song-taek was forced to sit through a series of lengthy *"factionalist"*, *"counter-revolutionary"*, *"anti-party"*^{xi} accusations. It ended with a public arrest, and a hurried execution. Yo-jong's soon-to-be father-in-law, at the prodding of her brother, was running the mock-trial. Aunt Kim Kyong-hui survived the purge, but not indignity. Her husband was dead, and she would be forced to live out her days under strict house arrest. Yo-jong's wedding would be delayed.



(Kim Yo-jong left, with her aunt Kim Kyong-hui)

The impact of this upheaval on Yo-jong's life is hard to fully picture. Whether it was from mourning the loss of more close family members, or from a new appreciable fear of how things

might also turn against her one day, Yo-jong dropped out of the media in the months following the purges. It took four months for her to psychologically process the events, and reconcile herself with the new world around her. On March 9th, 2014, back by her brother's side, Yo-jong made her most significant public appearance until that point. The gig was fairly straightforward, casting a vote for the Supreme People's Assembly, but in the media coverage she was referred to by name, and recognised as a "*Senior Official*"^{xii} of the Central Committee. This was the first time that she stepped out of the background, and had been an individual target of propaganda. Later that year, when Kim Jong-un disappeared from public life with a variety of medical problems – returning after a month with a walking stick – Yo-jong briefly took over the management of some of his state responsibilities. Yet behind this public image, her career was moving forward in deliberate ways. She was soon back on the path that her father had laid out for her during that first photo-op in 2009 at the Wonsan University of Agriculture. The old men in the photograph were being moved out and, in November 2014, Yo-jong was named Vice-Director of the Propaganda and Agitation Department. By July 2015, Kim Ki-nam was pushed out to pasture – officially named Director, but only in a ceremonial capacity – and she moved into the position of Vice-Minister for the Department.

Tasked with sculpting the citizens' relationship to their leadership, and managing the cultural landscape, the Propaganda and Agitation Department is responsible for all the public affairs broadcasts and news media inside North Korea. Yo-jong suddenly had control over all appointments to the Public Guidance Bureau, the Central Broadcasting Commission, as well as her father's old haunt, the performing arts and film studios. She effectively controlled the vital choke-point of her brother's regime. Everything that was communicated as media or propaganda, had to first come through her. Yet even further, a large degree of general government communication was also transiting through the Propaganda and Agitation Department, leaving Yo-jong with a not-so-visible, but essential position in defining policy and running the country. Building her brother's cult of personality was no easy task. Jong-un was quick to break with the traditions of his father and grandfather, insisting on making public speeches, parading his young wife while on state visits, and making public note of policy failures. In response, Yo-jong chose to re-augment North Korea's media philosophy, and began running more to-the-minute reporting, with wider latitude for individual editors and producers to make creative decisions; and even mistakes. North Korean media was becoming Western. Whether Yo-jong was forced to oversee the media coverage of her uncle and aunt's downfall is uncertain, but it had all the hallmarks of this new style.

Early that year, in January 2015, putting aside an unhealthily long (by Korean standards) engagement, Yo-jong finally made her marriage to Choe Song official. And by some accounts, there was a shotgun element to it all – four months later she gave birth to her first child. Her new husband, and father of her child, an undeniable member of the Pyongyang elite, graduate of Kim Il-sung University, and operative in the Workers' Party of Korea, has seemingly learnt a lesson from the execution of Uncle Jang Song-taek. If you marry into the Kim family, it is best not to make too much of a splash. Choe Song has yet to be seen in public, in any capacity. And this has been a smart decision, as Yo-jong herself – wrestling with the volatility that comes from organising the public life, and image of a dictator – hasn't been immune from potentially career-ending mistakes. Not long after giving birth, her brother Kim Jong-un and father-in-law, Choe Ryong-hae, were at a youth rally organised by Yo-jong. After speaking to an enthusiastic crowd of 10,000, the two men shuffled between stage platforms to pose for photographs with different groups. The chance to be pictured in national media with the new Supreme Leader was too much for some to handle, and the scene quickly deteriorated into a stampede. A visibly molested Kim Jong-un, was filmed worriedly trying to shake off the teenagers, while Choe Ryong-hae, showing his age, struggled to calm the onslaught of love. Both men needed to be saved by a military escort forming a protective ring around them, and crab-walking slowly away from the venue. Yo-jong was on the hook for both risking the safety of her brother, and for allowing the pictures of the indignity to hit the newspaper stands. For the next year and a half, she was out of favour, with the old Director Kim Ki-nam dragged out of retirement to

reclaim control of the Propaganda and Agitation Department, and supervise the daily work of Yo-jong.

By 2017, through sheer resilience she had found a way to wriggle out of this hole, and even extend beyond her previous station. Soon she was announced as only the second ever woman in North Korean history to be appointed as an alternative member of the Politburo^{xiii}, the country's highest decision-making body. She was also placed in charge of the State Security Department, as well as regaining control over the Propaganda and Agitation Department through her position as Vice-Minister. As recognition for the power she had gained over the North Korean state, 2017 was also the year that the United States Treasury Department designated Yo-jong for targeted sanctions, labelling her as someone operationally responsible for "*severe human rights abuses*"^{xiv}. And it is hard to imagine this being too far off base. In the very early years of Kim Jong-un's rule, all the hope internationally was that this third Kim, with his foreign education and fresh look on the world, might be a Deng Xiaoping-type reformer. Sure, he would have to play things carefully, not moving too fast too soon, and be vigilant not to trip over ideological traps. And importantly, he would have to deal artfully with *Songun* – 'Military First Policy' – because a ham-fisted abandoning would tear back the veneer of his own position, shoot turmoil through the population (particularly the military), and likely bring the house down upon itself. So as the North Korean state under the new Kim began picking-up from the previous generations' rule, taunting the possibility of war, launching missiles and deepening the nuclear program, there were plenty of people willing to give the young man a pass; recognising that all this might be just the necessary lip-service that cements Jong-un's position, so that later reforms could come from a point of strength. As the years have dragged by, and as internal repression has deepened – the growing of gulag infrastructure and the revival of old draconian punishments for infractions, such as border crossings – this has become impossible to believe. And all this way, Yo-jong has been by her brother's side; building his image, implementing his policies, and fighting for his attention.

This hasn't always been easy. The low hanging fruit of cult-building is to make an attachment to history. And so, Kim Jong-un would be made up to look like his grandfather; same clothes, haircut and mannerisms. Then, his father, the man who chose Jong-un for the position would be elevated in stature, post-mortem. New statues, myths and reporting would talk-up the dead Dear Leader, Kim Jong-il, to the same heights of the dead Great Leader, Kim Il-sung. The message was simple, '*if you question the judgement of Kim Jong-un, you are also questioning the judgement of Kim Jong-il*'. This was, at least in part, the work of Yo-jong. But her hardest conjuring trick was still to come. Her brother was likely the first North Korean leader to not fully understand the ideology of his own country, to not understand the delicate game he needed to play. Instead of visiting schools, hospitals and military barracks, Kim Jong-un would attend theme parks, concerts and sporting events; complaining publically about the length of the grass, rather than the looming American 'enemy'. Three televised visits by the ex-basketball player, Dennis Rodman, strained Yo-jong's abilities further. As clearly enthralled as her brother was to meet a former sporting icon from his youth, a very creative media spin would be needed to shadow the image of it all. Here was a black (North Korea still identifies itself by a particularly distasteful form of racial purity) American (the national enemy), covered in tattoos and piercings (unheard of in North Korea and a symbol of criminality), wearing sunglasses and a hat in Kim's presence (an incredible form of traditional disrespect), being fawned over publically by the new leader, and joking around as if they were old friends. The very fact that Yo-jong has managed to ride her brother's cult of personality through these visits, says something quite special about her abilities.



(Kim Yo-jong shadowing her brother through an official visit/photo-op)

Her brief purge to the outer-edge of government, forced Yo-jong to soak-in a sharp education on survival. Increasingly, she would force herself into the same events, and party platforms, that she was tasked with organising. And as the months ticked by, she could be seen moving from the background of these pictures, into the edges of the front rows. Then steadily, seat-by-seat, closer-and-closer toward her brother; toward the centre of the frame. The more public she was, the harder it would be to remove her; or so the logic goes. She also learned to roll with the punches of her brother's cavalier attitude to tradition, embracing it whenever appropriate. The more prominent she became, the more free-spirited she appeared. In October, 2017, Yo-jong tightened another strap of her regime-life vest. At an upmarket Pyongyang cosmetic factory, Kim Jong-un trundled around the products, sprayed deodorants, sampled creams and joked with the nervous staff. But for once, he wasn't the sole attraction. This was also a launching event for a new company, state owned of course, but conceived and operated by Yo-jong and Kim Jong-un's wife, Ri Sol-ju. The more indispensable, and well-liked by the people around her brother, the better her chances of survival if things ever started to turn against her. The second stage of this, was to begin pushing out the old patriarchs, who now, by contrast to herself and brother, seemed stiff, boring and out of place. Soon enough there was a steady stream of senior bureaucrats leaving for 're-education' in labour camps. The chief of the party newspaper, Rodong Sinmun, was replaced, then when his successor didn't impress, Yo-jong replaced him too. Choe Hwi, Deputy-director of Yo-jong's Propaganda and Agitation Department disappeared, only to return once he was deemed to be 'reformed' and 'repentant'. Following him out the door, was Ri Jae-il and Kim Ki-nam, the two men who had posed with Yo-jong in that first 2009 photoshoot at Wonsan University of Agriculture; the two men who had paved her way into the Department. Yet as both former Directors, and with Kim Ki-nam being the person called on to replace her back in 2015, they both stood as possible handbrakes on her power. It was clear what Yo-jong was trying to do – never again would she be moved aside by a generational holdover.

It came slowly, but soon Yo-jong was operating with a rare independence, and even breaking the glass ceiling of North Korean government – being photographed unaccompanied by her brother. Her popularity was peaking at just the right moment. Always in competition with the South, the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympic Games presented an important moment for Kim Jong-un's regime. He would have to respond in some way – North Korea marked the 1988 Seoul Olympics by exploding a bomb on a Korean Air passenger plane, killing 115 people – but coming after months of missile tests, and military bluster, and with South Korean President Moon Jae-in offering a personal invitation, a

new opportunity appeared. Kim Jong-un quickly accepted the offer, agreed to various cultural exchanges and good will gestures – such as both sets of athletes marching under a reunification flag, and North Korea hosting South Korean downhill skiers – and turned to the person who he trusted the most.

Bundled-up next to Kim Yong-nam, the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Peoples' Assembly, and nominal head of state, Yo-jong led a diplomatic delegation across the Demilitarized Zone, and into the face of a fascinated foreign media. She had a dangerous diplomatic game to play. She needed to charm the world, and earn affection from everyday South Koreans, whilst playing up her superiority to South Korea's closest ally and most prominent envoy, America. On February 9, she attended the opening ceremony, seated in the same corporate box as Moon Jae-in and American Vice-President, Mike Pence. It is hard to imagine, based on her work experience, that she was unaware of the camera angles, and how the shot would play-out on television. She smiled at her host and played gracious; then waiting for the camera in front of Pence to pan upward, catching her in the background, she sneered downward at the American, with a clearly affected expression. And that's all it took! There couldn't have been a more under-stated act of international diplomacy. But it worked! The world's media had their image, they had their story, and quite inexplicably they began speaking of America as the clumsy, belligerent actor in the relationship. She also watched the first game of the joint North Korean-South Korean ice hockey team (they lost, and their best players were American ringers). But all eyes were now on South Korea's Presidential palace, the Blue House.

Walking into the same building that her grandfather had once stormed with dozens of commandoes in a failed assassination attempt of then-President, Park Chung-hee, was a notable moment in itself. They ate lunch, smiled and posed for the cameras; Yo-jong then delivered an absolute lay-up of a diplomatic coup, handing a beaming President Moon – an unreformed advocate of the Sunshine Policy – an invitation for further talks in Pyongyang, this time with her brother. Yet she had already exceeded the most optimistic of predictions. She had managed to touch just the right buttons, offered nothing more upfront than her presence, yet had achieved tremendous downstream outcomes. After a year of nuclear development, rolling missile tests, and threats of war, North Korea had managed to steal the shine from their southern neighbours during their own Olympic Games – then being referred to in the media as the 'Peace Olympics' – while also getting them to violate the same United Nations sanctions – through refuelling their passenger ferry, handing out Samsung cell phones to their athletes, and paying the full cost of housing, feeding and transporting the contestants and dignitaries between events – that they had pushed so hard for only months earlier. This was all being reported back in Pyongyang via the state news agency, KCNA, and Yo-jong, the first member of the Kim dynasty to visit South Korea since the Korean War, was at the centre of it all.



(Kim Yo-jong seated behind American Vice-President Mike Pence, at the Pyeongchang Olympics opening ceremony)

Whether or not it was always intended this way, Yo-jong is now North Korea's highest ranking diplomat, and likely the second most powerful person inside North Korea, behind her brother. When the South Korean delegation made good on their invitation and visited Pyongyang in March 2018, she was in all the photographs, and seated prominently for the over-dinner pleasantries/diplomacy. In a way, she had arrived. The woman, always in the background of photographs, had fought her way to centre stage. From the indignity of her childhood exile, and constant uncertainty of her adult life, Yo-jong is now a shadow of the marginalised figure, once forced to line-up as just another face in a crowd of bureaucrats at her own father's funeral. With power beyond what her name and relationship to her brother offered, Yo-jong now has the freedom and control to develop and execute her own policies, whilst also running North Korea's international affairs. It is easy to forget the human being behind it all.

More than just unfettered access to the leader of North Korea, Yo-jong could, quite conceivably – considering some of the recent social changes inside her country – be next in line for succession if something were to happen to her brother. As close as she is to Kim Jong-un, this must also worry her. In her short adult life, Yo-jong has witnessed a veritable revolving door of family members being exiled or killed for simply being in the position she is now. Her uncle, Jang Song-taek, just like her, had built-up a huge portfolio over the years. And just like her, he had, through international diplomatic excursions (to China), become a statesman in his own right, and someone who foreign leaders had begun to see as an alternative centre of power; as a potential replacement for Kim Jong-un. Her aunt, Kim Kyong-hui, was guilty by association. In February 2017, her half-brother Kim Jong-Nam, after years of speaking to reporters, questioning the direction of his country's rule, and criticising the dynastic succession of Kim Jong-un, was assassinated at Kuala Lumpur airport, in Malaysia. The killing must have been long-planned, catching Jong-Nam on a rare trip outside the Chinese territory of Macau. The use of a highly contaminable, and media catching, VX nerve agent as the weapon of choice, could only have been to send a message beyond the event itself – *'despite our denials, we unmistakably did this, and we will do it again if necessary'*. Her eldest maternal brother, Kim Jong-chol, has so far avoided such a fate only by staying in exile, occupying himself at music festivals, and as much as possible refusing the public eye.

If none of this fills her with dread, then the memory of her own childhood, of the treatment she received when, along with her brothers, they were seen as pretenders to the throne and not legitimate successors, should. Yo-jong, by becoming a symbol of the regime, is playing a very

dangerous game. But a game in which she is so far winning – which implies something unpleasant in itself. Clearly shaped by her environment, as we all are, Yo-jong’s new scowling image at the Olympic opening ceremony, might be representative of something more than an act; it might hint at something deeper, something amiss. Yo-jong’s Olympic diplomacy had handed North Korea its most significant propaganda victory of Kim Jong-un’s rule. The little sister of the Supreme Leader had managed to captivate the world. Alongside *Songun* – ‘Military First Policy’ – the prospect of Korean reunification has always been a publically championed signal fire for the North Korean regime. As the narrative runs, all the problems that currently afflict the peninsula, will one day be wiped away clean by the re-merging of a divided nation. Every North Korean has been fed this diet of propaganda since birth, and hold on to it as an undeniable truth (as do many South Koreans). On the final stop of her Southern visit, Yo-jong attended, as Moon Jae-in’s guest of honour, a reunification concert in Seoul. Invited down for the event, Pyongyang’s Samjiyon Orchestra were joined on stage by members of South Korea’s K-pop band, Girls Generation, and they worked their way through a series of traditional, emotion-drawing, nationalistic songs. Sat beside Yo-jong, her travelling partner the octogenarian Kim Yong-nam was overcome. A lifetime of internalised propaganda, of dreaming of reunification, was suddenly playing out through his body. Sobbing heavily, he wiped away tears, and continued to cry uncontrollably. Yo-jong stared straight ahead, unmoved, with the same indifferent, empty-eyed sneer that she had delivered to the American Vice-President two days earlier.



(Kim Yo-jong at the reunification concert, next to a weeping Kim Yong-nam)

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