

EXCERPT

# 'Nothing to Envy'

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## Chapter 1

If you look at satellite photographs of the far east by night, you'll see a large splotch curiously lacking in light. This area of darkness is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Next to this mysterious black hole, South Korea, Japan, and now China fairly gleam with prosperity. Even from hundreds of miles above, the billboards, the headlights and streetlights, the neon of the fast-food chains appear as tiny white dots signifying people going about their business as twenty-first-century energy consumers. Then, in the middle of it all, an expanse of blackness nearly as large as England. It is baffling how a nation of 23 million people can appear as vacant as the oceans. North Korea is simply a blank.

North Korea faded to black in the early 1990s. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had propped up its old Communist ally with cheap fuel oil, North Korea's creakily inefficient economy collapsed. Power stations rusted into ruin. The lights went out. Hungry people scaled utility poles to pilfer bits of copper wire to swap for food. When the sun drops low in the sky, the landscape fades to gray and the squat little houses are swallowed up by the night. Entire villages vanish into the dusk. Even in parts of the showcase capital of Pyongyang, you can stroll down the middle of a main street at night without being able to see the buildings on either side.

When outsiders stare into the void that is today's North Korea, they think of remote villages of Africa or Southeast Asia where the civilizing hand of electricity has not yet reached. But North Korea is not an undeveloped country; it is a country that has fallen out of the developed world. You can see the evidence of what once was and what has been lost dangling overhead

alongside any major North Korean road — the skeletal wires of the rusted electrical grid that once covered the entire country.

North Koreans beyond middle age remember well when they had more electricity (and for that matter food) than their pro-American cousins in South Korea, and that compounds the indignity of spending their nights sitting in the dark. Back in the 1990s, the U.S. offered to help North Korea with its energy needs if it gave up its nuclear weapons program. But the deal fell apart after the Bush administration accused the North Koreans of reneging on their promises. North Koreans complain bitterly about the darkness, which they still blame on the U.S. sanctions. They can't read at night. They can't watch television. "We have no culture without electricity," a burly North Korean security guard once told me accusingly

But the dark has advantages of its own. Especially if you are a teenager dating somebody you can't be seen with.

When adults go to bed, sometimes as early as 7:00 p.m. in winter, it is easy enough to slip out of the house. The darkness confers measures of privacy and freedom as hard to come by in North Korea as electricity. Wrapped in a magic cloak of invisibility, you can do what you like without worrying about the prying eyes of parents, neighbors, or secret police.

I met many North Koreans who told me how much they learned to love the darkness, but it was the story of one teenage girl and her boyfriend that impressed me most. She was twelve years old when she met a young man three years older from a neighboring town. Her family was low-ranking in the byzantine system of social controls in place in North Korea. To be seen in public together would damage the boy's career prospects as well as her reputation as a virtuous young woman. So their dates consisted entirely of long walks in the dark. There was nothing else to do anyway; by the time they started dating in earnest in the early 1990s, none of the restaurants or cinemas were operating because of the lack of power.

They would meet after dinner. The girl had instructed her boyfriend not to knock on the front door and risk questions from her older sisters, younger brother, or the nosy neighbors. They lived squeezed together in a long, narrow building behind which was a common outhouse shared by a dozen families. The houses were set off from the street by a white wall, just above eye level in height. The boy found a spot behind the wall where nobody would notice him as the light seeped out of the day. The clatter of the neighbors washing the dishes or using the toilet masked the sound of his footsteps. He would wait hours for her, maybe two or three. It didn't matter. The cadence of life is slower in North Korea. Nobody owned a watch.

The girl would emerge just as soon as she could extricate herself from the family. Stepping outside, she would peer into the darkness, unable to see him at first but sensing with certainty his presence. She wouldn't bother with makeup — no one needs it in the dark. Sometimes she just wore her school uniform: a royal blue skirt cut modestly below the knees, a white blouse and red bow tie, all of it made from a crinkly synthetic material. She was young enough not to fret about her appearance.

At first, they would walk in silence, then their voices would gradually rise to whispers and then to normal conversational levels as they left the village and relaxed into the night. They maintained an arm's-length distance from each other until they were sure they wouldn't be spotted.

Just outside the town, the road headed into a thicket of trees to the grounds of a hot-spring resort. It was once a resort of some renown; its 130-degree waters used to draw busloads of Chinese tourists in search of cures for arthritis and diabetes, but by now it rarely operated. The entrance featured a rectangular reflecting pond rimmed by a stone wall. The paths cutting through the grounds were lined with pine trees, Japanese maples, and the girl's favorites — the ginkgo trees that in autumn shed delicate mustard-yellow leaves in the shape of perfect Oriental fans. On the surrounding hills, the trees had been

decimated by people foraging for firewood, but the trees at the hot springs were so beautiful that the locals respected them and left them alone.

Otherwise the grounds were poorly maintained. The trees were untrimmed, stone benches cracked, paving stones missing like rotten teeth. By the mid-1990s, nearly everything in North Korea was worn out, broken, malfunctioning. The country had seen better days. But the imperfections were not so glaring at night. The hot-springs pool, murky and choked with weeds, was luminous with the reflection of the sky above.

The night sky in North Korea is a sight to behold. It might be the most brilliant in Northeast Asia, the only place spared the coal dust, Gobi Desert sand, and carbon monoxide choking the rest of the continent. In the old days, North Korean factories contributed their share to the cloud cover, but no longer. No artificial lighting competes with the intensity of the stars etched into its sky.

The young couple would walk through the night, scattering ginkgo leaves in their wake. What did they talk about? Their families, their classmates, books they had read — whatever the topic, it was endlessly fascinating. Years later, when I asked the girl about the happiest memories of her life, she told me of those nights.

This is not the sort of thing that shows up in satellite photographs. Whether in CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, or in the East Asian studies department of a university, people usually analyze North Korea from afar. They don't stop to think that in the middle of this black hole, in this bleak, dark country where millions have died of starvation, there is also love.

by the time I met this girl, she was a woman, thirty-one years old. Mi-ran (as I will call her for the purposes of this book) had defected six years earlier and was living in South Korea. I had requested an interview with her for an article I was writing about North Korean defectors.

In 2004, I was posted in Seoul as bureau chief for the Los Angeles Times. My job was to cover the entire Korean peninsula. South Korea was easy. It was the twelfth-largest economic power, a thriving if sometimes raucous democracy, with one of the most aggressive press corps in Asia. Government officials gave reporters their mobile telephone numbers and didn't mind being called at off-hours. North Korea was at the other extreme. North Korea's communications with the outside world were largely confined to tirades spat out by the Korean Central News Agency, nicknamed the "Great Vituperator" for its ridiculous bombast about the "imperialist Yankee bastards." The United States had fought on South Korea's behalf in the 1950–1953 Korean War, the first great conflagration of the Cold War, and still had forty thousand troops stationed there. For North Korea, it was as though the war had never ended, the animus was so raw and fresh.

U.S. citizens were only rarely admitted to North Korea and American journalists even less frequently. When I finally got a visa to visit Pyongyang in 2005, myself and a colleague were led along a well-worn path of monuments to the glorious leadership of Kim Jong-il and his late father, Kim Il-sung. At all times, we were chaperoned by two skinny men in dark suits, both named Mr. Park. (North Korea takes the precaution of assigning two "minders" to foreign visitors, one to watch the other so that they can't be bribed.) The minders spoke the same stilted rhetoric of the official news service. ("Thanks to our dear leader Kim Jong-il" was a phrase inserted with strange regularity into our conversations.) They rarely made eye contact when they spoke to us, and I wondered if they believed what they said. What were they really thinking? Did they love their leader as much as they claimed? Did they have enough food to eat? What did they do when they came home from work? What was it like to live in the world's most repressive regime?

If I wanted answers to my questions, it was clear I wasn't going to get them inside North Korea. I had to talk to people who had left — defectors.

In 2004, Mi-ran was living in Suwon, a city twenty miles south of Seoul, bright and chaotic. Suwon is home to Samsung Electronics and a cluster of manufacturing complexes producing objects most North Koreans would be stumped to identify — computer monitors, CD-ROMs, digital televisions, flash-memory sticks. (A statistic one often sees quoted is that the economic disparity between the Koreas is at least four times greater than that between East and West Germany at the time of German reunification in 1990.) The place is loud and cluttered, a cacophony of mismatched colors and sounds. As in most South Korean cities, the architecture is an amalgam of ugly concrete boxes topped with garish signage. High-rise apartments radiate for miles away from a congested downtown lined with Dunkin' Donuts and Pizza Huts and a host of Korean knockoffs. The backstreets are filled with love hotels with names like Eros Motel and Love-Inn Park that advertise rooms by the hour. The customary state of traffic is gridlock as thousands of Hyundais — more fruit of the economic miracle — try to plow their way between home and the malls. Because the city is in a perpetual state of gridlock, I took the train down from Seoul, a thirty-minute ride, then crawled along in a taxi to one of the few tranquil spots in town, a grilled beef-ribs restaurant across from an eighteenth-century fortress.

At first I didn't spot Mi-ran. She looked quite unlike the other North Koreans I had met. There were by that time some six thousand North Korean defectors living in South Korea and there were usually telltale signs of their difficulty in assimilating — skirts worn too short, labels still attached to new clothes — but Mi-ran was indistinguishable from a South Korean. She wore a chic brown sweater set and matching knit trousers. It gave me the impression (which like many others would prove wrong) that she was rather demure. Her hair was swept back and neatly held in place with a rhinestone barrette. Her impeccable appearance was marred only by a smattering of acne on her chin and a heaviness around the middle, the result of being three months pregnant. A year earlier she had married a South Korean, a civilian military employee, and they were expecting their first child.

I had asked Mi-ran to lunch in order to learn more about North Korea's school system. In the years before her defection, she had worked as a kindergarten teacher in a mining town. In South Korea she was working toward a graduate degree in education. It was a serious conversation, at times grim. The food on our table went uneaten as she described watching her five- and six-year-old pupils die of starvation. As her students were dying, she was supposed to teach them that they were blessed to be North Korean. Kim Il-sung, who ruled from the time the peninsula was severed at the end of World War II until his death in 1994, was to be revered as a god, and Kim Jong-il, his son and successor, as the son of a god, a Christ-like figure. Mi-ran had become a harsh critic of the North Korean system of brainwashing.

After an hour or two of such conversation, we veered into what might be disparaged as typical girl talk. There was something about Mi-ran's self-possession and her candor that allowed me to ask more personal questions. What did young North Koreans do for fun? Were there any happy moments in her life in North Korea? Did she have a boyfriend there?

"It's funny you ask," she said. "I had a dream about him the other night."

She described the boy as tall and limber with shaggy hair flopping over his forehead. After she got out of North Korea, she was delighted to discover that there was a South Korean teen idol by the name of Yu Jun-sang who looked quite like her ex-boyfriend. (As a result, I have used the pseudonym Jun-sang to identify him.) He was smart, too, a future scientist studying at one of the best universities in Pyongyang. That was one of the reasons they could not be seen in public. Their relationship could have damaged his career prospects.

There are no love hotels in North Korea. Casual intimacy between the sexes is discouraged. Still, I tried to pry gently about how far the relationship went.

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