
Opening Extract from...

Nothing to Envy

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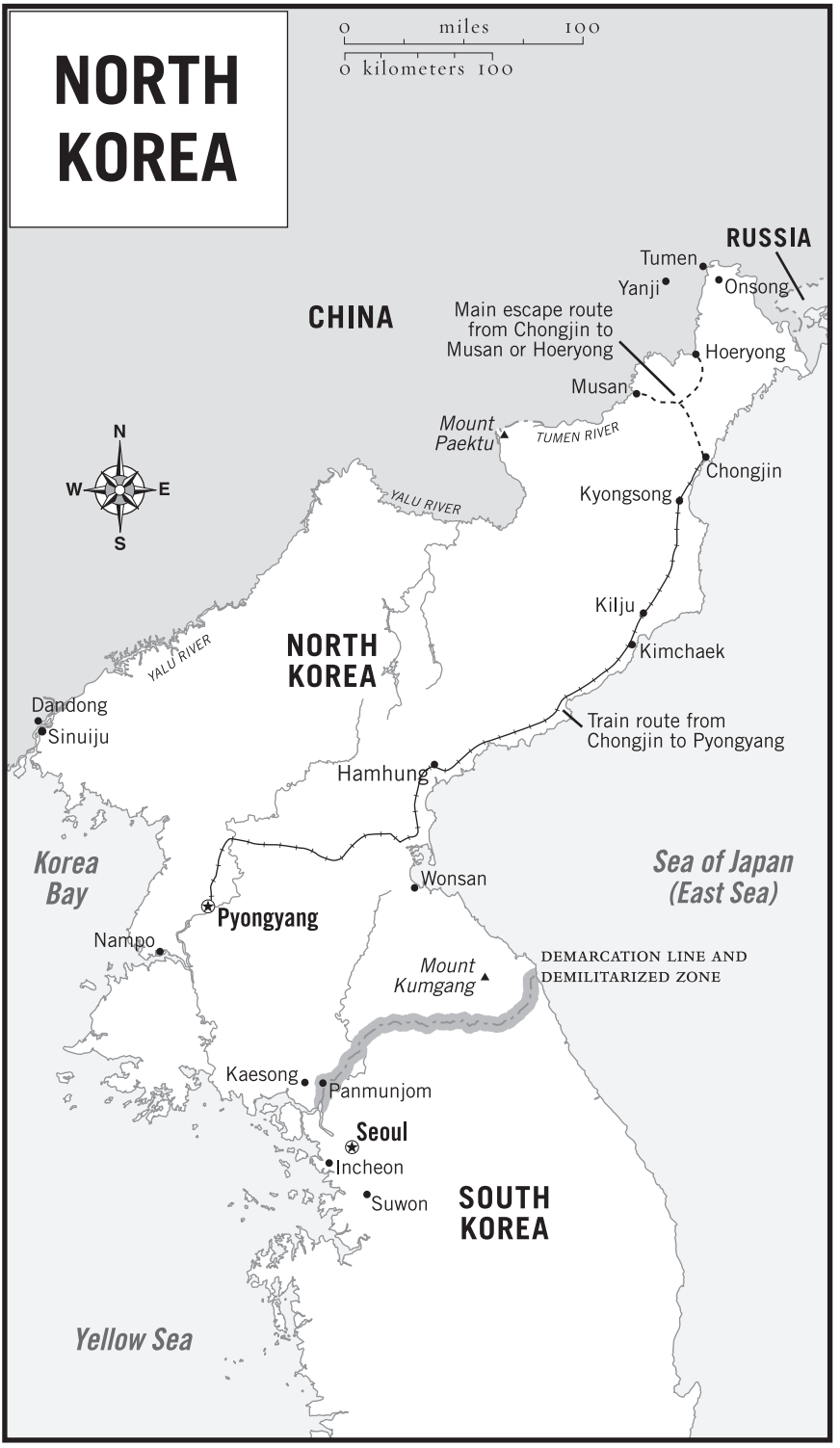
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Korea Bay
Sea of Japan (East Sea)
Wonsan
Pyongyang
Nampo
Mount Kumgang
DEMARCATION LINE AND DEMILITARIZED ZONE
Kaesong
Panmunjom
Seoul
Incheon
Suwon
SOUTH KOREA
Yellow Sea

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In 2001 I moved to Seoul as a correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times,* covering both Koreas. At the time, it was exceedingly difficult for an American journalist to visit North Korea. Even after I succeeded in getting into the country, I found that reporting was almost impossible. Western journalists were assigned "minders" whose job it was to make certain that no unauthorized conversations took place and visitors hewed to a carefully selected itinerary of monuments. There was no contact permitted with ordinary citizens. In photographs and on television, North Koreans appeared to be automatons, goose-stepping in formation at military parades or performing gymnastics en masse in homage to the leadership. Staring at the photographs, I'd try to discern what was behind those blank faces.

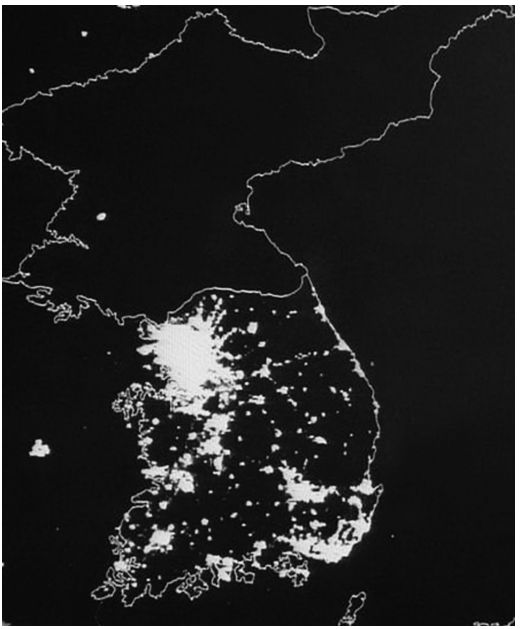
In South Korea, I began to talk to North Koreans who had defected, escaping to South Korea or China, and a picture of real life in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea began to emerge. I wrote a series of articles for the *Los Angeles Times* that focused on former residents of Chongjin, a city located in the northernmost reaches of the country. I believed that I could verify facts more easily if I spoke to numerous people about one place. I wanted that place to be far from the well-manicured sights that the North Korean government shows to foreign visitors—even if it meant I would be writing about a place that was off limits. Chongjin is North Korea's third-largest city and one of the places that were hardest hit by the famine of the mid-1990s. It is also almost entirely closed to foreigners. I had the good fortune to meet many wonderful people from Chongjin who were both articulate and generous with their time. *Nothing to Envy* grew out of that original series of articles.

This book is based on seven years of conversations with North Koreans. I have altered only some of the names to protect those still

living in North Korea. All of the dialogue is drawn from the accounts of one or more people present. I have attempted as best I can to corroborate the stories I was told and to match them with publicly reported events. The descriptions of places that I haven't visited personally come from defectors, photographs, and videos. So much about North Korea remains impenetrable that it would be folly to claim I've gotten everything right. My hope is that one day North Korea will be open and we will be able to judge for ourselves what really happened there.

CHAPTER 1

HOLDING HANDS IN THE DARK



Satellite photo of North and South Korea by night.

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 United States 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 thirteenth-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 1950–53 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.

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.

Mi-ran laughed.

"It took us three years to hold hands. Another six to kiss," she said. "I would never have dreamed of doing anything more. At the time I left North Korea, I was twenty-six years old and a schoolteacher, but I didn't know how babies were conceived."

Mi-ran admitted she frequently thought about her first love and felt some pangs of remorse over the way she left. Jun-sang had been her best friend, the person in whom she confided her dreams and the secrets of her family. But she had nonetheless withheld from him the biggest secret of her life. She never told him how disgusted she was with North Korea, how she didn't believe the propaganda she passed on to her pupils. Above all, she never told him that her family was hatching a plan to defect. Not that she didn't trust him, but in North Korea, you could never be too careful. If he told somebody who told somebody . . . well, you never knew—there were spies everywhere. Neighbors denounced neighbors, friends denounced friends. Even lovers denounced each other. If anybody in the secret police had learned of their plans, her entire family would have been carted away to a labor camp in the mountains.

"I couldn't risk it," she told me. "I couldn't even say good-bye."

After our first meeting, Mi-ran and I spoke frequently about Jun-sang. She was a happily married woman and, by the time I saw her next, a mother, but still her speech raced and her face flushed whenever his name came up. I got the feeling she was pleased when I brought up the subject, as it was one she could not discuss with anyone else.

"What happened to him?" I asked.

She shrugged. Fifty years after the end of the Korean War, North and South Koreans still have no proper communication. In this regard, it is nothing like East and West Germany or any other place for that matter. There is no telephone service between North and South Korea, no postal service, no e-mail.

Mi-ran had many unanswered questions herself. Was he married? Did he still think of her? Did he hate her for leaving without saying good-bye? Would Jun-sang consider Mi-ran a traitor to the motherland for having defected?

"Somehow I think he'd understand, but I have no way, really, of knowing," she answered.

MI-RAN AND JUN-SANG met when they were in their early teens. They lived on the outskirts of Chongjin, one of the industrial cities in the northeast of the peninsula, not far from the border with Russia.

The North Korean landscape is perfectly depicted by the black brushstrokes of Oriental painting. It is strikingly beautiful in places—from an American frame of reference, it could be said to resemble the Pacific Northwest—but somehow devoid of color. The palette has a limited run from the dark greens of the firs, junipers, and spruce to the milky gray of the granite peaks. The lush green patchwork of the rice paddies so characteristic of the Asian countryside can be seen only during a few months of the summer rainy season. The autumn brings a brief flash of foliage. The rest of the year everything is yellow and brown, the color leached away and faded.

The clutter that you see in South Korea is entirely absent. There is almost no signage, few motor vehicles. Private ownership of cars is largely illegal, not that anyone can afford them. You seldom even see tractors, only scraggly oxen dragging plows. The houses are simple, utilitarian, and monochromatic. There is little that predates the Korean War. Most of the housing stock was built in the 1960s and 1970s from cement block and limestone, doled out to people based on their job and rank. In the cities there are "pigeon coops," one-room units in low-rise apartment buildings, while in the countryside, people typically live in single-story buildings called "harmonicas," rows of one-room homes, stuck together like the little boxes that make up the chambers of a harmonica. Occasionally, door frames and window sashes are painted a startling turquoise, but mostly everything is whitewashed or gray.

In the futuristic dystopia imagined in *1984,* George Orwell wrote of a world where the only color to be found was in the propaganda posters. Such is the case in North Korea. Images of Kim Il-sung are depicted in the vivid poster colors favored by the Socialist Realism style of painting. The Great Leader sits on a bench smiling benevo-

lently at a group of brightly dressed children crowding around him. Rays of yellow and orange emanate from his face: He is the sun.

Red is reserved for the lettering of the ubiquitous propaganda signs. The Korean language uses a unique alphabet made up of circles and lines. The red letters leap out of the gray landscape with urgency. They march across the fields, preside over the granite cliffs of the mountains, punctuate the main roads like mileage markers, and dance on top of railroad stations and other public buildings.

LONG LIVE KIM IL-SUNG.

김일성 만세!

KIM JONG-IL, SUN OF THE 21ST CENTURY.

21세기의 태양 김정일 장군 만세!

LET'S LIVE OUR OWN WAY.

우리 식으로 살자.

WE WILL DO AS THE PARTY TELLS US.

당이 결심하면 우리는 한다!

WE HAVE NOTHING TO ENVY IN THE WORLD.

세상에 부럼 없어라.

Until her early teens, Mi-ran had no reason not to believe the signs. Her father was a humble mine worker. Her family was poor, but so was everyone they knew. Since all outside publications, films, and broadcasts were banned, Mi-ran assumed that nowhere else in the world were people better off, and that most probably fared far worse. She heard many, many times on the radio and television that South Koreans were miserable under the thumb of the pro-American puppet leader Park Chung-hee and, later, his successor, Chun Doo-hwan. They learned that China's diluted brand of communism was less successful than that brought by Kim Il-sung and that millions of Chinese were going hungry. All in all, Mi-ran felt she was quite lucky

to have been born in North Korea under the loving care of the fatherly leader.

In fact, the village where Mi-ran grew up was not such a bad place in the 1970s and 1980s. It was a cookie-cutter North Korean village of about one thousand people, stamped out by central planning to be indistinguishable from other such villages, but its location was fortuitous. The East Sea (the Sea of Japan) was only six miles away, so locals could occasionally eat fresh fish and crab. The village lay just beyond the smokestacks of Chongjin and so had the advantages of proximity to the city as well as open space on which to grow vegetables. The terrain was relatively flat, a blessing in a country where level ground for planting is scarce. Kim Il-sung kept one of his many vacation villas at the nearby hot springs.

Mi-ran was the youngest of four girls. In 1973, when she was born, this was as much a calamity in North Korea as it was in nineteenth-century England when Jane Austen wrote in *Pride and Prejudice* about the plight of a family with five daughters. Both North and South Koreans are steeped in Confucian traditions in which boys carry on the family line and care for elderly parents. Mi-ran's parents were ultimately spared the tragedy of having no sons with the birth of one three years after Mi-ran, but it meant their youngest daughter was the forgotten child of the family.

They lived in a single unit of a harmonica house, befitting Mi-ran's father's status. The entrance led directly into a small kitchen that doubled as a furnace room. Wood or coal would be shoveled into a hearth. The fire it produced was used both to cook and to heat the home by means of an underfloor system known as *ondol*. A sliding door separated the kitchen from the main room where the entire family slept on mats that were rolled up during the day. The birth of the boy swelled the family size to eight—the five children, their parents, and a grandmother. So Mi-ran's father bribed the head of the people's committee to give them an adjacent unit and allow them to cut a door into the adjoining wall.

In a larger space, the sexes became segregated. At mealtime, the women would huddle together over a low wooden table near the kitchen, eating cornmeal, which was cheaper and less nutritious

than rice, the preferred staple of North Koreans. The father and son ate rice at their own table.

"I thought this was just the way life naturally is," Mi-ran's brother, Sok-ju, would tell me later.

If the older sisters noticed, they didn't make a fuss, but Mi-ran would burst into tears and rail against the injustice.

"Why is Sok-ju the only one who gets new shoes?" she demanded. "Why does Mama only take care of Sok-ju and not me?"

They would hush her up without answering.

It wasn't the first time she would rebel against the strictures placed on young women. In North Korea at the time, girls weren't supposed to ride bicycles. There was a social stigma—people thought it unsightly and sexually suggestive—and periodically the Workers' Party would issue formal edicts, making it technically illegal. Mi-ran ignored the rule. From the time she was eleven years old she would take the family's single bicycle, a used Japanese model, on the road to Chongjin. She needed to get away from the oppression of her little village, to go anywhere at all. It was an arduous ride for a child, about three hours uphill, only part of the way on an asphalt road. Men would try to pass her on their bicycles, cursing her for her audacity.

"You're going to tear your cunt," they would scream at her.

Sometimes a group of teenage boys would career into her path trying to knock her off the bicycle. Mi-ran would scream back, matching obscenity with obscenity. Eventually she learned to ignore them and keep on pedaling.

THERE WAS ONLY one reprieve for Mi-ran in her hometown—the cinema.

Every town in North Korea, no matter how small, has a movie theater, thanks to Kim Jong-il's conviction that film is an indispensable tool for instilling loyalty in the masses. In 1971, when he was thirty years old, Kim Jong-il got his first job, overseeing the Workers' Party's Bureau of Propaganda and Agitation, which ran the country's film studios. He published a book in 1973, *On the Art of Cinema,* in which he expounded on his theory that "revolutionary art and lit-

erature are extremely effective means for inspiring people to work for the tasks of the revolution."

Under Kim Jong-il's direction, the Korean Feature Film Studio on the outskirts of Pyongyang was expanded to a 10-million-square-foot lot. It churned out forty movies per year. The films were mostly dramas with the same themes: The path to happiness was self-sacrifice and suppression of the individual for the good of the collective. Capitalism was pure degradation. When I toured the studio lot in 2005, I saw a mock-up of what was supposed to be a typical street in Seoul, lined with run-down storefronts and girly bars.

No matter that the films were pure propaganda, Mi-ran loved going to the movies. She was as much a cinephile as one could be growing up in a small town in North Korea. From the time she was old enough to walk to the theater herself, she begged her mother for money to buy tickets. Prices were kept low—just half a won, or a few cents, about the same as a soft drink. Mi-ran saw everything she could. Some movies were deemed too risqué for children, such as the 1985 film *Oh My Love* in which it was suggested that a man and a woman kissed. Actually, the leading lady modestly lowered her parasol so moviegoers never saw their lips touch, but that was enough to earn the film the equivalent of an R rating. Hollywood films were, of course, banned from North Korea, as were virtually all other foreign films, with the exception of an occasional entry from Russia. Mi-ran especially liked the Russian films because they were less propagandistic than North Korean ones and more romantic.

Perhaps it was inevitable that a dreamy girl who went to the cinema for on-screen romance should have found there for herself the real thing.

They met in 1986, when there was still enough electricity to run the movie projectors. The culture hall was the most imposing structure in town, built in a rather grandiose style popular in the 1930s, when Korea was occupied by Japan. Two stories high, big enough to accommodate a mezzanine, the theater had a huge portrait of Kim Il-sung covering its facade. The dimensions were dictated by regulations that all images of the Great Leader be commensurate with the size of the building. The culture hall served as a cinema, theater, and

lecture hall. On public holidays, such as Kim Il-sung's birthday, it would host contests to name the citizens who best followed the example of the Great Leader. The rest of the time the theater showed movies, a fresh film arriving every few weeks from Pyongyang.

Jun-sang was every bit as crazy about the movies as Mi-ran. As soon as he heard there was a new film, he rushed to be first to see it. The film on this particular occasion was *Birth of a New Government*. It was set in Manchuria during World War II, where Korean Communists led by a young Kim Il-sung had been organized to resist the Japanese colonial occupation. The anti-Japanese resistance was as familiar a theme in North Korean cinema as cowboys and Indians was in early Hollywood. The movie was expected to draw big crowds because it starred a popular actress.

Jun-sang got to the theater early. He secured two tickets, one for himself and one for his brother. He was pacing around outside when he spotted her.

Mi-ran was standing toward the back of a crowd surging its way toward the box office. Movie audiences in North Korea tend to be young and rowdy. This crowd was especially rough. The bigger kids had pushed their way to the front of the line and formed a cordon blocking the younger ones from the box office. Jun-sang moved in to take a better look at the girl. She was stamping her feet with frustration and looked like she might cry.

The North Korean standard of beauty calls for pale skin, the whiter the better, a round face, and bow-shaped mouth, but this girl looked nothing like that. Her facial features were long and pronounced, her nose high-bridged, and her cheekbones well defined. To Jun-sang, she looked almost foreign and a little wild. Her eyes flashed with anger at the melee at the box office. She didn't seem like other girls, who made self-effacing gestures and covered their mouths when they laughed. Jun-sang sensed in her a spirited impatience, as if she hadn't been beaten down by life in North Korea. He was immediately enchanted.

At fifteen, Jun-sang was naggingly aware that he was interested in girls in a generalized way, but had never focused on a particular girl—until now. He had seen enough movies to be able to step out of himself and envision what this first encounter with her might

look like if it were unfolding on-screen. He would later remember the moment in a dreamlike Technicolor, with a mystical glow around Mi-ran.

"I can't believe there is a girl like that in this little town," he told himself.

He walked around the perimeter of the crowd a couple of times to get a better look and debated what to do. He was a scholar, not a fighter. It wouldn't do to try to push his way back to the box office. Then an idea lodged in his mind. The movie was about to start, and his brother wasn't there yet. If he sold her the extra movie ticket, she would have to sit next to him since the tickets were for assigned seats. He circled her again, formulating in his mind the exact words he would use to offer her the ticket.

In the end, he couldn't muster the courage to speak to a girl he didn't know. He slipped into the movie theater. As the screen filled with the image of the movie's heroine galloping across a snowy field, Jun-sang thought of the opportunity he had let pass. The actress played a fierce resistance fighter who wore her hair tomboy-short and rode her horse across the Manchurian steppe, proclaiming revolutionary slogans. Jun-sang couldn't stop thinking of the girl outside the theater. When the credits rolled at the end of the movie, he rushed outside to look for her, but she was gone.