Nothing to Envy

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BARBARA DEMICK

Barbara Demick grew up in Ridgewood, New Jersey, and graduated from Yale University and the Bagehot Fellowship in economic and business journalism at Columbia University. From 1993–1997, she lived in Eastern Europe, where she served as a correspondent for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and wrote extensively about the war in Bosnia and its aftermath. In 2001, after a stint in the Middle East, Demick became the *Los Angeles Times*'s first bureau chief in South Korea, where she wrote about North Korea and interviewed refugees fleeing the regime for China and South Korea. Her books *Logavina Street: Life and Death in a Sarajevo Neighborhood* and *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* are drawn from her reportage on both regions. Known for her imaginative, novelistic expansions of her interviewees' testimonials, Demick's work has been nominated for the Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction, the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award, and the Pulitzer Prize in international reporting.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The bulk of *Nothing to Envy* charts the lead-up to and the fallout from the North Korean famine, known in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (D.P.R.K.) as the "Arduous March." A period of mass starvation that lasted from about 1994–1999, the famine stemmed from factors related to North Korea's rocky, mountainous terrain and lack of arable lands, economic mismanagement, and a series of floods and droughts which the North Korean regime's centrally planned system failed to respond to with any urgency or flexibility. Demick meticulously outlines how North Korea's floundering economic relationships with the Soviet Union—which had collapsed in the early 1990s—and China meant that the country, heavily reliant on foreign aid and imports, could not sustain itself economically by the mid-1990s. As food disappeared and jobs—through which D.P.R.K. citizens received their weekly meal ration tickets—dried up, the North Korean regime instituted austerity measures such as the "Eat Two Meals a Day" campaign and proliferated propaganda campaigns branding the famine as an "Arduous March" mirroring one of the Great Leader Kim Il-sung's "arduous" battles against Japanese forces in World War II. Somewhere between 240,000 and 3.5 million Koreans lost their lives as a result of the famine. Because of the secretive nature of the regime, exact numbers are unknown, but a 2011 U.S. Census Bureau report estimates the number of excess deaths in the country throughout the 1990s to be between 500,000 and 600,000. North Korea, according to many reports, still suffers from widespread food insecurity to this day.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The North Korean regime is notoriously hostile toward journalists and uses the showcase capital of Pyongyang to distract visitors to the country from the poverty and famine found in more rural areas of the country. But many writers and journalists have nevertheless managed to write books exploring the ins and outs of North Korean society, using interviews with defectors and refugees to help paint a picture of what life is really like inside the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Sandra Fahy's *Marching Through Suffering: Loss and Survival in North Korea*, like *Never Caught*, draws on interviews with refugees who escaped North Korea at the height of the famine, painting a portrait of an insular nation deep in crisis and the ways in which citizens cope, socially and psychologically, with the duress of hunger and starvation. Bradley K. Martin's *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty* and Victor Cha's *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future* are more academic studies of the dynastic politics of North Korea, exploring the ins and outs of the regime that exerts total control over the lives of over 25 million citizens. Many refugees who have fled North Korea have written memoirs of their lives there—*The Girl with Seven Names* by Hyeon-seo Lee and *In Order to Live* by Yeonmi Park are just two firsthand accounts of life inside North Korea—and life after escaping its borders.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*
- **When Written:** 2001–2009
- **Where Written:** Seoul, South Korea
- **When Published:** December 29, 2009
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Nonfiction; Reportage
- **Setting:** Primarily Chongjin, North Korea
- **Climax:** Because *Nothing to Envy* follows the lives of several individuals, there are several small "climaxes" throughout the book, including the death of Kim Il-Sung; Oak-hee's arrest for defecting to China; Mi-ran's escape across the border with her family; and Mrs. Song's triumphant arrival in South Korea.
- **Antagonist:** Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un, totalitarianism, famine
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Allegory On Film. South Korean director Bong Joon-ho's 2013 science fiction film *Snowpiercer* features an alternate future in which the last of humanity has confined itself to a fast-moving circumnavigational train in order to escape freezing-cold temperatures. Though *Snowpiercer* effectively allegorizes the more general effects of climate science denial, class stratification, and capitalist consumption, it also lends itself to an allegory for North Korean society: all passengers aboard the Snowpiercer are instructed to worship the "sacred engine" that keeps the train running, as well as its "divine" steward, Wilford, the train's inventor. The starving masses at the back of the train eat roaches to survive while the wealthy few at the front enjoy steak dinners, free healthcare, and luxurious spa cars. Meanwhile, all children growing up onboard the train are daily fed a steady diet of overzealous propaganda about Wilford's glory.

PLOT SUMMARY

In *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*, American journalist Barbara Demick blends historical context, content from interviews with North Korean defectors, and her own imagination as she recreates the journeys of six refugees who escaped from North Korea in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Demick begins the book by describing the fraught history of Korea in the 20th century. Prior to the end of World War II, Korea was one united peninsula, occupied by the Japanese. After the Allies won the war, American forces feared that a power vacuum in the wake of the end of the Japanese occupation would create strife—so they arbitrarily divided the peninsula into two countries along the 38th parallel, offering the northern half to the Soviets and occupying the southern half themselves. Both governments hated the division. In June of 1950, Kim Il-sung, the leader of North Korea, stormed across the border with Soviet tanks and began the Korean War. The bloody but ultimately fruitless war lasted three years—by the end, North Korean forces had been pushed back even further beyond the bounds of the 38th parallel, and the peninsula remained divided. The two governments signed an armistice—essentially a cease-fire which offered no real resolution to the division in the region.

Kim Il-sung assumed totalitarian control over North Korea, took on the title of Great Leader, and created a Communist, isolationist, hyper-militant hermit state which revolved around the concept of juche, or extreme self-reliance. Kim introduced stringent background checks and the concept of songbun, a kind of feudal social hierarchy, to reward those loyal to his regime while punishing those whose ancestors came from South Korea, those who spoke out against his leadership, and those whose behavior appeared even slightly "anti-state." Kim sent hordes of people off to gulags while instituting local inminban, or people's watch groups, to spy on their neighbors and snitch on those who seemed suspect. All of daily life in North Korea revolved around propaganda that glorified Kim Il-sung while painting all outside forces—especially Americans—as pillaging "bastards" who devoted their lives to sabotaging North Korean interests. North Koreans were taught from infancy to revere Kim Il-sung as a god, to hate the outside world, and to sacrifice all they had for the good of the regime and the Workers' Party.

By the 1990s, Communist regimes around the globe began to collapse. North Korea's failing Communist allies demanded repayment for long-standing debts in order to stay afloat. North Korea couldn't pay their debts, and their economy collapsed. Workers and farmers around the country had long known the hermit kingdom could not sustain itself—but they often fudged numbers to their superiors, who then lied to *their* superiors, creating a bedrock of instability that, when tested, plunged the country into a miserable famine that would ultimately claim the lives of hundreds of thousands—if not millions. In 1994, Kim Il-sung died, sending the country into renewed throes of uncertainty and devastation. His son Kim Jong-il took hold of the country, instituting mass military purges and ordering crackdowns on any anti-state activities—including the black markets that were blossoming all over the country as desperate citizens bought and sold anything they could to survive.

Over the course of the book, Demick introduces the occasionally intersecting storylines of six defectors, sharing their experiences throughout the infamous North Korean famine of the mid-1990s. She tells the stories of Mi-ran and Jun-sang, a pair of young lovers who took to writing love letters back and forth when they were separated by their respective college plans. As the famine descended upon their families, both Mi-ran and Jun-sang began to question the regime and consider defecting—but because of the constant atmosphere of surveillance in North Korea, neither felt comfortable sharing their most intimate thoughts with the other, especially via the carefully monitored postal service. Demick describes the life of Mrs. Song, the deeply loyal wife of a prominent Workers' Party member, Chang-bo, who found herself faced with increasingly impossible decisions as her rebellious children Oak-hee and Nam-oak grew weary of the regime's refusal to acknowledge the famine even as more and more people starved and died. When Mrs. Song lost her mother-in-law, Chang-bo, and Nam-oak to the famine in the span of a year, she grew despondent—and found herself turning to capitalist black-market commerce. After Oak-hee escaped her abusive marriage and fled to China—with a couple of stints in labor camps in between—Mrs. Song followed her daughter across the border, where she began to realize that life in North Korea looked very different from the outside world. Demick tells the

story of Kim Hyuck, a kochebi or "wandering swallow" whose father placed him in an orphanage at the height of the famine. Hyuck survived on scraps for years, traveling around with gangs of orphans and abandoned children for protection before realizing, as a teenager, that he could make money selling goods across the border in China. He made many trips back and forth—but when he was eventually caught and placed in a grueling labor camp, he knew he had to defect for good. Demick also tells the story of Dr. Kim, a physician with dreams of Workers' Party membership who watched countless patients—mostly children—starve and die as North Korea failed to import medicine or supplies, let alone food, for its suffering citizens. When Dr. Kim learned that her superiors were spying on her, suspecting her of deception in spite of her deep loyalty to the regime, she consulted a list of Chinese relatives her dying father had given to her and decided to escape at last.

Demick's interviews with Mrs. Song, Oak-hee, Mi-ran, Jun-sang, Kim Hyuck, and Dr. Kim all took place between 2004 and 2009—some of them had just arrived in South Korea when she began interviewing them, while others had lived there for years already. As Demick interviewed each subject about their childhood, their struggles during the famine, their experiences risking their lives to defect, and their often-painful periods of adjustment to life outside North Korea, she crafted their stories into narratives that would reveal to readers the intricacies of what ordinary life in North Korea looks like. Demick alternates between tales as she examines how propaganda and misinformation have long served to control North Korean citizens' thoughts, perceptions, and behaviors; how surveillance and a lack of trust impacts the formation of long-term intimate relationships between friends, lovers, and even family members; and how scarcity, starvation, and lack push ordinary people to do extraordinary things in order to survive.

In an epilogue written in 2015, Demick comments on the newest developments in North Korea, including the ascendancy of the young and volatile Kim Jong-un to the role of Supreme Leader following the death of his father, Kim Jong-il, as well as the rollout of North Korean nuclear tests, missile strikes, and cyberattacks aimed at the United States. She also notes the ongoing food, electricity, and resource shortages that continue to plague the citizens of North Korea, even as their government focuses its funds on beautifying the showcase capital of Pyongyang to attract intrigued tourists who will hopefully sustain its economy.

Demick checks back in with her interviewees, as well. Though they are all doing well in their personal and professional lives, and though some of them speak publicly before human rights organizations and the United Nations about their trials, none of them, she writes, could ever have imagined that the North Korean regime would have the staying power it currently has. With no end to the regime in sight, there is nothing for defectors and refugees to do but wait—and to try their best to escape the trauma, shame, and survivor's guilt that continues to hold sway over their own lives.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Barbara Demick – Barbara Demick is the author and narrator of *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*. Demick is an American journalist who worked for many years as the *Los Angeles Times*'s first bureau chief in South Korea, where she reported on human rights in North Korea and interviewed refugees making new lives for themselves in China and South Korea. Her research culminated in the 2009 publication of *Nothing to Envy*, which novelizes and reimagines the stories of six North Korean defectors living in Seoul. Demick's incisive reportage and ability to humanely, empathetically inhabit the mindsets of her interviewees makes *Nothing to Envy* a blend of fact and historical fiction, contextualizing the unbelievable and painful stories of Mi-ran, Jun-sang, Mrs. Song, Dr. Kim, Kim Hyuck, and Oak-hee within the larger scope of North Korean history. As Demick demystifies for her readers the catastrophic economic collapse that led to one of the most devastating famines the world has ever seen, she focuses on the human collateral of such an unprecedented and unmitigated crisis. Incisive, careful, artistic, and dedicated above all to the integrity of her interviewee's stories, Barbara Demick herself becomes a character within the book, a kind of Virgil figure who leads her readers through their descent into the world of 1990s North Korea.

Mi-ran – Mi-ran is a young North Korean woman born into a family whose futures were marked by beulsun, or tainted blood, the result of her father Tae-woo's South Korean origins. Mi-ran was a spirited young girl who grew up in North Korea in the 1980s. She harbored dreams of attending college and rising to prominence in the Workers' Party. But when her father told her the truth about his birth in South Korea and the fact that he'd come to North Korea as a prisoner of war, Mi-ran adjusted her expectations for herself and embarked on a career as a teacher. Mi-ran wrote love letters back and forth for years with a young man from her village, Jun-sang—but because Jun-sang was descended from wealthy ethnic Koreans who'd immigrated from Japan, she knew they could not take their relationship public. As Jun-sang attended university at a prestigious school in Pyongyang and stayed to train as a scientist, Mi-ran became a teacher at the height of the famine of the 1990s and watched her students disappear from school one by one as starvation took hold of countless families across the country. Disillusioned with her lot in life and reeling from the pain of losing her father to the famine, Mi-ran jumped at the opportunity to defect to China and contact her father's relatives in South Korea. In South Korea, Mi-ran created a socially and financially

prosperous life for herself—but she was unable to escape memories of her older sisters, who were allegedly arrested and taken to a labor camp as retaliation for their other siblings' defection. Mi-ran's story raises questions of what qualities North Korea prizes in its citizens—and what it will do slowly and systematically to those whose heritages do not reflect generations of perfect allegiance to the regime. Mi-ran's bravery allowed her to survive the worst of the famine, emboldening her to turn a blind eye to the suffering all around her in order to focus on herself. But Demick, through her interviews with Mi-ran in South Korea, paints a portrait of a woman who remains haunted by the things she witnessed and endured in her home country and the unbelievable pain she caused when she left.

Jun-sang – Jun-sang is a young North Korean man who abandoned a promising career as a scientist and the prospect of admission into the Workers' Party in order to defect to South Korea in 2004. While growing up outside of Chongjin, Jun-sang fell in love with a local girl named Mi-ran. After asking if he could court her, the two began sending long love letters back and forth while Jun-sang attended university in Pyongyang, and Mi-ran, whose lowly songbun negatively affected her prospects in life, attended teachers' college in Chongjin. By North Korean standards, Jun-sang and Mi-ran's affair was an intense one—she traveled illegally to Pyongyang at the height of the famine to visit him, and during his long breaks at home each year, Jun-sang escorted Mi-ran on illicit nightly walks through the pitch-dark countryside. Jun-sang began questioning the regime shortly after the death of Kim Il-sung—he felt nothing when the Great Leader passed, as opposed to his classmates, who wailed and mourned publicly for days. Jun-sang obtained a **television**, which he outfitted with illegal antennae that allowed him to pick up South Korean news broadcasts. Once Jun-sang saw what life in North Korea looked like from the outside, he began harboring anti-regime feelings—yet he did not share even with Mi-ran—his closest confidant and great love—that he wanted to defect. Mi-ran and her family left before Jun-sang; she didn't tell him of her dissatisfaction or her desire to escape, either, for fear of being overheard. After waiting a few more lonely years, Jun-sang decided that enough was enough. Though Jun-sang and Mi-ran were reunited in South Korea, their shared pain over mourning what could have existed between them had they not been forced to conduct their relationship within a totalitarian surveillance state derailed the possibility of truly connecting once more. Jun-sang and Mi-ran's story of thwarted love and poor timing reflects the emotional casualties of those who come of age in North Korea.

Mrs. Song Hee-suk – Mrs. Song is an older woman who grew up in Chongjin in the 1950s and 1960s. Her father, who fought for North Korea in the Korean War, died in battle—and from a young age, Mrs. Song declared herself completely loyal to the regime and a "true believer" in its promises. Mrs. Song married a kind man named Chang-bo, a prominent member of the Workers' Party, and took a good job in a local factory. She did everything she could in her personal and professional life to glorify the regime, to express fealty toward the Great Leader Kim Il-sung, and to raise children who echoed her loyalty to the government and to the Party. Mrs. Song's rebellious children, Oak-hee and Nam-oak, worried her because of their anti-regime sentiments—but she ignored their distaste for the state and focused on inhabiting within herself the "filial devotion" the regime demanded. In the early days of the North Korean economic collapse and ensuing food shortage, Mrs. Song tried to maintain the image of a loyal, hard worker who would continue showing up to a factory job for no pay and no rations. As times got tougher, however, and it became impossible to keep food on the table for herself, her husband, and her mother-in-law, Mrs. Song turned to the black market in order to survive. Though she'd been taught all her life that commerce was evil—and though as the head of her neighborhood's local inminban, or people's watch, she could get in serious trouble—Mrs. Song learned to embody the spirit of industry in order to keep her family alive. After the consecutive deaths of her mother-in-law, her husband, and her son within two years, Mrs. Song nearly lost her own life—but with the help of her daughters, she regained her strength and began selling cookies to make ends meet. With the help of the rebellious Oak-hee, Mrs. Song eventually defected to South Korea, where she was able to at last confront the pain, disappointment, and sorrow her years of fruitless dedication to the regime had inspired. Dedicated, courageous, and determined to survive, Mrs. Song and her remarkable journey from party mouthpiece to emboldened defector form the heart of the book.

Dr. Kim Ji-eun – Dr. Kim Ji-eun is a doctor who worked for most of her life at a hospital in Chongjin in the mountainous north of North Korea. Dr. Kim worked for no pay, yet she constantly added extra shifts to her schedule in order to increase her chances of being invited to join the Workers' Party one day. The daughter of an ethnic Korean from Manchuria, Dr. Kim was astonished when, on his deathbed, her father began speaking out against the North Korean regime for the first time in his life—and then gave her a list of Chinese relatives whom she could call if she ever wanted to leave the country. Dr. Kim grew frustrated with her superiors as the famine brought out the worst in them and forced them to pick and choose which patients would receive increasingly rare treatments and antibiotics. She switched to pediatrics, hoping that caring for children would be easier—but as she watched toddlers and children suffer and die of starvation, she realized that in order to survive, she would have to steel herself against their misery and be completely detached. In early 1999, after years of watching her young patients die, Dr. Kim had an encounter with a school friend who celebrated the deaths of her husband and son because she had "fewer mouths to feed." Dr. Kim, who'd

already learned that the Bowibu was surveilling her more heavily lately for no apparent reason, realized that the regime was irredeemable and that she'd never be allowed to join the Party. She defected in March of that year, calling upon the help of her father's Chinese relatives to house her as she waited for an opportunity to resettle in South Korea. When she finally arrived in Seoul in 2002, Dr. Kim was disillusioned with life in South Korea: her medical degree was useless there, and she was far behind the times. Eventually, however, she found a new lease on life: she reenrolled in a medical program, made friends, and expressed hope that one day she'd see the reunification of Korea and be able to bring medical help back to her homeland. Thoughtful, earnest, devoted, and true, Dr. Kim, like Mrs. Song, spent her life in service to a regime that never cared for her—her ability to realize what was happening, cut her losses, and make a brave bid for a new life render her one of the book's most intrepid and adaptable characters.

Kim Hyuck – Kim Hyuck is a former kochebi, or "wandering swallow," who was just a child when the famine of the mid-1990s hit. Abandoned by his father and separated from his brother, Hyuck was forced to fend for himself in an increasingly dangerous and hostile atmosphere. Hyuck quickly realized that the only way to survive was to make money by selling North Korean goods across the border in China. Kim's repeated crossings along the Tumen River landed him in and out of labor camps for years. After a particularly long and devastating stint in prison, Kim Hyuck decided to defect for good. The horrors he'd witnessed while wandering the North Korean countryside as a child in search of food, and while enduring miserable days and nights in the labor camps as a young man trying to survive, had convinced him that no life worth living would ever be possible in his home country. Hyuck joined a church in China to obtain refuge from the ever-growing immigration police presence there. He then led a group of other refugees on an arduous and ill-fated trip through a stretch of the Gobi Desert along the Mongolian border. By the time Hyuck made it to South Korea, he was worn out, exhausted, and disillusioned. He struggled for many years to adjust to life in South Korea, afraid of forming meaningful connections with others. Eventually, Hyuck became the most outspoken and public-facing of the interviewees Demick spoke with between 2004 and 2009, even producing a short film about his life and his journey to South Korea. Headstrong, determined, tough, and desperate to outrun the traumas of his youth, Hyuck is an iron-willed young man whose story helps shape the landscape of *Nothing to Envy*'s many perspectives on what life looks like inside of North Korea.

Oak-hee – Oak-hee is Mrs. Song's eldest daughter. Rebellious from a young age and contemptuous of the regime since her school years, Oak-hee deigned to take a job with her local propaganda department after graduating high school and agreed to marry a young Korean People's Army upstart, Choi Yong-su. When Yong-su turned abusive and the famine took hold of North Korea, making Oak-hee's job irrelevant, Oak-hee became angrier than ever. Though she had two children to care for, Oak-hee fled home in the dark of night after enduring a particularly brutal beating from Yong-su and crossed the Tumen River into China, where she offered herself to a broker who arranged "marriages" between wealthy Chinese men and North Korean women desperate for escape. When Oak-hee returned to North Korea in hopes of bringing her children back over the border, she was arrested multiple times and sent to a labor camp. With the help of her mother, Mrs. Song, who had learned a lot about bribery over the course of the famine, Oak-hee again fled to China. She eventually sent for her mother, convincing her to cross the border into China and then to fly to South Korea to defect for good. Oak-hee's bitterness toward the regime, her rebellious nature, and her prizing of freedom above all else—even her own children—makes her one of Barbara Demick's most compelling and controversial interviewees.

Kim Il-sung – Kim Il-sung was the founder and first Great Leader of North Korea, which he ruled from its establishment in 1948 until his death in 1994. A charismatic totalitarian ruler, Kim Il-sung projected an image of fatherly benevolence. But he did so while assuming total control over his citizens, using a thriving propaganda machine to perpetuate his ideologies of juche, or total self-reliance, and to create a complete saturation of pro-regime media. Even as Kim Il-sung painted himself in a positive light and had his propaganda czars spread rumors of his supernatural, godlike powers, he nevertheless profited off his people's suffering, hypocritically teaching that Communism was the only way forward while he himself enjoyed a luxurious lifestyle in the showcase capital of Pyongyang. Kim Il-sung's failure to pay his debts to neighboring allies, such as the Soviet Union and China, led to an economic collapse and widespread famine that decimated the country of North Korea and resulted in the deaths of millions of citizens. When Kim Il-sung died in 1994, the famine was still in its early days, and he had denied entirely that any food shortage was present in the country even as people began dying in the streets. His people mourned him publicly for a period of 10 days, during which heart attacks and bouts of heatstroke ravaged the mourners. The total cult of personality Kim Il-sung erected around himself mirrored the efforts of leaders like Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong to ensure the complete loyalty of the people he ruled, even as his policies decimated their social, financial, and bodily well-being. Kim Il-sung's notoriety persists to this day, and his descendants Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un have tried throughout their respective leaderships to get their people to adore them as they did Kim Il-sung—but the founder of the Kim dynasty's stronghold over his people, Demick suggests, was an historical aberration likely never to be repeated to such a degree.

Kim Jong-il – Kim Jong-il was the son of Kim Il-sung and the

leader of North Korea from his father's death in 1994 until his own demise in 2011. When Kim Jong-il took control of the country, North Korea was already in the throes of a severe food shortage. But under his corrupt leadership, which continued to demonize commerce and hammer home the importance of isolationist politics, the country found itself in a full-blown famine. Estimates suggest that millions of North Koreans lost their lives over the course of Kim Jong-il's reign. Though the regime insisted the people revere him as a Christlike or godlike figure—the perfect son of his perfect father—many North Koreans saw Kim Jong-il as responsible for the scarcity and starvation that came to define their lives and held him in much lower esteem than they had his father. Kim Jong-il was notorious for his crackdowns on desperate people who turned to the black market to make money or attempted to defect, throwing more and more citizens into labor camps and gulags. Kim Jong-il purged the country's military to weed out those who were lenient about surveilling and punishing merchants, defectors, and ordinary citizens who accidentally or purposefully leaked anti-state sentiment. Demick depicts Kim Jong-il as a ruthless leader determined to live up to—and even overshadow—his father's legacy, even as he ignored his people's suffering in pursuit of consolidating absolute power.

Kim Jong-un – Kim Jong-un is, as of 2020, the leader of North Korea. The son of Kim Jong-il and the grandson of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-un rose to power in 2011 following his father's death. Considered by many an unlikely choice to lead North Korea, Kim Jong-un has, since his ascent to power, attempted incessantly to remind the world of North Korea's growing nuclear and technology capabilities through a series of missile launches, nuclear tests, and cyberattacks. Kim Jong-un's eccentric behavior and almost childlike investment in renovating North Korea's amusement parks even as his people starve has earned him a strange reputation—yet his ruthless dispatching of many of his own family members and his father's former political allies has marked him as a leader with as much desperation and as little mercy as his predecessors in the Kim dynasty.

Chang-bo – Chang-bo was Mrs. Song's husband. He was a tall, strapping member of the Workers' Party with a lust for life and a great appreciation for food. Chang-bo's high social standing, or songbun, enabled his family to live well and to possess luxuries such as a **television**—but even Chang-bo's status within the Workers' Party could not protect him from the wrath of the regime. When Chang-bo made a joke in the presence of a neighbor about a misleading ad he saw on state television, he was arrested, beaten, and interrogated at a state facility for three days, alerting his wife to the fact that no matter how respected they seemed to be, they were always at the mercy of the regime. Chang-bo suffered mightily as the famine descended upon North Korea. Though he struggled to hold on, Chang-bo passed away in 1996 at the height of the famine after strokes and edema weakened him beyond help.

Nam-oak – Nam-oak was Mrs. Song's son. He was a rebel who defied North Korean social mores by engaging in premarital sex with a woman much older than he. As a result, Nam-oak's childhood dreams of athletic glory never came to fruition. He died in 1997, at the height of the famine, after a bout of pneumonia worsened by starvation.

Tae-woo – Tae-woo was Mi-ran's father. Originally from South Korea, Tae-woo fought for South Korea in the Korean War and was brought to North Korea as a prisoner of war. The regime refused to release him after the war ended, and Tae-woo lived out his days in North Korea as a miner whose heritage made him a person of beulsun, or tainted blood. Tae-woo's *beulsun* came to affect his entire family's social standing and future prospects in North Korea. Tae-woo passed away in 1997—his final wish was that his family contact his distant relatives in South Korea. Eventually, Mi-ran, her sister So-hee, her brother Sok-ju, and their mother would defect to South Korea with the help of Tae-woo's long-lost family.

Mi-hee – Mi-hee is Mi-ran's oldest sister, a talented singer who nonetheless struggled to use her talents due to their family's beulsun, or tainted blood. Mi-hee was already married with children when Mi-ran, Sok-ju, So-hee, and their mother defected in 1998; she did not travel with them, and she was later imprisoned in a labor camp as retribution for their crimes. As of the time of *Nothing to Envy*'s publication in 2009, Mi-hee and her sister Mi-sook were presumed dead.

Mi-sook – Mi-sook is one of Mi-ran's older sisters. She did not defect with Mi-ran and the rest of their family in 1998. Mi-ran later learned that Mi-sook and Mi-hee were sent to labor camps as retribution for their family's crimes. Mi-ran began to believe, after several years of no word, that her sisters were both dead.

MINOR CHARACTERS

So-hee – So-hee is one of Mi-ran's sisters. She defected with Mi-ran, Sok-ju, and their mother in 1998.

Sok-ju – Sok-ju is Mi-ran's youngest brother.

Syngman Rhee – Syngman Rhee was a South Korean politician who served as the first president of South Korea from 1948 to 1960. He led a corrupt and authoritarian government, even as he condemned the totalitarian, communist government led by Kim Il-sung in North Korea.

Choi Yong-su – Choi Yong-su is Oak-hee's cruel, selfish, and abusive husband. He regularly beats Oak-hee and refuses to let her share their vast stores of stockpiled food with her starving family.

Yong-hee – Yong-hee is Mrs. Song's youngest daughter.

Minyuan – Minyuan is the Chinese man to whom Oak-hee sells herself as a bride after defecting to China from North Korea.

Minyuan is a simple, kind, quiet man who genuinely cares for Oak-hee, even though their marriage is not recognized by any legal authority.

Mi-ran's Mother The mother of Mi-ran and her siblings. She defected to China from North Korea along with Mi-ran and two other of her children.

TERMS

Beulsun – A Korean word for "tainted blood" used to single out individuals whose families' prior sins—which might stretch back generations—make social mobility impossible.

Bowibu – The Bowibu is the North Korean national security agency that investigates political crimes.

Hanawon – Hanawon is aA halfway house and reeducation center just outside of Seoul where recent refugees from North Korea spend several months upon their arrivals learning about the outside world and acquiring the life skills needed to survive in the bustling country that is South Korea.

Inminban – The *inminban*, literally the "people's group[s]," are cooperatives of about twenty 20 families whose job it is to "keep tabs on one another" and make sure their neighborhoods run smoothly. Each *inminban*, which functions like a citizen's watch group, has an elected leader who reports suspicious talk or activity to higher-ranking authorities in the police force or the military.

Juche – *Juche* is a complex, difficult-to-translate ethos espousing strength, self-reliance, and the theory that "man is the master of his destiny." *Juche* is the founding ideology of North Korea and . It was developed by the country's first Great Leader, **Kim Il-sung**. *Juche* has evolved over the years—often based on the whims of the government—and has been used widely as propaganda for the values of stoicism, isolationism, and overzealous self-defense and military greatness that keep North Korean citizens focused on giving their all to the regime even as they starve and suffer. **Barbara Demick** positions suggests that while *juche* as a founding ideology that, while was initially meant to galvanize the people of a small, impoverished country, it has been transformed over the years into less of afrom a rallying cry than to a death sentence for citizens who cling to its failed promises.

Kochebi – In North Korea, *kochebi*, or "wandering swallows," are the masses of children orphaned and left alone after their parents die or abandon them in search of food. These children were named the *kochebi* at the height of the famine in the mid-1990s for their tendency to flock together like birds scavenging for crumbs and migrating across the country in groups for added protection.

Songbun – *Songbun* is the system of ascribed, often unchangeable status within the social hierarchy of North Korea. One's *songbun* is based on the political, social, and economic statii status of one's ancestors, stretching back at least three generations. One's *songbun* is difficult to shift upwards, —but one's *songbun*it can easily be negatively impacted by a relative's rogue speech or behavior. *Songbun* determines the opportunities and responsibilities one can take on in terms of education and work, what kinds of rations one receives, and whether a person is eligible to join the Workers' Party.

Songun – *Songun* is the North Korean political ideology which that emphasizes a "military- first" approach to government and society. **Barbara Demick** argues that the rhetoric of *songun* and other military-first propaganda has been used to justify the government's prioritization of comfort and plenty for the members of the North Korean military, even as ordinary citizens suffer and starve.

The 38th Parallel – The 38thth parallel is a popular name given to latitude 38? N—the latitude marker which roughly separates North Korea from South Korea. The 38thth parallel was chosen somewhat arbitrarily by U.S. military planners at the Potsdam Conference toward the end of World War II in July of 1945 as a way of placing North Korea under Soviet control and South Korea under U.S. control. The demarcation was intended to be temporary, but the Cold War increased tensions between the Soviet regime and the United States, thus deepening divisions between North and South Korea. **Barbara Demick** notes that the division at the 38thth parallel represents a profound lack of Western understanding about the geopolitics of the Korean peninsula., which was Hhistorically, the peninsula was divided longitudinally between eEast and wWest, with the eastern part of the peninsula tending to be more sympathetic to and accepting of Japanese influence and the western part traditionally allying itself with China.

The Korean War – The Korean War was a war between North Korea, which was backed by China and the Soviet Union, and South Korea, which was backed principally by the United States. The war began in June of 1950, when North Korean forces invaded South Korea, and ended in July of 1953, after South Korean forces, aided by the U.S. military, had pushed North Korean armies back to about the 38th parallel. The war ended unofficially in an armistice, or a cease-fire, with the creation of a demilitarized zone between the two countries to serve as a neutral zone between the two sovereign states.

The Workers' Party of Korea – The Workers' Party of Korea is the founding—and ruling—political party of North Korea. The W.P.K. espouses the juche ideology, the songun military-first policy, and the supremacy and infallibility of the Great Leader, who, as of 2020, is **Kim Jong-un**, the youngest member of the Kim dynasty. Membership in the Workers' Party is exclusive and highly sought after, seen by many North Koreans as a pathway to a better, more comfortable life.

THEMES

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

PROPAGANDA, MISINFORMATION, DECEPTION, AND CONTROL

In *Nothing to Envy*, Barbara Demick investigates the lives of ordinary people who have defected from North Korea. Throughout the book, Demick shows how a constant stream of state propaganda has been used to deceive and control a population of over 25 million. By exploring the use of propaganda as a means of deception and control, Demick suggests that when the concept of objective truth is eradicated, people can be completely controlled by misinformation.

First, Demick shows how propaganda is an effective means of control in North Korea in part because it's so constant. Demick explains that propaganda constantly bombards North Koreans in the form of billboards, state **television**, and even loud, chipper public service announcements which Workers' Party members blare from megaphones mounted to vans that drive through cities and villages. Although this constant stream of propaganda, Demick says, "invites parody" and makes it seem as if the North Korean people are willing to buy all too easily into the idea of their leaders' greatness, she urges her readers to understand the effect this constant saturation of propaganda has on the vulnerable, often starving population of North Korea. Their "indoctrination" begins during days spent in factory daycares; as adolescents, their school curriculum revolves around the deification of their leaders; the only forms of edification and entertainment available to adult citizens are films, songs, and articles that glorify the regime.

Another reason that the propaganda machine is so compelling is that it frames North Korea's leader as not just a powerful politician but a divine figure. Kim Il-sung positioned himself as a benevolent, mystical father figure, and likewise positioned his son, Kim Jong-il, as Christ. Indeed, the media proclaimed that Kim Il-sung had the ability to calm seas in times of trouble and enshroud himself in fog in the presence of his enemies—and even defy death. After Kim Il-sung's funeral, North Korean media suggested that ordinary citizens might be able to bring him back to life if they cried hard enough over his loss. All North Koreans are required to keep pictures of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un hung on the walls of their home and maintained pristinely. Taking the photos down is punishable by a sentence to a labor camp. The adornment of these images on the walls of every home in North Korea is reminiscent of icons in Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy: a way for practitioners to always remember that God, through Jesus, made himself flesh. In this way, Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un position themselves as sacred, divine, and worthy of constant supplication.

Next, Demick illustrates how it is not just the frequency and fervor of North Korea's propaganda that make it so difficult to resist—it is also the fact that regime replaces objective truth with pointed misinformation in order to create disorientation, fear, and anger. Thus, the propaganda machine is able to clinch the regime's ability to manipulate and control the masses by sowing discord and confusion. Demick focuses specifically on the ways in which the government used propaganda throughout the notorious famine of the 1990s in order to convince citizens that things weren't as bad as they seemed—and that North Korea's misfortune was the result of the actions of bad actors abroad. The government broadcasted messages about how food was being stockpiled to feed "the starving South Korean masses on the blessed day of reunification," that the U.S. had blockaded North Korea to starve them out, and that enduring hunger was a "patriotic duty." None of these things were true: South Korea was, by the mid-1990s, one of the wealthiest countries in the world, while North Korea's famine was due to fractures in North Korea's relationships with China and the Soviet Union, not a U.S. blockade.

Demick points to this new propaganda campaign as a distillation and new weaponization of the decades of indoctrination the North Korean people had already weathered. Convinced as they were by state materials that their Great Leader was benevolent, generous, and indeed in possession of magical, God-like powers, the North Korean masses were poised to believe any message he passed down. Knowing that the people could be manipulated, Kim Il-sung and his government fed the masses lies and excuses in order to make starving seem not just unavoidable, but noble. Demick sees the famine as a turning point in the state propaganda machine: a national crisis provided a test they could not afford to fail. By piling on even more fawning ideology about Kim Il-sung's intelligence, benevolence, and staunch defense of his people against outside aggressors, the government was able to keep its people in the dark about what was truly happening in their country and manipulate them into complacency even as food rations stalled, jobs dried up, and electricity cut out.

Demick argues that the use of propaganda in North Korea has created a vicious cycle in which the North Korean people cling desperately to what the state tells them as the only path to salvation—even as state messaging is manufactured expressly in order to create more desperation, instill greater control, and muddy the line between truth and deception. Demick suggests that by eating away at the concept of objective truth—and by isolating North Koreans from access to outside media—the

North Korean government is able to exert an almost baffling measure of control over ordinary citizens.

ISOLATIONISM AND SELF-RELIANCE

North Korea's isolationist government seeks to instill the ideal of juche—an untranslatable ethos that relates to self-reliance and total independence—in its people at every turn. *Juche* combines elements of Marxism, Confucianism, and nationalism in order to depict the Democratic People's Republic of Korea as a separate, special, and even divinely-chosen state. In particular, Barbara Demick argues that the North Korean government uses the language of *juche* to convince its people that suffering is noble, that other nations are evil and insignificant, and that there is "nothing to envy" about what the rest of the world has to offer. In other words, the North Korean regime's strength stems from the way it uses *juche* rhetoric to isolate its citizens from the outside world.

Demick shows how the idea of *juche* was specifically created to turn the North Korean people against almost the entirety of the outside world, isolating them entirely. Following the arbitrary division of the Korean Peninsula in the wake of World War II, the Korean War, which began in 1950, marked North Korea's attempt to enforce what it believed was a legitimate claim to be the sole government of the peninsula. American troops intervened to stop the Sino-Korean push southward, and the peninsula remained divided around the 38th parallel. With a parcel of the peninsula containing only 20% arable land, the North Korean regime knew that to maintain power in the wake of an embarrassing defeat—and to keep people dedicated to the regime no matter what food struggles loomed on the horizon—they needed to come up with a concept that would unify the country. Kim Il-sung, the leader of North Korea, introduced the philosophical system of *juche*—a hybrid ideology drawing on the self-determination of man and a deadly serious brand of Korean nationalism. North Koreans internalized *juche* and rejected the idea that they should be dependent on any other country—even powerful neighbors like China and Russia—for aid. Demick writes that *juche* was especially "seductive to a proud people whose dignity had been trampled by its neighbors for centuries." Demick is careful to explain the ideology behind *juche* in detail in order to set up how dearly North Korean people were encouraged to cling to it. Kim Il-sung, revered as a divine leader, convinced his people to see the entire outside world as one giant enemy. By hammering home the importance of self-reliance, he was attempting to head off the major issues that would plague North Korea in the decades to come.

Demick then goes on to enumerate the ways in which the government uses the rhetoric of *juche* to subjugate North Korean citizens and keep them isolated physically and ideologically—even as government elites hypocritically enjoy comfort, luxury, and contact with the outside world. Though *juche* was the government's primary tool for encouraging the masses to blindly weather the terrible famine of the 1990s, Demick shows how profoundly dangerous an ethos of self-reliance is in times when there are no resources or support upon which to rely. The famine was the result of two major factors: floods and droughts which devastated North Korea's already tiny percentage of arable land, illustrating that North Korea could not rely on its own soil to sustain its people. The second factor was deteriorating relationships with other socialist regimes, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union. North Korea relied on other governments like it for support and solidarity, claiming that relying on like-minded governments was acceptable—when that fell apart, North Korea had nowhere to turn. Just as the North Korean propaganda machine thrives by alienating citizens from objective truth, the North Korean regime remains in total control by lying. The regime, Demick illustrates, elevates values of independence, self-reliance, and exceptionalism—even as it hypocritically begs foreign aid in order to keep the political and military elite pampered while allowing common citizens to starve. During the worst of the famine, between 1996 and 2005, North Korea received $2.4 billion in aid from countries around the world. Though the regime accepted the offers of food, they made sure to house the representatives from aid agencies who arrived in North Korea in the showcase capital of Pyongyang, putting fake fruit in shop windows and lining the streets with members of the elite to project an image of health, prosperity, and self-sufficiency. Foreign aid workers, whose job it was to evaluate just how bad things were in North Korea and how much help they needed both monetarily and materially, were confused by reports of starvation that didn't line up with the false, propagandistic image they were being shown in Pyongyang. As a result, large aid packages began to slow to a trickle. This incident demonstrates the ways in which *juche*, while used to convince North Korean citizens to suffer in silence and to continue working for the collective even as individual food rations ceased, was ultimately a sham meant to control the masses and keep them in the dark about the depths of what was going on. While spouting a motto of self-reliance and nationalism—and presenting a false face to the world—the North Korean government sought to bring in aid that the people who most needed it would never see.

Demick suggests that while *juche* was perhaps once meant to unify the North Korean people, it is now used as a stubborn and destructive rejection of the rest of the world and a tool of control and brainwashing. By committing to a national ethos of exceptionalism and extreme isolation, North Korea has become a place of scarcity and stalled progress. Juche, Demick ultimately argues, is no longer a rallying cry—it is a death sentence.

SURVEILLANCE, TRUST, AND RELATIONSHIPS

Throughout *Nothing to Envy*, Barbara Demick describes the constant surveillance and monitoring that defines daily life in North Korea. State police and citizen watch groups, or inminban, monitor how citizens react to propaganda broadcasts and what families talk about in the privacy of their homes, creating an environment in which free speech is a deadly liability, even amongst family members. This kind of domineering surveillance, Demick argues, breeds deep distrust among people, destroying their personal relationships as well as society more broadly.

Demick first explores how the atmosphere of hyper-vigilance and informing on others is the product of a totalitarian regime that has, for decades, punished anyone who speaks out against its leaders. "Spying on one's countrymen is something of a national pastime [in North Korea,]" Barbara Demick writes. Ordinary citizens who report on anti-regime sentiments to their superiors at work or in the *inminban*, or citizen's watch, often stand to bolster their own reputations or social standings through spying and snitching—as a result, surveillance and betrayal are constantly incentivized. In a society in which one's songbun, or social status, is more or less fixed at birth and determined by the actions of generations past, there is little hope for social mobility—but in proving loyalty to the regime by informing on others, one might be able to amass some good faith and even change one's fate. This poses a practical problem for the formation of authentic, truthful connections or any kind of fundamental trust between neighbors or family members. Because of the constant threat of being turned in for any questioning of the regime, it is impossible, Demick argues, for any truthful relationships to form. Even in households of tight-knit families who live five to a room, what is said in private is not privileged information—neighbors could hear through the paper-thin walls of the "harmonica" style row housing, or a member of the family, desperate and starving, might already be seeking a path to a greater social position by snitching on their kin. Demick uses the example of a North Korean man, Chang-bo, seeing a report on state **television** about a factory making plentiful amounts of rubber boots. When Chang-bo sarcastically asked where his children's boots were, if there were so many to be had, one of their neighbors reported him to the Ministry for the Protection of State Security, or the political police—Chang-bo was arrested, beaten, and interrogated for three days.

Demick goes on to investigate how the long-term effects of living in a surveillance state erodes not just practical but emotional points of connection, leading to an individual's inability to form or maintain secure, trusting, bonded relationships—even with those closest to them. To do this, Demick uses the example of Mi-ran and Jun-sang—two young lovers from very different families who nonetheless found themselves drawn to one another at a young age. Mi-ran and Jun-sang would meet up after dark and take long walks through the pitch-black countryside each night. It took them three years to hold hands, and over six years to share a kiss on the cheek. Their relationship was marked by the directive to maintain utter chastity and purity, instilled in young people by the Korean government (a directive, Demick suggests, ultimately meant to keep young people from procreating early and thus bringing more mouths to feed into the country). Though Mi-ran and Jun-sang had reasons for keeping the physical aspects of their relationship on hold, their capacity for emotional connection, Demick suggests, was stymied by the atmosphere of surveillance and snitching within the regime. Mi-ran and Jun-sang both began questioning the regime privately during their separate educations at different colleges. While Mi-ran studied to be a teacher and Jun-sang attended an elite university in Pyongyang in the mid-1990s, at the height of the famine, they separately found ways to consume outside media and illegal foreign broadcasts—and even began considering escape. Neither, however, told the other about their feelings or suspicions in the lengthy letters they sent back and forth—how could they, when the mail service regularly read and intercepted letters searching for anti-regime sentiment? As a result, Mi-ran fled in secret with her family, leaving Jun-sang behind—hurt, confused, and in disbelief that he and Mi-ran missed the chance to connect over their shared suspicions and run away together.

Years later, when Demick interviews Mi-ran and Jun-sang—both of whom defected successfully to South Korea—side-by-side, it is clear that they harbor a sense of uncertainty about the other. They were never able to be fully honest with each other as young lovers for fear that the other would turn them in. Demick implies that this engrained sense of distrust has impacted both Mi-ran and Jun-sang in their independent, adult lives in South Korea as well: they still have difficulty being fully honest with one another, though they are free to speak their minds at last.

By showing how an atmosphere in which surveilling, snitching, and spying on one's friends, neighbors, and family members is incentivized erodes the fabric of society, Demick suggests that there is no hope for reform, revolution, or true solidarity in North Korea. Though the DPRK claims to be built on communal living and solidarity, Demick exposes the ways in which the regime's desperate bids for total control has turned its people against each other, profoundly and permanently eroding the basic trust necessary to build a functioning society.

SCARCITY, STARVATION, AND DESPERATION

Barbara Demick's *Nothing to Envy* explores the famine that struck North Korea in the mid-1990s, taking the lives of anywhere between 240,000 and 3.5 million

people. As Demick interviews defectors about their experiences struggling to survive what the North Korean government termed the Arduous March, she paints a picture of physical, social, and mental starvation. By presenting painful and stark descriptions of a country wasting away, Demick ultimately argues that scarcity and starvation can force people to do unthinkable things—and endure indescribable pain—out of the sheer will to survive.

Throughout the book, Demick highlights several instances in which her interviewees recall doing or enduring horrible things in order to survive, illustrating how unthinkable circumstances can inspire unspeakable acts. Kim Hyuck, one of Demick's interviewees, was known as a child as one of the uncountable kochebi, or wandering swallows—the name given to children who, at the height of the famine in the mid-1990s, took to the streets to beg, barter, and steal food when their families or the state orphanages in which they were housed were unable to provide for them any longer. Hyuck first stole from a stranger when he was just 10 years old—he was arrested, but as soon as he was released, he went back to stealing from orchards, pilfering snacks from people at train stations, and even killing animals to survive. Hyuck recalls an incident in which he and a friend drowned a dog before skinning and barbequing it. Though dog meat, Demick notes, is part of the traditional Korean diet, Hyuck "felt bad" about the brutal way in which the animal was caught and killed. Even after joining a street gang of other *kochebi* for protection, Hyuck recalls falling asleep each night full of fear that another child would steal from him while he slept—or that a cannibal would come along, kidnap him, and eat him. In 1997, Hyuck began crossing the Tumen river illegally into China, bringing goods to sell back and forth across the border and risking arrest, torture, and even death in so doing. Hyuck was eventually arrested in about 1998 and placed in a labor camp, where, for over 20 months, he watched men starve and die in between hard labor shifts each day. In relaying Kim Hyuck's story, Demick emphasizes how even young children are exposed to desperation, cruelty, and fear under the North Korean regime. The scramble for food occupies the *kochebis'* entire lives as malnourishment warps their bodies and fear disrupts their development. Unthinkable actions become ordinary at a very young age. In including Hyuck's tale, Demick shows how starvation and scarcity push people to the brink and, indeed, numb them to what it means to witness or to commit an atrocity against another living, breathing thing.

Demcick uses the story of Mrs. Song—a dedicated factory worker who was loyal to the regime—to illustrate how scarcity and starvation often force people to confront unbearable choices. In 1995, Demick reports, Mrs. Song had been forced to sell all of her and her husband Chang-bo's possessions in order to make enough money to buy food on the black market. The factory was closed, and Mrs. Song was no longer receiving ration tickets in exchange for her work. After selling their valuables, Mrs. Song and her husband had no choice but to illegally sell their apartment for the equivalent of $3,000 and move into a tiny shack. Chang-bo died within months, while Mrs. Song was out foraging in the hills for weeds and barks to turn into soup. Shortly thereafter, Mrs. Song's son, Nam-oak, contracted pneumonia during a cold winter. Mrs. Song rushed to the hospital to obtain medicine for her son. A doctor wrote her a penicillin prescription—which she sold for 50 won in order to buy corn. Nam-oak died months later in the same manner Chang-bo did—alone and starving while Mrs. Song scrounged for food. Mrs. Song doesn't commit any crimes against her family—rather, she does everything she can with every waking moment she has to ensure their survival—but she still loses many of them one by one, even as she makes impossible decisions in hopes of saving them. In highlighting the desperation Mrs. Song exhibited to obtain scraps of food for her family—and, most notably, the choices she had to make between food and medication, and between staying at home with her sick loved ones and abandoning them in hopes of finding food for them—Demick shows how scarcity and starvation can force one to choose between two horrible, impossible outcomes.

Sometimes, Demick shows, simply turning a blind eye to the suffering associated with starvation and scarcity in order to survive can feel like a great atrocity in and of itself. Kim Ji-eun, a doctor who treated starving children at the height of the famine, watched helplessly as many of her young patients died in front of her. Mi-ran, who worked as a teacher, witnessed her kindergarten class's enrollment drop from 50 students to 15 in just over three years. In sharing their stories, Demick shows how both of these women remain haunted by the indifference they showed at the height of the famine, not recognizing that that indifference was an "acquired survival skill." Learning to "stop caring" and to suppress "any impulse to share food," Demick suggests, is, to these women, as evil as actively taking food away from someone. Demick, however, reports on these instances with compassion, suggesting that the women's desperation to survive was natural and unavoidable—yet still an example of the great, unimaginable lengths to which a starving person will go in order to survive another day.

Demick illustrates the horrors of starvation in painstaking detail throughout *Nothing to Envy*, but she never seeks to invoke melodrama. Instead, she uses graphic descriptions of scarcity and starvation to impress upon readers just how deep and painful the decisions starvation forces people to make truly are.

ESCAPE, TRAUMA, AND SURVIVOR'S GUILT

Over the last 20 years, for an increasing number of North Koreans, illegal escape into China, Mongolia, or South Korea has transformed from an unthinkable

impossibility into an attainable—if highly dangerous—reality. Interviewing five defectors now living in South Korea's bustling capital of Seoul to put together narratives about ordinary life in North Korea, Barbara Demick highlights the fear, uncertainty, and instability that follow these refugees as they make new lives for themselves in other countries. In her interviews with the defectors, Demick finds one common thread in all five stories: their lives outside of North Korea remain defined by the memories of the horrific things they saw and did while still living in their home country—and the resultant guilt they now feel about having escaped and left their families and their former lives behind. Demick suggests that the traumas of malnourishment, totalitarianism, propaganda, and isolation from the rest of the world—and the guilt of surviving it all—define life for North Korean defectors long after they have left their homeland.

Through Mrs. Song's story, Demick shows how remorse can impact survivors' abilities to enjoy their freedom because of the guilt they feel about having left their old lives behind. All defectors from North Korea are brought immediately upon arrival in South Korea to the secluded campus of Hanawon, a kind of trade-school-turned-halfway-house where, for several months following their escapes, North Koreans are taught the truth about the world, modern technology, and the basics of South Korean society. Though the program at Hanawon is meant to help survivors adapt and acclimate to their new lives, the re-education program cannot erase the scars and associations North Koreans bring with them across the border. Demick points out how, while eating at a restaurant with interviewee Mrs. Song, Mrs. Song began nearly crying when waiters brought out bowl after bowl of steaming food—she was reminded of her husband Chang-bo's final words as he lay dying of starvation: "Let's go to a good restaurant and order a nice bottle of wine." Mrs. Song, Demick reports, found herself unable to enjoy the comforts of modern life, such as a nice meal in a restaurant, because of the guilt she felt over her husband's inability to enjoy them alongside her. Mrs. Song's survivor's guilt is palpable and intense in spite of all she has learned about how powerless she was in North Korea to stand up against the injustices she witnessed or to save her family from the ravages of famine.

Next, Demick uses Mi-ran's story to illustrate how "guilt and shame are […] common denominators among North Korean defectors," and how guilt is a big part of defectors' lives. Though Mi-ran married a kind man, gave birth to a healthy son, and pursued a graduate education all within a couple years of arriving in South Korea, Demick writes that Mi-ran remained "shaped" by the indoctrination and betrayal she suffered in North Korea (and the stubborn self-interest she learned in order to survive the famine.) Mi-ran confided in Demick during one of their interviews that her older sisters had been arrested simultaneously in 1999, six months after several other members of their family defected. Mi-ran knew, she told Demick, that her sisters were being punished for her crimes. This, Demick suggests, compounded the guilt that Mi-ran already struggled to excise from her new life in South Korea. Not only did Mi-ran have to contend with the survivor's guilt that is common in North Korean defectors—she had to learn how to work through the guilt of knowing that her sisters were suffering in order to focus on her own family.

Finally, Demick uses Dr. Kim's story to show how survivor's guilt and the ability to resolve old traumas often manifests as denial—in the case of these defectors, as the unlikely belief that one day it will be possible to return home to a reformed, open North Korea. Dr. Kim, who fell victim to a pyramid scheme shortly after she defected and found her medical degree useless in South Korea, clung to North Korean manners of dress for many years and even claimed that if she knew earlier what she had come to learn about life in South Korea, she would not have left the north. Demick later reveals, however, that several years after Dr. Kim defected, they met up for another interview—Dr. Kim had left her "tacky" North Korean style behind, yet she still harbored dreams of bringing South Korean ideas about elder care she'd learned in her new medical school program back across the border once the country was reunified. This illustrates that even as Dr. Kim took steps forward in her new life, she remained tied to a hope for reunification—and some kind of return to the land she once called home—out of guilt over her inability to use her new skills to help serve her own people, as she always hoped she would as a naïve young doctor in North Korea.

In demonstrating the traumas that haunt those who have left North Korea, Demick seeks to underscore that though one may physically leave, one can "never completely escape the terror that is North Korea." Even after leaving, the survivors Demick interviews remain disturbed by their pasts, unable to fully let go of the pain they endured in their shared homeland.

SYMBOLS

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

TELEVISION

Throughout *Nothing to Envy*, television symbolizes the ways in which North Korean citizens are given the illusion of choice and freedom within the crushing omnipresence of the Kim dynasty's propaganda machine. By the 1990s, television was a permanent fixture in most households in the developed world. Television is a way of connecting with other perspectives, escaping into fantasy, and staying informed in a practical way. In North Korea, however, owning a television was—and still is—not just a luxury but a

government-issued privilege. Author Barbara Demick reports that in the mid-1990s, North Korean citizens had to apply for permits to obtain a television—and once they were granted that permission, they found that their televisions broadcast only state programming on a constant loop. Televisions, then, provide certain North Korean households with the illusion of luxury and freedom while continuing to serve only the state's interest by broadcasting incessant propaganda. The regime, she suggests, issue televisions to prominent members of certain communities so that their propaganda can reach entire villages of citizens who huddle around their more-privileged neighbors' televisions to watch news broadcasts, documentaries, and other programming that serves to glorify the regime and perpetuate false information about the goings-on within North Korea and in the outside world. Throughout the book, Demick invokes the symbol of television to illustrate the dangerous, insidious character of North Korean propaganda.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *Nothing to Envy* published in 2010.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Jun-sang had been [...] the person in whom [Mi-ran] confided. [...] 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.

Related Characters: Barbara Demick (speaker), Jun-sang, Mi-ran

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

In the first chapter of *Nothing to Envy*, Barbara Demick establishes what daily life looked and felt like for ordinary citizens of North Korea living there through the height of the country's miserable famine in the 1990s. She uses the life stories of a few individuals—defectors whom she interviewed in the mid-2000s—in order to paint detailed portraits of these ordinary yet extraordinary lives.

In this passage, Demick draws on an interview with a young defector, Mi-ran, as she establishes the atmosphere that governs daily life and even intimate relationships in North Korea. It's an atmosphere of constant, intense surveillance and the omnipresent threat of being snitched on by a loved one. In a regime that demands absolute loyalty from its citizens—and rewards those who turn others in by elevating their social standing and increasing their rations—it is impossible to know who, if anyone, can be trusted. In the present, Mi-ran still feels guilty about her failure to trust her boyfriend Jun-sang years after defecting. But as Mi-ran describes the abundance of caution needed to survive in an ultra-violent and hyper-vigilant totalitarian state, Demick helps her readers understand the dangers ordinary things like trust and openness pose to people like Mi-ran.

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.

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

LET'S LIVE OUR OWN WAY.

WE WILL DO AS THE PARTY TELLS US.

WE HAVE NOTHING TO ENVY IN THE WORLD.

Related Characters: Barbara Demick (speaker), Kim Jong-il, Kim Il-sung

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening chapter of the book, Demick establishes the emotional atmosphere of claustrophobic, constant surveillance in North Korea, as well as the elusive details of what physical life looks and feels like within the intensely isolated country. As she describes the drab, gray landscapes of the countryside and cities alike, Demick notes that the only source of color in the entire country comes from the ubiquitous propaganda posters and billboards that dot the uniform countryside. The billboards extoll the greatness of Kim Il-sung, the country's founder and first great leader, and his son Kim Jong-il. They express the isolationist rhetoric of

juche, or militant self-reliance: "Let's live our own way." They very plainly and authoritatively command citizens to do as the ruling political party, the Workers' Party of Korea, tells them: "We will do as the party tells us." They insist that citizens' lives are perfect as they are and would not be better anywhere else, flying almost cruelly in the face of the facts of the constant food shortages which continue to plague North Koreans even in the 21st century: "We have nothing to envy in the world." By breaking down how constant exposure to propaganda and isolationist rhetoric influence citizens' perceptions of their own lives, forcing misinformation and confusion onto them at every turn, Demick begins to explore some of the book's major themes.

Chapter 2 Quotes

Yet for all their wealth, the Japanese Koreans occupied a lowly position in the North Korean hierarchy. No matter that they were avowed Communists who gave up comfortable lives in Japan, they were lumped in with the hostile class. The regime couldn't trust anyone with money who wasn't a member of the Workers' Party. They were among the few North Koreans permitted to have contact with the outside, and that in itself made them unreliable; the strength of the regime came from its ability to isolate its own citizens completely.

Related Characters: Barbara Demick (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Demick focuses on Jun-sang, a young man whose grandparents had lived in Japan amongst a community of ethnic Koreans for a long time. She explores his heritage to illustrate the tensions the regime faced as it sought ways to increasingly isolate and thus control its citizens throughout the 20th century. People like Jun-sang, whose families had ties to the outside world—and who could thus receive outside news reports or financial support—were seen as direct threats to the regime. People like Jun-sang and his family were limited in their prospects in life and more heavily surveilled than those who were perceived as being more authentically loyal to the regime. Demick uses Jun-sang's life story and personal struggles to highlight the connection between propaganda and control, isolationism, and surveillance. When a country's longevity depends on its ability to keep its citizens physically sequestered and both emotionally and psychologically isolated, Demick suggests, every single point of connection to the outside world is a pressing threat that must be dealt with no matter the cost.

Chapter 3 Quotes

North Korea invites parody. We laugh at the excesses of the propaganda and the gullibility of the people. But consider that their indoctrination began in infancy, during the fourteen-hour days spent in factory day-care centers; that for the subsequent fifty years' every song, film, newspaper article, and billboard was designed to deify Kim Il-sung; that the country was hermetically sealed to keep out anything that might cast doubt on Kim Il-sung's divinity Who could possibly resist?

Related Characters: Barbara Demick (speaker), Kim Il-sung

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 45-46

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Demick attempts to help her readers understand exactly why the North Korean regime is so effective in spite of its inflammatory rhetoric, economic impotence, and uncanny, stuck-in-time quality. Everything that makes North Korea strange and worthy of parody, she argues, has a dark underside that has actually been carefully engineered to brainwash, manipulate, and control its citizens from the day of their birth. The "hermetically sealed" (or isolated) country creates its own narrative about its past, its leaders, its economy, and the outside world—all the while keeping facts and truth far away from the people. Demick highlights how the fawning, excessive cults of personality that have sprung up around Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and now Kim Jong-un were contrived to give citizens tangible father figures to try to impress with their loyalty and extreme dedication to the regime. Meanwhile, the skewed, propagandistic media gives citizens the *illusion* of choice and freedom, but it only exists to perpetuate widespread misinformation and the deification of the leaders. It is impossible, Demick suggests, to resist such a deluge.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ The propaganda machine launched a new campaign, playing up Korean pride by recalling a largely apocryphal fable from 1938-39 in which Kim Il-sung commanded a small band of anti-Japanese guerrillas "fighting against thousands of enemies in 20 degrees below zero, braving through a heavy snowfall and starvation." [...] The Arduous March, as they called it, would later become a metaphor for the famine. [...] Enduring hunger became part of one's patriotic duty. Billboards went up in Pyongyang touting the new slogan, "Let's Ear Two Meals a Day." North Korean television ran a documentary about a man whose stomach burst, it was claimed, from eating too much rice.

Related Characters: Barbara Demick (speaker), Kim Il-sung

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 69-70

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Demick describes the North Korean government's tactics for convincing citizens that experiencing hunger was not only normal but in fact noble as the famine descended upon the country in the early 1990s. As the propaganda machine hurtled into overdrive, state media urged citizens to think of themselves as brave and honorable soldiers embarking on an "Arduous March" that mirrored the exaggerated antics of their Great Leader during the Korean War. Knowing that patriotic inspiration might not be enough at first—and certainly wouldn't be sufficient once the famine got even worse—the state also attempted to create propaganda that would shame people into eating less and inspire fear of death or illness if they went against the state's guidelines. In this passage, Demick illustrates the insidious nature of the North Korean propaganda machine, outlining how misinformation and deception are regularly used to control North Korean citizens' behavior as well as their very thoughts. It also casts light upon the dark ways in which the government was preparing to use the *juche* ideal—an ideology based in extreme self-sufficiency and rejection of any outside help—to convince its citizens that any signs of weakness, collaboration with neighbors, or solicitation of help were not just pitiful but criminal.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ "How are we going to live? What are we going to do without our marshal?" The words came tumbling out.

[Chang-bo] didn't react. He sat pale and motionless, staring into space. Mrs. Song couldn't keep still. She was pumped up with adrenaline. She rushed down the staircase and out into the courtyard of the building. Many of her neighbors had done the same. They were on their knees, banging their heads on the pavement. Their wails cut through the air like sirens.

Related Characters: Barbara Demick, Mrs. Song Hee-suk (speaker), Chang-bo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Demick shows how Mrs. Song and her husband Chang-bo's extremely different reactions to the news of Kim Il-sung's passing reflected the widening gulf within North Korea in the years leading up to and directly following the Great Leader's demise. When Kim Il-sung, who was revered as a god figure, died of natural causes, the country went into a period of hysterical mourning. People like Mrs. Song and her neighbors dutifully gathered in the streets to wail, moan, hug, and even physically injure themselves in order to express the depths of their sorrow at the passing of their Grand Marshal. A quiet minority of like Chang-bo, however, found themselves so disillusioned with the leader and his regime that they had trouble mustering the strength to affect true sadness.

This passage is significant because it calls into question which reactions were real and which were not among the North Korean people. In spite of propaganda that revered Kim Il-sung as a god, many North Koreans harbored anti-regime sentiments, which they often kept locked up inside in order to avoid being questioned about their loyalty. Because all North Koreans knew that the punishment for speaking out against the leader was imprisonment or even death, Demick suggests, it is impossible to know which mourners were truly lamenting the loss of a godlike father figure—and which were simply affecting extreme devastation in order to avoid being seen as anti-regime.

Now, surrounded by sobbing students, Jun-sang wondered: If everybody else felt such genuine love for Kim Il-sung and he did nor, how would he possibly fit in? [...] He was alone, completely alone in his indifference. He always thought he had close friends at the university, but now he realized he didn't know them at all. [...]

This revelation was quickly followed by another, equally momentous: his entire future depended on his ability to cry. Not just his career and his membership in the Workers' Party, his very survival was at stake. It was a matter of life and death. Jun-sang was terrified.

Related Characters: Barbara Demick (speaker), Kim Il-sung, Jun-sang

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

Earlier in this chapter, Barbara Demick examined an individual's unemotional reaction to Kim Il-sung's death when she showed the devastated Mrs. Song's husband, Chang-bo, sitting in stunned silence while his wife screamed and wailed in her deep grief. That anecdote, however, was delivered from Mrs. Song's point of view. Now, Demick gets inside the head of Jun-sang—a young university student whose private questioning of the regime made him incapable of feeling anything when the Great Leader passed. In this passage, Jun-sang reckons with the fear of being seen as anti-regime and the crushing knowledge of what would happen to him if one of his classmates reported his strange reaction. In light of this, he decides that he needs to fake his emotions in order to get by.

This passage is significant because it illustrates that there can be no truth or any real emotional connection in a surveillance state. When everyone's emotions are closely monitored in order to gauge their loyalty to an oppressive regime, it's always possible that a huge number of people are affecting emotions they don't truly feel. Jun-sang knew that he'd never survive in a labor camp—or simply back home—at the height of the famine; in order to maintain his social position and his seat at school, he decided to give into the propaganda machine's demands of its citizens and present an emotional front.

Chapter 7 Quotes

As [Dr. Kim] did her rounds, walking through the pediatric ward, the children would follow her with their eyes. Even when her back was turned, she could feel their eyes staring at her white gown, wondering if she could relieve their pain and soon realizing that she could not.

"They would look at me with accusing eyes. Even four-year-olds knew they were dying and that I wasn't doing anything to help them," Dr. Kim told me years later. "All I was capable of doing was to cry with their mothers over their bodies afterward."

Related Characters: Dr. Kim Ji-eun, Barbara Demick (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dr. Kim describes watching her young patients suffer and die right before her eyes at the height of the North Korean famine of the 1990s. Dr. Kim had chosen to switch to pediatrics as the famine began in earnest, hoping that she'd be able to save more young lives—but she quickly realized that children were even more vulnerable to the effects of scarcity and starvation than adults. This passage is significant because it illustrates the ways in which Dr. Kim was forced to adopt an attitude of nonchalance and even cruel indifference in order to stay sane and alive—even as the horror and misery of the famine made itself known in every hour of her waking life. Before she'd even considered defecting from North Korea, Dr. Kim was already contending with shame, remorse, and profound survivor's guilt. Dr. Kim simply couldn't save her patients, and she felt profoundly guilty that she was eating fairly well while the children in her care were dying of starvation. Knowing that no matter what choices she made or how much of herself she gave thousands and thousands of children would die deeply affected her.

Chapter 8 Quotes

Our father, we have nothing to envy in the world.

Our house is within the embrace of the Workers' Party.

We are all brothers and sisters.

Even if a sea of fire comes toward us, sweet children do not need to be afraid,

Our father is here.

We have nothing to envy in this world.

Related Characters: Kim Il-sung, Mi-ran

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

This passage quotes a popular children's song in North Korea. It is the song from which Barbara Demick took the title of her book—the phrase "Nothing to Envy" is painful, profound, and deeply ironic. In this quotation, Demick shows how North Korean children are indoctrinated from a young age with total faith in their leader, their party, and their regime. They are taught to see their leader as a benevolent father figure who unites and protects them all and the Workers' Party that governs their country as a port in the storm.

But Demick emphasizes throughout the book that the opposite is true. The Workers' Party serves only to enact the agenda of North Korea's totalitarian leadership, sacrificing citizens' lives and enforcing the rules of an authoritarian police state in order to maintain a façade of togetherness and prosperity. This song reveals itself as a particularly painful piece of state propaganda as the book continues to unfold. As a "sea of fire" in the form of a debilitating famine did, in fact, seize hold of North Korea, there was no one and nothing to protect ordinary citizens from dying in the streets: still, they were taught that there was no better place in the world, and that to even consider turning to "envy" in times of hardship was anti-state and punishable by death.

❝ It is axiomatic that one death is a tragedy, a thousand is a statistic. So it was for Mi-ran. What she didn't realize is that her indifference was an acquired survival skill. In order to get through the 1990s alive, one had to suppress any impulse to share food. To avoid going insane, one had to learn to stop caring. In time, Mi-ran would learn how to walk around a dead body on the street without paying much notice. She could pass a five-year-old on the verge of death without feeling obliged to help. If she wasn't going to share her food with her favorite pupil, she certainly wasn't going to help a perfect stranger.

Related Characters: Barbara Demick (speaker), Mi-ran

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Demick describes Mi-ran's slowly increasing numbness to the plight of her young elementary school students over the course of the famine. Though Mi-ran initially played favorites with her students and tried to give extra attention to those whom she especially loved or pitied, she soon realized that her attention—or even the sacrifice of her own resources—would not help these children in any meaningful way. Mi-ran realized that she had to focus only on keeping herself sane and fed as well as she could.

This passage is significant because it highlights the ways in which the rhetoric of *juche*, or intense self-reliance, set the stage for North Koreans to ignore one another's suffering in the midst of the famine. Having been taught all their lives that to ask for help was to show weakness, many North Koreans found themselves internalizing their government's isolationist rhetoric in devastating new ways. Mi-ran knew that if she wanted to make it out of the famine alive, she needed to be numb and detached—and so she made the impossible, painful choice to daily work on ignoring the suffering of others, knowing there was nothing she could really do to help.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ Even with his weight loss, Nam-oak was too heavy for Mrs. Song to carry to the hospital-there were no ambulances working by now-so she went herself and explained his condition. A doctor wrote her a prescription for penicillin, but when she got to the market she found it cost 50 won—the same price as a kilo of corn.

She chose the corn.

Nam-oak died in March 1998, alone in the shack.

Related Characters: Barbara Demick (speaker), Mrs. Song Hee-suk, Nam-oak

Related Themes:

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Demick continues her investigation into how scarcity and starvation push ordinary people into making extraordinary—and often humiliating, painful, or morally corrupt—decisions in order to survive. Here, as she describes a painful choice that Mrs. Song was forced to make in the late winter of 1998, Demick highlights how the devastating forces of the famine made people confront the failures of a system which made them choose between food

and medicine. Mrs. Song, who had already lost her mother-in-law and her husband to the famine, was hoping to make a choice that would allow her son to live—she believed, perhaps rightfully, that even medicine would not help him get better if he couldn't eat. In spite of the carefully considered choice his mother made for him, Nam-oak died—and Mrs. Song was left wracked with survivor's guilt once more, forced to reckon with the things the famine had made her decide to do.

❝ In 1997 a few aid officials were allowed entry to Chongjin, with even greater restrictions than in Pyongyang. An aid worker [...] wrote in a journal that she was not allowed to leave the Chonmason Hotel. [...] The agency pulled out soon afterward, reporting that it could not verify that aid was getting to the intended recipients. [...] While big ships laden with donated grains from the U.N. World Food Programme started docking at Chongjin's port in 1998, the relief was offloaded into trucks by the military and driven away. [...] Much of it ended up in military stockpiles or sold on the black market.

Related Characters: Barbara Demick (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Barbara Demick discusses the catch-22 in which the North Korean government found itself at the height of the famine. After a collapsed economy and a bad season of floods kicked off a food shortage that spiraled into a famine in the early 1990s, North Korea failed to find any way to provide its citizens with enough food over the course of the next several years. Toward the end of the decade, the crisis was so bad that the "hermetically sealed" country invited in foreign aid workers to determine if North Korea qualified for financial aid and food rations. However, because they were desperate to maintain a façade of strength and isolationism to outsiders, they refused to let designated aid workers actually interact with any citizens or tour any cities to assess the damage. And when food did arrive, the government stockpiled it for themselves and their military or funneled it into the black market—presumably to make enough money to keep the elite afloat and comfortable. This passage highlights the dangerous intersection of isolationist politics, self-aggrandizing propaganda, and an atmosphere of intense scarcity and widespread starvation. The North Korean government badly needed help, but it squandered its chances at receiving meaningful aid in order to project an image of self-sufficiency and to prop up those in the highest rungs of the government and military, even as ordinary citizens starved to death by the thousands.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ Dog meat was part of the traditional Korean diet, but Hyuck liked animals and felt bad, though not so bad that he didn't try it again—although by mid-1996 dogs too were scarce.

Hyuck continued to steal. He and his brother climbed walls and dug up clay kimchi pots that had been buried in private gardens. They shoveled the kimchi straight out of the pots into their mouths.

All the while, Hyuck remembered his father's admonition: "It's better to starve than to steal."

In the imaginary dialogue that Hyuck kept up with his father, he retorted, "You're no hero if you're dead."

Related Characters: Barbara Demick (speaker), Kim Hyuck

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Demick recounts a major instance in Kim Hyuck's youth in order to illustrate how North Korean citizens were willing to do painful, unimaginable things in order to merely survive. As a young boy coming of age at the height of the famine, Hyuck had always been told that stealing was shameful and that it was better to starve to death with dignity than to live as a thief. Hyuck, armed with an intrepid survival instinct, ignored his father's advice and began resorting to increasingly dangerous and morally compromising tactics to survive. After drowning a neighborhood dog in order to cook and eat it—an action that hurt Hyuck even though dog meat wasn't an odd thing for North Koreans to consume in good times—Hyuck resorted to stealing from neighbors and, later on, crossing the border in order to buy and sell goods in China. Though some of Hyuck's acts weren't necessarily morally wrong, just risky, Demick's point holds: when scarcity and starvation push people to the brink, they will find themselves doing things they never could have imagined in order to hang on.

Chapter 12 Quotes

"The food problem is creating anarchy," Kim Jong-il complained in a December 1996 speech delivered at Kim Il-sung University. [...] As well as any of the world's strongmen, he understood perfectly the cliché that an absolutist regime needs absolute power. Everything good in life was to be bequeathed by the government. He couldn't tolerate people going off to gather their own food or buying rice with their own money. "Telling people to solve the food problem on their own only increases the number of farmers' markets and peddlers. In addition, this creates egoism among people, and the base of the party's class may come to collapse."

Related Characters: Kim Jong-il (speaker), Barbara Demick

Related Themes:

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Demick illustrates how Kim Jong-il, furious with the problems he'd inherited from his father's regime, chose to blame his own people for the seemingly imminent collapse of the Workers' Party—and the country as a whole—rather than the social, political, and economic errors that North Korea's first Great Leader made. In particular, this passage highlights the state's total disregard for the well-being of the very people it was meant to protect. North Koreans' attempts to prevent themselves and their families from starving by buying and selling food and goods on the black market was "egoism"—it threatened the perception that the communist government should (or could) provide the people with everything they needed, and thus threatened the government itself. Rather than admit that the famine was taking hundreds of thousands of lives, Kim Jong-il ignored his people's suffering and suggested that any individual attempt to mitigate the scarcity and starvation throughout the country was an act of disloyal insurrection. In this way, Kim Jong-il could root out anyone whose actions exposed the famine's true depths and its true origins.

Chapter 13 Quotes

Listening to South Korean television was like looking in the mirror for the first time in your life and realizing you were unattractive. North Koreans were always told theirs was the proudest country in the world, but the rest of the world considered it a pathetic, bankrupt regime. Jun-sang knew people were starving. He knew that people were dragged off to labor camps; but he had never before heard these figures. Surely South Korean news reports were exaggerated, just like North Korean propaganda?

Related Characters: Barbara Demick (speaker), Jun-sang

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jun-sang describes becoming increasingly disillusioned with the North Korean regime after obtaining access to an illegal extension that allowed him to watch foreign news broadcasts on his government-issued television. Here, as Jun-sang listens to the news from the outside world, he finds himself angry and disappointed in his country—but when he must reckon with the reality of what he's being told and shown, he experiences a moment of cognitive dissonance and denial. Jun-sang doesn't want to believe what he's seeing, and he decides that South Korean news reports, just like North Korean ones, must be doctored and sensationalized in order to function as propaganda.

This passage reveals just how profoundly Jun-sang's mind has been warped by the constant stream of propaganda and misinformation that has been aimed at him and his fellow citizens for decades. When it is impossible to know what's true and what's false, it becomes difficult to recognize and accept objective facts. Demick uses this passage to illustrate how intense isolationism, deliberate misinformation, and constant surveillance combine to create a breakdown of objective truth for citizens of North Korea, even when they try to begin opening their hearts and minds to information from the outside world.

Jun-sang knew the song by heart from his childhood, except the lyrics had been updated. In the verse "Our father, Kim Il-sung," the child substituted the name of Kim Jong-il. It was beyond reason that this small child should be singing a paean to the father who protected him when his circumstances so clearly belied the song. There he was on the platform, soaking wet, filthy, no doubt hungry.

Related Characters: Barbara Demick (speaker), Jun-sang

Related Themes:

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Jun-sang witnesses a young *kochebi*, or wandering swallow, reciting a paean to the Great Leader of North Korea on a train platform as he begs for tips or food scraps from passerby. Jun-sang experiences a moment of profound anger, disappointment, and cognitive dissonance as he realizes that the dirty, starving young boy is singing a familiar song, one that Jun-sang himself was taught in school. When Jun-sang learned the song, the lyrics praised Kim Il-sung—but now that Kim Il-sung is dead and his son is in power, the song venerates Kim Jong-il.

In this moment, Jun-sang realizes the hollow, morally bankrupt nature of the regime in a way he never has before, even as he's embarked on a journey of questioning and doubting the authorities that govern North Korea. Jun-sang at last realizes that it doesn't matter who is in power—the regime will never do anything but take and take from its citizens while demanding absolute loyalty and constant supplication. Even in an atmosphere in which people (mostly children) are starving and dying, the regime demands its citizens essentially worship whoever is in charge by regurgitating propaganda that was only ever created to control, silence, and distract a needy, hungry population.

He reminded himself: You don't talk politics as long as you live in North Korea. Not with your best friend, not with your teachers or your parents, and certainly not with your girlfriend. Jun-sang never discussed his feelings about the regime with Mi-ran. He didn't tell her he was watching South Korean television, and reading pamphlets about capitalism. He certainly did not tell her that he had begun to harbor fantasies of defecting.

Related Characters: Barbara Demick (speaker), Jun-sang

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 197

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Barbara Demick reconstructs Jun-sang's thought process as he weighs his growing anti-regime feelings—and his longing to defect—against his desire to connect with his girlfriend, Mi-ran, about his new ideas and thoughts. Though Jun-sang is, at this point in his life, closer to Mi-ran than anyone in the world, he is still unable to tell her about his secret late-night viewings of South Korean news broadcasts or his desire to leave North Korea behind.

Jun-sang's very real fears speak to the way that a constant atmosphere of surveillance hampers one's ability to be truthful even with one's closest friends, family members, and confidants. Those relationships, then, unable to ever be based in truth, wither and suffer as time goes by. Demick repeatedly turns to the relationship between Mi-ran and Jun-sang in order to illustrate the corrosive effects of life in a surveillance state. Under a regime that seeks to control and disempower its citizens through constant streams of propaganda and misinformation, it is impossible to know who is to be trusted—and who has so internalized the regime's rhetoric that they hold allegiance to shadowy political figures over those they love most dearly. This constant atmosphere of uncertainty and isolation, Demick suggests, makes true connection impossible.

Chapter 14 Quotes

Mi-ran told herself they were going just for a short trip to make the telephone call, but in her heart, she knew she might never come back. […] After they were gone, they would be denounced as traitors. "She received an education through the benevolence of the party and she betrayed the fatherland," she could almost hear the party secretary saying. She didn't want her guilt to rub off on Jun-sang. After she was gone […] he could find himself a suitable wife, join the Workers' Party, and spend the rest of his life in Pyongyang as a scientist.

He'll forgive me, he'll understand, she told herself. It's in his best interest.

Related Characters: Mi-ran, Barbara Demick (speaker), Jun-sang

Related Themes:

Page Number: 206-207

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Mi-ran prepares to defect to China with her family in order to contact her father's long-lost relatives in South Korea, she reckons with several competing ideas and emotions. Demick shows that Mi-ran has spent her entire life living in—and perpetuating herself—a culture of isolationism, idol-worship, and misinformation. All of her actions, speech, and relationships, even those with her own family, have been constantly surveilled since before she can remember. As a teacher, she has watched her elementary school students wither and die before her very eyes as a famine gripped her country and refused to let go its stronghold over millions of people. Now, even as Mi-ran contemplates the possibility of freedom, she finds that her thoughts are *still* controlled by what she imagines the party will think of her and her family. Mi-ran is so convinced that her actions will make her evil and despicable to all those who know her that she refuses to even entertain the possibility that Jun-sang, her boyfriend of several years, might have the same reservations about the regime as she does. Instead, she is (wrongly) convinced that he will hate her for defecting and that he will be relieved, once he realizes who she truly is, to have her gone from his life. Demick uses this passage to illustrate how life under a regime as suffocating as the one in North Korea has the power to control every aspect of one's life—even one's own thoughts. Though Mi-ran is preparing to physically escape North Korea, this passage suggests it will take her a long time to escape the learned thought patterns she has developed while living under the thumb of the regime.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ Dr. Kim was incredulous. Her entire life, her behavior had been impeccable. [...] She was always the first to volunteer for extra work and to attend extra ideological sessions. Her father had come from China and still had relatives there, but Dr. Kim had never met or corresponded with them.

It had to be a mistake, she told herself.

Eventually the truth sank in. Comrade-Secretary Chung was stringing her along, exploiting her hard work and talent with absolutely no intention of letting her join the party. Even worse, Dr. Kim began to suspect that she was indeed under surveillance.

Related Characters: Barbara Demick (speaker), Dr. Kim Ji-eun

Related Themes:

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dr. Kim Ji-eun is startled and hurt to learn that she has been being watched and surveilled by her superiors at work despite her extreme loyalty to the regime and flawless work ethic. For years, Dr. Kim has dreamed of gaining admission to the Workers' Party by virtue of her hard work in the hospital in Chongjin—but now, after stumbling upon her file while doing some work for the local bureau of the Workers' Party, Dr. Kim understands that she is being exploited for her labor even as her superiors open inquiries into her relationships, her beliefs, and her behavior simply because of her father's *beulsun*, or tainted blood, a casualty of his having been born in Manchuria.

In this moment, Dr. Kim realizes that no matter how hard she works or how much of herself she sacrifices to the regime, she will never be accepted—and she will always be suspicious to those who pull the strings. This passage marks a clear turning point for Dr. Kim as she reckons with what a lifetime of deceptive propaganda and claustrophobic surveillance have turned her into—and what she is going to do to extricate herself from the terrible circumstances in which she now finds herself.

❝ What was a bowl of rice doing there, just sitting out on the ground? She figured it out just before she heard the dog's bark.

Up until that moment, a part of her had hoped that China would be just as poor as North Korea. She still wanted to believe that her country was the best place in the world. The beliefs she had cherished for a lifetime would be vindicated. But now she couldn't deny what was staring her plainly in the face: dogs in China ate better than doctors in North Korea.

Related Characters: Barbara Demick (speaker), Dr. Kim Ji-eun

Related Themes:

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dr. Kim arrives in China after perilously crossing the Tumen River in the dead of night. She seeks shelter in a seemingly abandoned farmhouse—only to find that a bowl of precious white rice and meat has been laid out on the floor for a farm dog. As Dr. Kim realizes that dogs in China are eating better at their evening meals than she's

eaten in years, she is full of anger, shame, sadness, and, above all, a sense of validation for escaping from North Korea. Dr. Kim's entire life revolved around proving herself to her superiors in a bid for entrance into the Workers' Party—she sacrificed endlessly for her patients, took on extra shifts at the hospital whenever she could, and espoused complete loyalty to the regime and the Great Leader even in the midst of a famine that took the lives of countless patients. Here, Dr. Kim at last comes to realize that the extreme scarcity, starvation, and desperation that have marked most of her adult life were not normal or acceptable—and that in fleeing North Korea, she has made the right decision for herself.

Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ She thought of Chang-bo especially when she was eating. How that man loved to eat! He would have so enjoyed the sausage. […] Then her thoughts drifted to her son. Her memories were so tinged with guilt and shame that she couldn't even speak about him. So strong, so handsome—such a tragedy to have lost him at twenty-five. How much life he had missed. How much they had all missed, herself too, her daughters, locked away in North Korea, working themselves to death. For what? We will do as the party tells us. We will die for the general. We have nothing to envy. We will go our own way. She had believed it all and wasted her life. Or maybe not.

Related Characters: Mrs. Song Hee-suk, Barbara Demick (speaker), Nam-oak, Oak-hee, Chang-bo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 242

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Demick reconstructs Mrs. Song's thought process while waiting in a safehouse in China and deciding whether to return home to North Korea or to join her daughter, Oak-hee, and defect to South Korea. Mrs. Song was angry with Oak-hee for cajoling her out of the country under false pretenses and believed that the right thing to do was to return to her homeland. As days at the safehouse went by, however, Mrs. Song watched foreign television broadcasts and marveled at her kindly hosts' kitchen full of good food and modern appliances. As Mrs. Song enjoyed the simple pleasures of life outside North Korea, she began to realize with increasing anger just how much time, energy, and life she had wasted trying to be the model North Korean citizen she was raised to be. Mrs. Song was a "true believer" in the regime's promises—but the more she gave up in the name of the Great Leader, the *juche* ideal, and the party, the more she and her family suffered. Mrs. Song realized that she had a chance to take control of her life and to dedicate herself to something new—something outside of the small world of propaganda, isolationism, scarcity, and lack she'd come to accept as all she deserved. She knew, in this moment, that in order to honor her late husband and son and to redeem her own survivor's guilt, she needed to make something of the time she had left.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ "When I see a good meal like this, it makes me cry," Mrs. Song apologized one night as we sat around a steaming pot of shabu-shabu, thinly sliced beef cooked in broth and dipped in a sesame sauce. "I can't help thinking of his last words, 'Let's go to a good restaurant and order a nice bottle of wine.'"

Related Characters: Mrs. Song Hee-suk (speaker), Chang-bo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 251

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Demick recalls dining out with Mrs. Song at a delicious restaurant in Seoul, she focuses on the lingering trauma and sadness that Mrs. Song was continuing to reckon with even years after defecting from North Korea. Though Mrs. Song had established a comfortable life for herself in South Korea and filled her days with work, travel, and friendships, she was unable to abandon the traumas of her past. In particular, Mrs. Song was grappling with guilt of having survived the famine and escaped North Korea when her own husband and son did not. Mrs. Song's deep sadness and remorse, Demick shows, was often triggered by nice and pleasurable things such as a simple hot meal. The scarcity and starvation Mrs. Song witnessed in her own home—and the unimaginable choices she was forced to make at the height of the famine, like chosing to buy food instead of medicine for her dying son—continued to influence how she perceived and participated in the world around her. Though Mrs. Song had physically escaped the atmosphere of scarcity, lack, and death that surrounded her in North Korea, she could not emotionally or psychologically escape the lingering memories of being unable to provide a simple hot meal for her own family.

Chapter 19 Quotes

After graduation, [Dr. Kim] planned to resume her medical career, this time specializing in geriatrics. Her mother had died a miserable death from Alzheimer's. Dr. Kim dreamed of opening a nursing home, perhaps even a chain of nursing homes. She hoped that one day, when the North Korean regime had fallen, she might be able to take South Korean ideas of elder care back to Chongiin. Perhaps it was a pipe dream, but it helped her bridge the divide between her past and present selves and ease the guilt about what she'd left behind.

Related Characters: Barbara Demick (speaker), Dr. Kim Ji-eun

Related Themes:

Page Number: 260

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Demick explores the ideological leaps and practical choices that many North Korean defectors make in order to "bridge the divide[s]" between their pasts in North Korea and their present lives far from home. Ss an example, she focuses on Dr. Kim Ji-eun, one of the six primary interviewees whose stories forms the heart of *Nothing to Envy*. Here, Demick describes hearing of Dr. Kim's dreams of returning to North Korea one day to bring the advanced medical knowledge—and empathy for elders—she'd learned while living in South Korea. Recounting this dream, Demick tacitly suggests that Dr. Kim had begun to use such dreams to carefully distract from the survivor's guilt she was coping with while adjusting to life in South Korea. Dr. Kim, like many North Korean defectors, was unable to conceive that a return home would not be possible in her lifetime—but Demick clearly seems to believe that Dr. Kim's "pipe dream" of returning home is merely a fantasy that helps her to begin moving forward without abandoning her memories of her previous life.

Chapter 20 Quotes

Deep down, however, Mi-ran was the same person who had occupied the lowest rung of North Korean society, the poor, female progeny of tainted blood. She had been shaped by a thorough indoctrination and then suffered the pain of betrayal; she'd spent years in fear of speaking her mind, of harboring illicit thoughts. She had steeled herself to walk by the bodies of the dead without breaking stride. She had learned to eat her lunch, down to the last kernel of corn or grain of rice, without pausing to grieve for the children she taught who would soon die of starvation. She was racked with guilt.

Related Characters: Barbara Demick (speaker), Mi-ran

Related Themes:

Page Number: 271

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Barbara Demick describes Mi-ran's brand-new life in South Korea. By 2004, Mi-ran was a wife and mother with a graduate degree and a busy schedule; she took care of her child, she worked out, and she lived a cosmopolitan life in a high-rise flat in Seoul. Still, however, the more Demick talked with Mi-ran in their interviews, the more Demick came to see that Mi-ran remained defined by her past and all the horrors it contained.

In North Korea, Mi-ran's life was defined by government propaganda, isolationism, the inability to trust anyone around her due to heightened starvation, and a profound, unceasing sense of scarcity. And in this passage, Demick breaks down the ways in which this painful life in North Korea continued to haunt Mi-ran even as she carved out a new, abundant life for herself. Mi-ran's guilt over the unimaginable things she had to do in order to survive consumed her. Like many of Demick's interviewees, though Mi-ran had physically escaped the horrors of North Korea, she was unable to emotionally or psychologically escape her memories of the past.

While the persistence of North Korea is a curiosity for the rest of the world, it is a tragedy for North Koreans, even those who have managed to escape. Jun-sang has no chance of seeing his parents, now entering their seventies, unless the regime collapses within their lifetime. If that happens, he would like to return to North Korea to do something to help rebuild his country. Since the birth of her second child, a daughter, in 2007, Mi-ran has been pursuing a graduate degree in education in the hope that she can play a part in reforming the North Korean school system should the country open up.

Related Characters: Barbara Demick (speaker), Mi-ran, Jun-sang

Related Themes:

Page Number: 284

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Demick explores how individuals like Jun-sang and Mi-ran, who defected from North Korea in the late 1990s and early 2000s, marvel at the endurance of the

North Korean regime and watch it with a sort of horror-fascination. Many defectors who left in the years immediately following the famine had seen what economic instability and food insecurity had done to their compatriots—they left, Demick suggests, believing the fragile regime would soon fall. At the time of *Nothing to Envy*'s publication in 2009, it had been more than a decade since some had left, and yet the government showed no sign of opening up the country, brokering peace with the rest of the world, or loosening any of the stringent demands it places upon its citizens. In order to cope with their shock and incomprehension, many of these defectors, Demick shows, continue to imagine what their lives will look like when—not if—the regime falls, failing to take into account North Korea's odds-defying staying power. By imagining the fall of North Korea and the reunification of the peninsula, survivors and defectors are better able to cope with their own guilt about leaving and their fears about never being able to see their families again.

Epilogue Quotes

❝ I have found that, over time, the North Korean defectors I know in South Korea become more reticent. They worry about spies within the defector community who might try to blackmail them. They fear that speaking on the human rights circuit or giving interviews to journalists will result in retaliation. One can leave but never completely escape the terror that is North Korea.

Related Characters: Barbara Demick (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 299

Explanation and Analysis

In the final lines of *Nothing to Envy*, Barbara Demick describes the myriad fears that weigh on North Korean defectors, even after they have established new, comfortable lives for themselves far away from the horrors of their home country. Many defectors, she says, fear that they will still be spied upon by individuals sent from North Korea to infiltrate their communities, while others fear their every move is being watched by government organizations within North Korea. They know that even though they have escaped, their actions as free individuals living abroad still have the potential to reign pain and terror down on their remaining family members and acquaintances still trapped in North Korea. All of these very real, practical fears are the product, Demick suggests, of a lifetime spent not only being indoctrinated by ceaseless propaganda about the unshakable power of the regime, but also spent in fear of even the smallest verbal or physical infraction having the power to bring down one's entire family. The added factors of individual trauma and survivor's guilt, Demick suggests, compound the constant fears that refugees and defectors must face as they try each day to move on from their past and "escape the terror that is North Korea" emotionally and psychologically.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1

Discussing satellite photos of the far east at night, Barbara Demick notes that one "splotch [of land is] curiously lacking in light." This "splotch" is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or North Korea to most of the world. The country, she writes, both literally and metaphorically faded into darkness in the early 1990s. Without aid from the collapsed Soviet Union, the North Korean economy plummeted, and the lights stopped coming on at night. Still, it is inaccurate, Demick says, to call North Korea an undeveloped country—she sees it, rather, as a place that has *dropped out* of the developed world.

As the book opens, Demick introduces her readers to a portrait of a country that has been plucked out of the developed world and plunged into darkness. The profound darkness she describes—both literal darkness and metaphorical, ideological darkness—begins to introduce the theme of isolation, a central part of any case study of North Korea.

The darkness, while startling, has its advantages. Demick recalls an interview with a North Korean defector, Mi-ran (a pseudonym), who would take illicit, forbidden nightly strolls with Jun-sang (also a pseudonym), a boy three years her senior, each night after the lights went out. Even in darkness and even beyond the limits of their rusted-out, empty town, Mi-ran and Jun-sang kept their distance from one another physically yet conversed for hours, sharing thoughts about their families, classmates, and lives. Demick writes that most people see North Korea as a bleak, black hole and thus fail to realize that love exists even there.

Demick uses this passage to declare her intent not to sensationalize North Korea or paint its citizens as lost, pitiful individuals. Instead, she wants to show her readers what life is really like in North Korea. She also wants to impress upon her readers that as dire and strange as things may be in North Korea, the people living under the regime have rich inner lives that they must keep repressed.

Demick first met Mi-ran in 2004, when Mi-ran was already 31 years old. Mi-ran had been living in South Korea for six years. Demick was the Seoul bureau chief for the *Los Angeles Times*, where she covered news from the entire Korean peninsula. Though covering South Korea was easy, simply gaining admission into North Korea was nearly impossible—and when Demick and a colleague of hers did manage to get in, they were shepherded through the showcase capital of Pyongyang, where they were shown government propaganda and discouraged from asking any real questions about life in North Korea. Demick realized that if she wanted to get answers about the country's famine and its repressive regime, she would need to talk to defectors.

After failing to figure out what life was really like inside North Korea by visiting the isolated country, Demick realized that she needed to find another way of learning about people's experiences there. Demick's experiences in Pyongyang highlight the deeply isolationist way that the country functions, showing outsiders a false version of what the country is like (the showcase capital) and using propaganda—which is useless on outsiders who have not been raised within the regime—to cover up the truth.

In 2004, Demick connected with Mi-ran, who was living in the Seoul suburb of Suwon. Mi-ran was dressed fashionably—not, Demick notes, in conservative or mismatched clothes, as many North Korean refugees do even after years of living abroad. At the time, Mi-ran was newly married and expecting a child. Demick met with Mi-ran, who had worked as a teacher in North Korea, to learn more about the school system there. While they ate bowls of hot food, Mi-ran discussed watching students as young as five or six years old die of starvation at the height of the famine. Mi-ran recalled that even as her students withered and died before her eyes, she was instructed to teach them each day that they were "blessed to be North Korean" and that they should revere their Great Leader as a benevolent god.

Demick recalls her first conversation with Mi-ran as being overwhelmed by Mi-ran's palpable guilt over surviving life in North Korea when so many young, innocent children did not. Demick highlights Mi-ran's hatred of a regime that allowed its most vulnerable to suffer and die while insisting that things were normal—even "blessed"—to show how profoundly warped the propaganda machine is, and how painful it is to live in an environment full of such cognitive dissonance.

Demick then turned the topic to lighter territory, asking Mi-ran what young North Koreans did for fun. When Demick asked if Mi-ran had had a boyfriend there, Mi-ran said she did. Her "boyfriend" of more than six years, Jun-sang, was a tall, lanky young man who was studying at a university in Pyongyang when she left. Mi-ran confided in Demick that though she still considered Jun-sang her first love and closest confidant in North Korea, she had always withheld from him the biggest secrets of her life: her anger toward the regime and the plans she and her family were making to defect. In North Korea, Mi-ran said, not even loved ones could be trusted—spies were everywhere. Mi-ran said she had no idea what had become of Jun-sang—whether he'd stayed or left, and whether he would, if they were to be reunited, hate her or understand her.

As Mi-ran looks back wistfully on her first love, she communicates to Demick a sense of remorse that she could never fully reveal herself to the most important person in her life. This emphasizes for readers early on just how stifling, oppressive, and isolating it is to live in an environment in which no one can be trusted. In this environment, one's closest confidants might at any moment betray them in the name of upholding the regime. Though Mi-ran is a married woman, she still pines for Jun-sang to some extent; she feels that she never fully understood him (or vice versa) because of the confines that dictated the boundaries of their relationship and prevented them from achieving true closeness.

Demick describes the stark differences between the landscapes of North and South Korea. While South Korea is busy and even cluttered, with heavy traffic in its cities and large, bright signage and advertisements nearly everywhere, North Korea is sparse, mountainous, and oddly "devoid of color." The housing throughout the country, built largely in the 1960s and 1970s following the destruction of the Korean War, is made of cement block and limestone. Apartment high-rises in the cities are common, but in the countryside, most families live in long single-story buildings called "harmonicas," named after their boxlike structures symbol to the many chambers of a harmonica.

In this passage, Demick begins to transition into a more lyrical, novelistic writing style, offering her readers a glimpse at what the mysterious landscape of North Korea looks like. The uniform architecture and cramped, confined housing, she suggests here, contributes to the atmosphere of scarcity, sameness, and constant surveillance. Even though North Koreans live close to their neighbors, she begins to posit, they remain isolated very profoundly in myriad other ways.

The only color to be found in North Korea, Demick observes, is on the brightly colored propaganda posters that adorn roadsides, railroad stations, and public buildings. The posters glorify Kim Il-sung, the first Great Leader of North Korea, and his son, Kim Jong-il. "We will do as the party tells us," many posters say; "we have nothing to envy in the world."

By illustrating how propaganda is literally the only bright spot in an otherwise drab, monochrome landscape, Demick shows how the regime uses physical and psychological manipulation—combined with isolationist misinformation—to assure its citizens that there is nothing more they could want anywhere else, thus controlling them entirely.

Mi-ran grew up in the 1970s and 1980s in a small mining town just outside of the industrial city of Chongjin. Though she and her family were poor, she had no reason to doubt the propaganda posters that told her nowhere else in the world was better off than North Korea. Mi-ran grew up with four sisters and one younger brother. Her father bribed the head of the local inminban, or people's committee, for access to an adjacent apartment in their harmonica housing unit. Mi-ran, her sisters, her mother, and her grandmother had to do everything separately from her brother and father; while the men ate rice, Mi-ran and the other women ate cornmeal. Mi-ran became indignant and rebellious at a young age, flouting gender roles by taking her family's bicycle out for rides into Chongjin and screaming at anyone who mocked her for being a girl on a bike.

Even though Mi-ran grew up in an environment saturated with propaganda, control, and strict gender roles, she was able from a young age to see the injustices around her and even within her own family. Demick tells Mi-ran's story in careful, thoughtful detail in order to paint a full portrait of Mi-ran's background and set the stage for her burgeoning dissatisfaction with the state's endless propaganda campaign and human rights violations.

Mi-ran loved the cinema from a young age. Though outside media is banned in North Korea, Kim Jong-il's love of film—and his crucial role, beginning in the 1970s while his father Kim Il-sung was still in power, as the overseer of the Workers' Party's Bureau of Propaganda and Agitation—meant that he produced many propaganda films. The movies denigrated capitalism and extolled the values of juche.

This passage illustrates that, while the state prevents its citizens from engaging with outside media, it is eager to create materials for mass consumption that will spread the message of the regime far and wide. This gives citizen the illusion of experiencing entertainment while all the while indoctrinating them further.

One day, Jun-sang—a fellow cinema lover—was waiting outside of the culture hall in Chongjin where movies were shown, waiting for his younger brother. He spied a wild-looking girl with short hair stamping her feet in frustration as a crowd poured ahead of her into the building and was entranced right away. The girl, Demick notes, was Mi-ran. Jun-sang considered approaching the girl and offering her his extra ticket, which he had been saving for his brother, but he could not work up the courage to do so. All through the propaganda film, Jun-sang wondered if he'd ever have another chance with her.

By taking the material she gleans from her interviews with defectors and transforming it into real, detailed stories, Demick paints a detailed and compelling portrait of what life is truly like in North Korea. She wants to push past the propaganda and the isolationist regime in order to uncover what ordinary citizens think, feel, and struggle with as they move through their days.

CHAPTER 2

At 15, Jun-sang was studious and smart. His father had high hopes that Jun-sang would make it out of the village and go on to university in Pyongyang. Because of this, he was strict with Jun-sang, and Jun-sang didn't have much time for girls or friendships. Still, he could not stop thinking of Mi-ran. Though he didn't know her name, he began asking around about her, and soon heard about her family and their roots.

In this chapter, Demick will use Jun-sang's desire to learn more about Mi-ran—and to please his own family—in order to delve more deeply into the political history of North Korea and the resultant social structures that have come to define modern-day society in the D.P.R.K.

Mi-ran's father, Tae-woo, was a miner from South Korea—which was, during his youth, under Japanese control. After World War II ended in 1945, Japanese troops pulled out of Korea and ceased a 35-year occupation. The Americans, fearing the power vacuum would let the Soviets would seize control of the Korean peninsula, divided it into two territories at the 38th parallel. They left the Soviets to administer the northern half and took control of the southern half themselves, disregarding or simply remaining ignorant to the fact that the bifurcation between north and south did not exist previously in Korean history. If anything, Demick notes, Korea was divided ideologically on an east-west plane.

Here, Demick describes the arbitrary, thoughtless way in which the Americans divided up the Korean peninsula following the end of World War II. Demick illustrates how an outside nation's failure to understand the history and politics of the Korean peninsula may have lent legitimacy to the North Korean regime's later claims about the evil outside world and the resultant need for an isolationist stance.

Both governments hated the new division, and both claimed to be the sole legitimate government of the entire peninsula. In June of 1950, the leader of North Korea, Kim Il-sung, stormed across the South Korean border with Soviet tanks and began a war that would last three years. Though North Korea's troops nearly succeeded in seizing control of the peninsula, American troops stormed in, along with soldiers from Britain, Australia, Canada, France, and the Netherlands. They recaptured Seoul, and pushed North Korean forces back up to around the 38th parallel. In July of 1953, North and South Korea signed a ceasefire. The war had been destructive but unproductive—the physical division remained in roughly the same place as it had in 1950.

Here, Demick provides some history about the Korean War. She does so in order to show that the Korean War, which was frustrating, bloody, and ultimately fruitless, only ramped up tensions between the two nations. The war sowed further discord amongst already confused and grieving populations on both sides of the hastily, arbitrarily divided peninsula.

Tae-woo was 18 in 1950 when the Communists from North Korea invaded South Korea. He joined the army and rose to the rank of sergeant. Toward the end of the war, however, he was captured and taken to North Korea as a prisoner of war. His life as a South Korean was over, and yet his heritage would follow him through his new life in North Korea. Relegated to an unappealing job in a coal mine, Tae-woo kept his head down and integrated into life in North Korea. He married and moved to Chongjin, where he hoped to settle down. But, in 1958, Kim Il-sung began a campaign to purge South Koreans from the government and even from ordinary society, using background checks and the concept of songbun, a kind of feudal social hierarchy, to keep potential "hostile[s]" such as former South Korean soldiers at the bottom of the social pyramid.

Demick tells Tae-woo's story to illustrate the hostility with which anyone with ties to South Korea was treated under Kim Il-sung's retributive, isolationist regime. In contextualizing the shame and fear Tae-woo felt throughout his life as a result of his heritage, she allows readers to understand the cruel, arbitrary nature of the struggles many North Koreans face due to circumstances beyond their control. The regime's punitive measures and obsession with rooting out potential insurgents speaks to the lengths to which they'd soon go to sow suspicion and discord, encourage spying and surveillance, and gain control of their citizens through misinformation and propaganda.

Tae-woo would spend the rest of his life watched carefully by his local inminban, or people's watch, and reminded constantly that he was beulsun—a person of "tainted blood." His status, he knew, was permanent and immutable, and any children he had would find their blood tainted and their horizons limited. Mi-ran grew up ignorant of her father's past and of her own lowly songbun. She found her father's lack of relatives odd and his refusal to talk about his past frustrating—but Tae-woo knew that talking about the Korean War (and who really started it) could land him in a labor camp, so he kept quiet. North Korean propaganda labeled South Korea as the aggressors in the Korean War and claimed they'd invaded the north, spurred on by American "Yankee bastards."

This passage illustrates how North Korea's regime creates a vicious cycle of shame, silence, and fear. Tae-woo knew that talking about his past would put himself and his family and an even greater, more immediate risk than they already were—yet in failing to tell his children the truth about their status in life, he also failed to warn them about the compounded dangers and repercussions of any thoughtless things they might say or do.

As Mi-ran watched her sister Mi-hee face rejection after rejection from specialized high schools, Mi-ran began to worry about her own prospects. One day, when a team of recruiters from the Workers' Party visited Mi-ran's high school, she learned that they were looking for girls to be sent off to a military-style training camp before going to Pyongyang to serve on the "personal staff" of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. Mi-ran wasn't recruited, and the rejection stung. Mi-ran and her siblings began to realize that their family history might be the problem—and when their brother Sok-ju failed to gain admission to college, Tae-woo's children confronted him. He told them the devastating truth. Sok-ju was so angry that he ran away from home for a few days before returning, sorry and emotional.

In this passage, Demick illustrates the awakening Mi-ran and her siblings have as they come to at last understand the truth about their songbun *and the paths that are closed off to them. She hints at the idea that Mi-ran would have been honored to serve Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il in an unspecified (and possibly illicit) capacity, and that being denied even a role as fraught as that one was painful.*

Meanwhile, Jun-sang was preparing to seek admission to colleges in Pyongyang. Jun-sang, however, knew that his own family background was a problem. His parents had been born in Japan—they were part of a sizable (but discriminated-against) population of ethnic Koreans who lived there before the end of World War II. After the partition of Korea, many of these people didn't know which part of the peninsula to return to—Jun-sang's grandparents, off-put by the South Korean leader Syngman Rhee's government, which was stacked with Japanese officials, chose to live in North Korea.

Here, Demick shows that Jun-sang and Mi-ran were going through similar struggles related to their birthrights, their parentages, and their hopes for pulling their families' stations up. The two, however, may never have been able to commiserate, bond, or strategize together about these issues, given the punishments that could come of speaking against a regime that kept its citizens stratified and isolated through songbun.

Jun-sang's family had more money than most when he was growing up in the 1970s and 1980s. They enjoyed luxuries such as modern appliances, nice furniture, and even a vegetable plot. However, Japanese Koreans were often isolated from the rest of society, speaking with distinctive accent and tending to marry individuals from other Japanese Korean families, and they occupied a low position with poor songbun.

This passage shows that even as Japanese Koreans lived more comfortable lives materially, they faced the same constant threat of hostility from the regime due to the station accorded to them by their birth.

The North Korean regime saw Japanese Koreans as a threat: they often had contact with family members back in Japan, and those family members often sent money. A regime that drew strength from isolating its people needed to cut these ties—and in the 1970s, many prominent members of these communities were rounded up and sent to the gulag. Jun-sang knew what families like his were often forced to endure, and he went through his adolescence trying to keep his head down and hide his nice possessions. Jun-sang knew that his family regretted their decision to live in North Korea rather than South Korea—and he knew that he was their only hope for elevating their songbun and being forgiven for their "bourgeois Japanese past." By getting into a good college and perhaps even the Workers' Party, Jun-sang could change his family's fate.

Here, Demick highlights just how necessary Jun-sang felt it was for him to stay in line and advance his own position. Jun-sang wasn't motivated by the desire for glory or material things; instead, he wanted only to ensure that the ever-present threat of being rounded up as a "hostile" or sent to the gulag for a minor infraction was lifted from his family. Jun-sang's desire to improve himself wasn't just about success—it was about pure survival.

CHAPTER 3

The industrial coastal city of Chongjin contains 500,000 people—yet it is considered by most North Koreans to be an undesirable place to live. Chongjin is far from the capital of Pyongyang and closer to Russia. During the Japanese occupation, Japanese forces built up Chongjin's port and created steelworks factories. Chongjin was devastated in the wars that wracked the peninsula in the 1940s and 1950s, but after the end of the Korean War, Kim Il-sung's regime rebuilt them, centering Chongjin as the site of North Korea's largest steel factory. Throughout the '60s and '70s, Chongjin became a city of great economic and strategic importance, and the regime installed a ruling elite to monitor the region's villagers and factory workers.

Here, Demick provides some background on Chongjin, the metropolitan area in and around which the book is set. In doing so, she helps her readers understand the geographic and economic position in which her story is primarily situated. Chongjin looks unwelcoming and is far from the center of the regime, making it a place primed for dissatisfied and rebellious citizens. The institution of a "ruling elite" to serve as a kind of elevated people's watch, she suggests, was meant to curtail or weed out dissatisfaction in the area.

One of these factory workers was Song Hee-suk, or Mrs. Song, as she liked to be called—a "true believer" in the regime who grew up in Chongjin in the 1950s and 1960s. Her father was killed during the bombing that took place throughout the Korean War. The loss was devastating, and it cemented the young Mrs. Song's anti-Americanism. The young Mrs. Song and her family received a certificate declaring their patriarch a "martyr of the Fatherland Liberation War." As a young woman, she married a man named Chang-bo, a prominent member of the Worker's Party. Mrs. Song dreamed of moving to Pyongyang, but the Party requested she and her husband remain in Chongjin.

Here, Barbara Demick introduces Mrs. Song, another of her interviewees. Unlike Mi-ran and Jun-sang, Mrs. Song was a model citizen and a devout adherent of the regime's messaging from a young age. Demick tells Mrs. Song's story from early childhood in order to contextualize her need to have faith in the regime following the terrible losses she and her family suffered. By clinging to the regime's isolationist, anti-American stance, Mrs. Song was able to feel, perhaps, that she could somehow make certain that her father's death was not in vain by giving her all to the Party and the regime.

Chongjin is a stark but imposing city with broad sidewalks and a large thoroughfare that could accommodate six lanes of traffic—if there were that many cars in Chongjin. Though Chongjin looks impressive to those just passing through by car or train, Demick notes that upon closer inspection, parts of the city are falling apart. The apartment building Mrs. Song and Chang-bo moved into as newlyweds wasn't yet in disrepair—though it didn't have an elevator, the young couple had two whole rooms to themselves. Their first daughter, Oak-hee, was born in 1966. Mrs. Song gave birth to two more girls before finally having a boy—in North Korean culture, boys are prized over girls.

Demick continues describing Chongjin, using its slow slide into disrepair as a metaphor for the problems simmering beneath the surface of North Korea that would soon become impossible to hide. She uses Mrs. Song's hopeful, optimistic move to the heart of Chongjin to metaphorize Mrs. Song's wholehearted belief in her country's promises.

Even with four young children, Mrs. Song worked hard six days a week at a clothing factory nearby. Her children played and learned at the factory's daycare center while Mrs. Song worked. Between caring for her family, cooking, and attending meetings of the Socialist Women's Federation, Mrs. Song hardly had any time for herself—yet her belief in the regime stayed strong, and Mrs. Song proved herself to be a model citizen and a perfect emblem of Kim Il-sung's juche ideology. Drawing on Marxism-Leninism, Confucianism, and intense nationalism, *juche* encourages stoicism and intense self-reliance, completely rejecting dependence on others.

Demick continues to explore the concept of juche *and how a country founded on values of isolationism, stoicism, and intense distrust functions—or fails to function. Though Mrs. Song believed dearly in the ideal of* juche *and strove to embody its teachings, Demick foreshadows the ways in which* juche *would fail Mrs. Song and her family.*

Through juche, Demick writes, Kim Il-sung hoped to build both a better country and better people. Seeking ways to establish total social control, he oversaw the creation of propaganda that would make him appear to his people more like Santa Claus than Stalin: an omnipresent, ever-watchful, benevolent father figure who commanded respect, love, and devotion. Kim Il-sung, whose maternal uncle had been a minister in North Korea's pre-Communist days, understood religion's power to sway people. He began positioning himself as a godlike figure capable of supernatural feats—and presented his son, Kim Jong-il, as a Christ figure who possessed similar powers. As Demick explains Kim Il-sung's coordinated effort to make himself a living god in the eyes of his people, she urges readers to understand the level of total indoctrination that assails isolated North Koreans every hour of every day.

By delving more deeply into the calculated approach Kim Il-sung took as he figured out how to control his people, Demick helps to contextualize the reasons why North Koreans like Mrs. Song found his regime's propaganda so compelling and believable. Kim Il-sung used a combination of religious overtones, coercion, and saturation to make himself the center of his people's every waking moment. Though outsiders may not understand how North Koreans came to believe such far-fetched things about their leader, Demick posits that Kim Il-sung's insidious tactics trumped reason.

In 1972, the Workers' Party began distributing lapel pins bearing Kim Il-sung's image. All North Koreans were required to wear them over their hearts. Additionally, all homes in the country were required to keep framed portraits of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il on their walls—but forbidden from hanging any other images. Inspectors from a special police force, the Public Standards Police, dropped in on homes at random to ensure the pictures were hung prominently and well-maintained. Mrs. Song was more than happy to follow these stringent rules—she believed in the party's aphorism that "loyalty and filial devotion are the supreme qualities of a revolutionary."

Demick delves even further into the tactics the regime instituted in order to ensure that most citizens' minds never strayed far from thoughts of their Great Leader and his son. By creating an atmosphere of extreme surveillance and total control—and by urging citizens to love their leader dearly, as they would a father or a god—the regime successfully convinced millions of people that total devotion was the only path to safety.

When Oak-hee reached adolescence, Mrs. Song's life, which revolved around the regime, began to change. Oak-hee was rebellious and irritable. She felt that the volunteering associated with her "patriotic duty" to her country was pointless and mind-numbing. She bragged about coming up with ways to get out of her duties, which worried her mother. Chango-bo helped get Oak-hee a good job with a local propaganda department after she graduated high school. There, she enjoyed the easy work and soon agreed to marry a young Korean People's Army employee, Choi Yong-su, who was a shoo-in for the Workers' Party. The two wed in 1988 in front of a statue of Kim Il-sung, as most young couples did, and enjoyed a happy wedding feast. Soon after, however, Yong-su developed an alcohol problem, began abusing Oak-hee, and was rejected from the Party—but there was nothing Mrs. Song could do.

Mrs. Song held high hopes for her children while they were growing up—but Oak-hee's rebellious nature and fairly open criticism of the things the regime demanded of her threatened to compromise all of Mrs. Song's hard work to create the perfect North Korean family. Mrs. Song and her husband tried to reel Oak-hee back in and help her build an acceptable life—but their prioritization of Oak-hee's adherence to the regime over her well-being had devastating consequences for all of them. This illustrates how the fear of being surveilled or punished for falling out of line often trumps the pursuit of genuine happiness, connection, openness, and honesty amongst people in North Korea, even within families.

Mrs. Song's son, Nam-oak, was recruited for a special athletic school in Pyongyang at a young age. Mrs. Song was proud—but as the years passed, Nam-oak's visits home became less frequent and he himself grew more distant. Mrs. Song learned that Nam-oak had an older girlfriend in Chongjin—on visits home, he would stay at her apartment. Mrs. Song knew that by seeing an older woman and engaging in premarital sex, her son was greatly endangering his chances for future entry into the Workers' Party.

Mrs. Song's world continued to fall apart as yet another of her children acted in ways which threatened to compromise not just their own security within the regime—but by extension their mother's as well.

Things got even worse for Mrs. Song in the late 1980s when Chang-bo applied for a permit for a **television** from his work unit. He was granted the permit, and the family got a TV preloaded with government channels that broadcast state propaganda and movies produced by Kim Jong-il at all hours. They often allowed neighbors over to watch the television. One evening, while watching a report on a factory supposedly made huge numbers of fine rubber boots, Chang-bo laughed and asked where his children's boots were if there were so many to go around. A neighbor reported Chang-bo to the head of the inminban, who passed the information on to the Ministry for the Protection of State Security. Changbo was arrested and interrogated by state agents for three days. When he returned home, his wife railed against him for jeopardizing all they had.

This passage introduces the concept of television as a symbol for the insidious ways in which the North Korean regime gives its citizens the illusion of openness and control—while actively continuing to indoctrinate them with fawning propaganda. This instance also shows just how extreme the punishment in North Korea is for speaking out in any way, small or large, against the regime. Even though Chang-bo and his wife held prominent positions in society and were widely known as dedicated adherents of the regime, Chang-bo was still tortured for simply making a joke that criticized the propaganda he was being fed.

Chang-bo and Mrs. Song were both grateful that because of their relatively high positions in society, he'd gotten off easy. But Chang-bo, a journalist who had occasional access to foreign media—which he sanitized and spun for North Korean consumption as part of his work—soon began questioning the regime. While Chang-bo commiserated with a likeminded coworker one night in the privacy of his own home, Oak-hee overheard and told her father she agreed with him. Chang-bo and Oak-hee began having frequent, secret conversations about what was really going on in the rest of the world. Chang-bo supplied Oak-hee with facts about South Korea's economic greatness and Communism's failure all over the world. Chang-bo and Oak-hee were very careful to never have such conversations when Mrs. Song—"the true believer"—was at home.

This passage continues to illustrate how the atmosphere of constant surveillance in North Korea hamper the potential for truthfulness and connection. Indeed, this society lauds and rewards those who snitch on their closest friends and family members. Though Chang-bo and Oak-hee found ways to share information and express their discontent, they did so with the constant fear that Mrs. Song—the person whom they were both, in their own ways, closest to—might turn them in for their beliefs.

CHAPTER 4

By 1990, the Soviet Union was falling apart, the Berlin Wall had come down, and Communist regimes around the world were being dismantled and replaced with capitalist systems. But in the "hermit kingdom" of North Korea, Communism continued to reign supreme. North Korean media reported on the weakness of the nations whose regimes had crumbled and reassured citizens that Kim Il-sung would keep North Korea on its own path. Mrs. Song believed these reports, willing herself to disregard the voice inside that told her something was terribly wrong.

Demick foreshadows the beginning of utter calamity in North Korea as other Communist regimes around the world began to fall one by one. Though North Korea believed itself to be exceptional and impenetrable, Demick illustrates how even an isolationist country like North Korea was not immune to the interconnected nature of the global economy.

Electricity was becoming increasingly unreliable in Chongjin. At first, the power would simply flicker every once in a while—but within a few months, it shut off completely, as did running water. Mrs. Song began collecting water from a public well each morning and walking miles to work because the electric tram that normally ferried her there was now almost always out of service. At the clothing factory where Mrs. Song worked, shipments of fabric began to slow, and then they stopped all together.

Mrs. Song knew that things were changing all around her for the worse. As things she took for granted, like running water, electricity, and a steady stream of work began to dry up, Mrs. Song found herself having to contend with a kind of scarcity she'd never known or believed possible.

The factory managers sent workers out on "special projects," which were really just scavenging missions to hunt for things that could be sold or bartered for food—things like scrap metal and dog feces, the latter of which could be used as fertilizer. Mrs. Song knew she couldn't quit her job—she needed the coupons she received from her employer in order to receive her food rations. Soon, bosses began filling days with mandatory lectures on Kim Il-sung's life and exploits. When the electricity became too unreliable for even that, a factory manager called Mrs. Song into her office and suggested she find some "other way" of bringing in money. She wasn't suggesting prostitution—she was suggesting Mrs. Song work on the black market.

As things worsened day by day, Mrs. Song's superiors did all they could to continue feeding workers and citizens a steady diet of mind-numbing yet inspiring propaganda. When the drastic changes afoot became too large to ignore, however, the bosses took a different tack: they opted for a radical kind of honesty that verged on blasphemy, given the regime's insistence that everything was all right.

Buying and selling things on the black market was illegal in North Korea, but the trade nevertheless went on in lots behind apartment complexes and other remote communal spaces. In theory, Demick writes, North Koreans are not supposed to need to shop—their government is supposed to provide them with everything they need. Salaries are unbelievably low, and work is generally compensated in the form of food rations. Major purchases such as watches and **televisions** must be approved by one's work unit.

Demick gives readers further insight into the ways in which the North Korean government failed its citizens by promising that they'd never want for anything—then plunging them into a period complete and utter scarcity and lack in which there was nowhere to turn and nothing to be done.

While North Korea's food distribution system, Demick writes, did seem to work for a time in the 1960s and 1970s, the entire country's economy was propped up on lies. Supervisors and officials made up statistics about agricultural and industrial production to save their own skins from coming under fire from the regime. The lies were so prevalent at every level of the supply chain, Demick suggests, that not even Kim Il-sung could pinpoint the moment when the economy went into free-fall.

Here, Demick illustrates how the unique combination of fear, control, and constant propaganda contributed to North Koreans' inability to admit to crises and shortcomings small and large in their work and in their communities. These lies, she suggests, piled up over decades, creating a completely unstable system that could not sustain itself.

Though North Korea affected a self-sufficient stance rooted in juche, it was always dependent on subsidized rice, fertilizer, medicine, and transportation equipment from its Communist allies. The country wasted significant resources on its disproportionately large defense budget—despite not having been to war since 1953, the North Korea of the early 1990s had over 1 million military servicemembers. When Kim Jong-il assumed control of the military in 1991, he introduced the concept of songun, or "military first," and oversaw the production and stockpiling of plutonium so that North Korea could have a "nuclear deterrent" against American forces. The preparations for creating nuclear weapons further ate into the country's budget. North Korea was $10 billion dollars in debt by the early 1990s, and its allies stopped sending resources. Without fuel imports, the electricity stopped. The coal mines shut down. Collective agricultural farms could not sustain their crops.

Demick delves more deeply into the disastrous mistakes the North Korean regime made in an effort to build its image up while neglecting the very real problems within. By wasting resources, hypocritically affecting self-sufficiency while secretly depending almost entirely on foreign aid, and failing to secure any kind of cushion, the regime plunged itself into free-fall. And despite this harsh reality, it nevertheless claimed that things were better, safer, and more prosperous than ever before.

In the early years of the 1990s, Mrs. Song began to notice that her weekly food rations were being cut further and further down. There was hardly any more rice, only corn and barley. The regime reported that the government was stockpiling food to send to their "starving South Korean" neighbors. The regime claimed that the U.S. had instituted a blockade against North Korea and was keeping out food, and that the "Arduous March" North Korea was now enduring was a chance to demonstrate one's patriotism. Billboards encouraged citizens to cut back to two meals a day. A **television** station showed a documentary about a man whose stomach burst from overeating. Newspapers reported that a bumper crop was on the way soon. North Korean citizens, isolated and constantly surveilled, had no choice but to believe what they were told and hope for the best.

After taking a macro view of the economic, social, and political problems that plunged North Korea into a famine, Demick recenters the smaller, more intimate story of Mrs. Song's experiences as she watched her country slide into turmoil. Even as ordinary citizens like Mrs. Song sensed that things were terribly wrong, the propaganda machine went into overdrive to assure them that things were just fine. Ordinary citizens, accustomed to relying on the regime's reports for everything, did not believe—or couldn't allow themselves to believe—that anything other than what they were being told was true.

Mrs. Song was the head of her neighborhood's inminban. She reported to a woman named Comrade Kang from the Ministry for Protection of State Security. As the food shortage went on, Mrs. Song noticed that Comrade Kang was almost desperate for Mrs. Song to report to her about people who were complaining the shortages, even encouraging Mrs. Song to complain to her neighbors first in order to bait them into saying bad things about the regime. Overwhelmed, exhausted, and hungry, Mrs. Song realized that she would need to start selling her belongings on the black market to make ends meet.

This passage shows the regime's increasing desperation to preemptively weed out any dissenters or troublemakers who might reveal the true depths of what was happening. Mrs. Song was loyal to the regime, but she found herself shocked and frightened by the new heights of surveillance and discord taking place within the inminban *and among those above her.*

Meanwhile, in September of 1993, Kim Ji-eun—then a medical graduate doing her residency—accompanied her family to an orchard owned by a collective farm to scavenge for pears. A group of wandering orphans including a young boy named Kim Hyuck, had already descended upon the farm and picked it bare. Kim Ji-eun and her family found only one rotten pear on the ground, took it home, and split it amongst themselves. The next day, Kim Ji-eun would remember later, was the first day in her life she went without food.

As Demick a new interviewee and perspective, Kim Ji-eun, she shows the ways in which even well-to-do North Koreans were plummeting into starvation more rapidly than they ever could have imagined.

CHAPTER 5

When Mi-ran was in high school, she began to notice people from Chongjin and even other parts of the country coming to the countryside where she and her family lived to scavenge for food and firewood. Mi-ran's father's paychecks had dried up, and Mi-ran's mother had quickly gotten to work inventing a new recipe for ice cream made of tofu, red beans, and sugar that she could sell on the black market in order to make some money. Mi-ran and her family were thus able to sustain themselves—the food shortage was not yet a full-blown famine.

Demick returns to Mi-ran's story, examining how the beginning of the famine affected the other soon-to-be defectors. Mi-ran's family, she shows, felt the effects of the food shortage right away—but they managed for a while, not yet pushed to the brink as many of their fellow citizens were. Still, in this passage, Demick shows how Mi-ran's witnessing of her fellow compatriots' increasing desperation foreshadowed darkly what was to come for Mi-ran herself.

Jun-sang, too, was insulated from the worst effects of the food shortage. With money from his paternal grandparents in Japan—and the privilege of a private yard in which they could clandestinely begin a garden—Jun-sang's family was able to eat better than most. Jun-sang had been accepted into a good university in Pyongyang, which was an enormous achievement for a young man without good songbun who lived far from a major city. Jun-sang was proud and optimistic, and he'd found a way to introduce himself to Mi-ran after making friends with her older sister, Mi-sook.

Jun-sang was even better off than Mi-ran, and he was even more insulated than she was from even bearing witness to increasing displays of fear and desperation. Jun-sang, then, had the luxury of focusing on deepening his relationship with Mi-ran, hoping to grow closer to her even in the midst of increasing stratification between people of different backgrounds and songbun.

Once Mi-sook orchestrated a meeting between Mi-ran and Jun-sang, during which Jun-sang confessed his feelings for Mi-ran, Mi-ran somewhat reluctantly agreed to begin a secret relationship with him. Jun-sang went off to college, and the two stayed in touch by sending letters. Paper was a luxury for Mi-ran, but she did whatever she could to procure it for herself—she'd quickly become deeply invested in Jun-sang and drew great happiness from writing him letters. They both knew—but never spoke of—the fact that Mi-ran's beulsun would keep them apart in real life, and so they funneled all of their feelings into melodramatic letters.

This passage shows that Mi-ran and Jun-sang did, for a time, make a full run at being in love, trusting one another with privileged correspondence and secrets, albeit from a distance. Demick illustrates how, even at the height of their relationship, Jun-sang and Mi-ran remained separated from one another—and thus closed-off from one another—in a fundamental way.

There is no real dating culture in North Korea, Demick notes, and premarital sex is frowned upon. Though women often get pregnant before marriage and have abortions to erase the evidence, Demick writes that "prudishness is part of traditional Korean culture." Couples never touch or kiss in public, women dress conservatively, and young people are encouraged by government propaganda to hold off on marriage until their late 20s or early 30s—partly to preserve an atmosphere of chastity, and partly to keep birth rates down so that there are fewer mouths to feed.

Demick offers up some cultural context that helps readers understand the many factors working against young couples such as Jun-sang and Mi-ran. Even when young people, she shows, feel close to one another, stringent societal norms—and, again, the constant threat of being surveilled—keeps many people apart.

Whenever Jun-sang was home from college, he would meet up with Mi-ran after dark to take their long, private walks through the barren, dilapidated countryside. Jun-sang and Mi-ran were both shyer in person than in their letters, but still Jun-sang managed to offer Mi-ran a glimpse of his life in Pyongyang through his detailed stories. Mi-ran was jealous of Jun-sang's good prospects, and admitted she felt she had no purpose in life. Jun-sang optimistically encouraged her to believe in herself and chase her dreams. She began studying hard, and, at the end of her senior year in 1991, she was admitted to a teachers' college in Chongjin.

This passage shows that even though it was difficult for Jun-sang and Mi-ran to cultivate a close relationship, they continued to try to support and connect with one another. In an environment where so many relationships are compromised due to the threat of snitching, surveillance, and betrayal, Mi-ran and Jun-sang did their best to be authentic with and loyal to one another—even though later on, they'd find that capacity tested in unprecedented ways.

At college in the city, Mi-ran found herself in for a rude awakening. The dorms were unheated, dark, and dank; the cafeteria, reeling from the food shortage, served only thin soup made of water and turnip leaves twice a day. Mi-ran, horrified as her malnourished classmates dropped out one by one, secured permission to live off-campus with a relative and visit home each weekend. Jun-sang, meanwhile, lived in a heated dorm with electricity and running water; he ate well and enjoyed his studies. Still, however, he longed to be finished with school so that he could be with Mi-ran. Jun-sang returned home for his sister's wedding in the fall of 1993, and, during the break, he and Mi-ran saw each other frequently. The two of them enjoyed the giddiness they got from sneaking around—and from their affair's ability to distract them from the starvation happening all around them.

Mi-ran's terrible experience at college awakened her to the true nature of what was happening around her. Demick suggests that Mi-ran and Jun-sang, beginning to understand in their own ways the seriousness of what was happening in their country, leaned on their relationship to provide comfort and distraction. Even though they were not free to be together openly, they took risks in order to support one another and numb the pain of living in a country that was sliding into chaos.

CHAPTER 6

In July of 1994, Mi-ran was just about to graduate from teachers' college. She was working as an apprentice teacher at a kindergarten in Chongjin. On July 9th, after students had already been dismissed for the day, one of Mi-ran's students rushed back into the room and declared that Kim Il-sung was dead. Mi-ran's co-teacher scolded the girl for blasphemy, but the girl insisted the other teacher and Mi-ran come to her apartment and see for themselves. Sure enough, when they arrived, a special broadcast was playing and a "heaving sound" of sobbing was rising up from the streets. Kim Il-sung was indeed dead. Mi-ran felt nothing but fear: "If the Great Marshal could die," she thought, "then anything could happen."

As Barbara Demick begins to tell the story of Kim Il-sung's death from her interviewees' different perspectives, she is careful to underscore just how jarring and, in some cases, literally unbelievable his passing was. In a country that revered its leader as a god, the idea that he could suffer a mortal fate was unfathomable for many. Even for those like Mi-ran who were disillusioned by the regime in some ways already, the Dear Leader's death signaled an unprecedented, frightening shift in an already unprecedented and frightening era.

The year leading up to Kim Il-sung's death had been tumultuous, but in June of 1994, it seemed as if change could be on the horizon. Former U.S. president Jimmy Carter visited Pyongyang to negotiate a tentative agreement to freeze North Korea's nuclear program. Carter was also asked to convey an invitation from Kim Il-sung to the South Korean president, Kim Young-sam, asking him to visit Pyongyang for a summit on the 23rd of July. On the 6th, however, Kim Il-sung suffered a heart attack while visiting a collective farm. His death was not announced for over 30 hours while Pyongyang prepared to announce Kim Jong-il as his father's successor. Though Kim Il-sung had been ill for years, no one in North Korea had publicly discussed even the possibility of their Great Leader's death.

Kim Il-sung's death was a major atmospheric shift that no one, in spite of his visible decline, was prepared for. His death was also politically inconvenient—at a moment when North Koreans were suffering and dying, and when broader diplomacy might have been used to leverage some help for the isolated nation, their spiritual and political leadership evaporated.

Mrs. Song heard about Kim Il-sung's death while she was home making lunch for herself and Chang-bo, who was watching the **television**. Mrs. Song reacted violently to the news, running out to the courtyard to join her wailing neighbors; Chang-bo barely reacted at all. Oak-hee, meanwhile, had just arrived at her own building to find her husband crying on the floor of another apartment, surrounded by weeping neighbors. When Oak-hee realized what had happened, she simply returned to her own apartment to fix lunch. As the media announced Kim Jong-il as his father's successor, Oak-hee began to cry tears of self-pity—Chang-bo had always warned her that Kim Jong-il was even worse than Kim Il-sung.

This passage illustrates the varying reactions to Kim Il-sung's death just within one family. Though Mrs. Song immediately experienced an outpouring of grief—as so many North Koreans did—her husband and her daughter, disillusioned with the regime and with Kim Il-sung's leadership, reacted only with stunned silence. Oak-hee's grief was not for the passing of her Dear Leader, but rather for the increasingly uncertain, unstable future she knew was just on the horizon.

In his room in Pyongyang, Jun-sang received a visit from one of his dormmates, who told him to join the rest of their classmates in the courtyard at noon for an important announcement. Jun-sang was afraid that the news would be news of war—but in the courtyard, a female voice on a loudspeaker delivered the news that Kim Jong-il had died. As Jun-sang's classmates fell to the ground weeping, he mirrored their movements even though he felt nothing. He was gripped with fear as he realized, for the first time, that he felt alone in his distaste for the regime. He knew that revealing these feelings was a matter of life and death, so he tried harder to summon tears to his eyes as he rocked back and forth with the others.

This passage takes the non-reactions Chang-bo and Oak-hee had in relatively private spaces and examines them further, through the lens of Jun-sang, who was forced to react falsely in order to appear loyal in front of his fellow students. Jun-sang's fear of being seen as insufficiently upset speaks to the ways in which the North Korean regime seeks to control every aspect of its citizens' physical and emotional lives. Jun-sang had to fake an emotion to escape punishment. In an environment where one must put on emotions this way, Demick suggests, true connection or the potential to ever really know someone is impossible.

All over the country, citizens gathered at their local statues of Kim Il-sung to weep and mourn. The crowds quickly grew hysterical—there were incessant wails of *abogi* (the word for "father" or "God"), instances of trampling, and frequent fainting under the hot summer sun. The displays of sorrow and grief grew almost competitive as the mourning went on for days. Meanwhile, the media broadcasted bizarre news stories about how Kim Il-sung might not really be dead—and that even if he was, the sounds of his people's grief could bring him back to life.

This passage illustrates Demick's argument about the impossibility not only of true, authentic relationships but of true, authentic emotion in a surveillance state. Many North Korean citizens were, of course, genuinely mourning their leader's death—but others like Mi-ran, Jun-sang, Chang-bo, and Oak-hee were forced to put on exaggerated displays so as not to seem blasphemous about Kim Il-sung's passing. It is impossible, Demick suggests, to know who was authentically mourning and who was affecting hysteria in a bid to seem loyal and devoted.

As the mourning period went on, local inminban began keeping track of how frequently people were paying their respects at their local statues and how hard they were crying. Officials often gave out food at the statues—starving children like Kim Hyuck waited in line again and again for hours on end to receive multiple rations. Many older North Koreans suffered heart attacks and strokes during the mourning period, while other citizens committed suicide. Dr. Kim Ji-eun, now a pediatrician at a hospital in Chongjin, lost her father when he purposefully starved himself to death out of grief.

As the inminban began encouraging and indeed enforcing mass public mourning, even more death swept the country. As emotions ran high, as summer heat crushed the masses, and as uncertainty about the future took over, many citizens already living at the brink of what they could take due to the famine gave up altogether.

CHAPTER 7

That July, the hospital in central Chongjin where Kim Ji-eun worked received many patients who sustained injuries or collapsed while mourning Kim Il-sung at his statue in the city. Rooms were crammed due to a recent typhoid outbreak and dark due to electricity failures. The 28-year-old Dr. Kim hardly ever left the hospital, as she was always the first to volunteer for extra shifts in hopes of being chosen to join the Workers' Party one day soon. Dr. Kim's father, an ethnic Korean from Manchuria, moved to North Korea in the 1960s and expressed extreme devotion to the regime right away, grateful to have fled Mao's China. Dr. Kim always mirrored her father's enthusiasm for the regime and sought to impress her father with her loyalty and hard work.

Even though Dr. Kim lived in a failing regime and witnessed daily her hospital's inability to provide adequate care for suffering people, she still had some blind faith in North Korea born of her father's own trust in the state. Demick begins to examine the ways in which Dr. Kim sought to embody ideals of juche *and to do all she could to prove herself a loyal citizen.*

Dr. Kim gave herself to her patients body and soul. From making house calls in poor neighborhoods to donating her own blood to gathering medicinal herbs to supplement the hospital's paltry treatments, Dr. Kim managed to meet the unique demands of being a doctor in resource-strapped North Korea. By the early 1990s, however, medical equipment continued to break, yet no new supplies or machines arrived from abroad; pharmaceutical factories shut down, leading to a shortage of medicine. When Dr. Kim's higher-ups started rationing painkillers and antibiotics based on their personal preferences for different patients, Dr. Kim began experiencing tension with her superiors. She asked to be transferred to pediatrics. Dr. Kim was already divorced and living with her parents—the struggles in her personal and professional lives were compounded by the sudden misery of Kim Il-sung's death.

By delving more deeply into Dr. Kim's complete and utter devotion to her patients and to her profession, even amidst a total collapse of resources, Demick shows how those suffering through scarcity and starvation often do unthinkable, unimaginable things, both good and bad. While Dr. Kim did unimaginable things to provide for her patients, her superiors began showing just how insidiously starvation and scarcity transform human behavior and illuminate the human capacity for cruelty.

Dr. Kim was devastated when she learned of Kim Il-sung's death. She and her colleagues, deep in denial, traded conspiracy theories about how Kim Il-sung had been assassinated. She was so wrapped up in the response at work that by the time she realized her father was intentionally starving himself to death, it was too late for her to do much of anything. Though Dr. Kim begged her father to eat and even gave him intravenous fluids, her father's condition worsened. He grew delirious and began railing against the Great Leader. One night, he scrawled a strange pyramid labeled with names and numbers on a piece of scrap paper. He handed it to Dr. Kim and told her that he had written down the names of relatives in China who would help her when she needed them. Dr. Kim locked the paper away in a box, confused and upset.

Dr. Kim loved the Great Leader so much in part because of her father's example—so when her father, in his final days, began speaking out wildly against the regime and even suggesting Dr. Kim find a way to defect or escape, she was unable to process her emotions. Just as Dr. Kim was unable to accept Kim Il-sung's death, she was unable to find a way to reconcile this new information about her father and her family with the things she thought she knew. This highlights the ways in which life in North Korea—and any environment marked by constant surveillance—transforms, erodes, and obscures human connection, even amongst family members.

After her father died, Dr. Kim threw herself into her work with even more gusto. Summer turned to winter, and the normal rhythms of life in North Korea resumed—but when the weather once again warmed and rains flooded the rice paddies, the government admitted publicly, at last, that the nation was enduring a food shortage. Dr. Kim began to notice that her patients in the pediatric unit were skinny and weak, with heads too large for their bodies and strange pains in their stomachs. Fed on wild grasses foraged in the woods and the husks of corncobs, the children were unable to digest or receive any nourishment from the scraps they were eating.

As Dr. Kim began witnessing the devastating effects of the worsening famine, she found herself forced to reckon with the fact that her country had failed her and her fellow citizens. The admission that there was a food shortage was too little, too late—it was clear to Dr. Kim that the long-term effects of starvation were already seizing hold of her patients' lives, and that there was nothing she could do.

Other patients began coming in with devastating, strange symptoms. Rashes around the neck and hands indicated pellagra, caused by a lack of niacin in the diet, and many women came in unable to produce milk for their newborns due to their own malnourishment. Many came to the hospital looking for food, but the hospital had no rations, either. Dr. Kim watched many of her pediatric patients die, unable to do anything to relieve what ailed them: starvation and wasting.

Dr. Kim's reckoning with the ways in which scarcity and starvation force people into unthinkable situations is unique. She was, in essence, forced to give up on a lot of people and turn a blind eye to their suffering: there were no options for these people, and Dr. Kim had already given her all to a system that could not sustain itself.

By 1995, North Korea's economy had come to a total standstill. Exports dropped from $2 billion to $800 million; factories began to rust, Chongjiin's ports were empty, and even the ubiquitous propaganda signs began to chip and fade. Demick notes that Kim Il-sung died at a "convenient" time—his legacy, in the eyes of his people, would be protected from association with the immense destruction that was just beginning.

Demick uses this passage to emphasize, once again, how those responsible for North Korea's complete collapse ultimately failed to face any consequences for their actions. Demick stresses that Kim Il-sung is still revered in North Korea to this day; the fact that he drove his country into famine goes largely ignored by those who devote themselves to him.

CHAPTER 8

In the fall of 1994, after graduating from teachers' college, Mi-ran requested an appointment teaching closer to home. Food distribution in Chongjin had come to a complete halt, and she hoped she'd be able to eat better closer to home. Every day, Mi-ran walked nearly an hour to her new school, where happy signs and pictures of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il hung in each classroom—even though the school had no paper, no heating, no uniforms, and no food to serve aside from a thin soup. Mi-ran worried for her kindergarteners, whose tiny bodies shivered in the cold classrooms each day, yet she tried to remain optimistic and enthusiastic.

Even in the depths of a famine—and indeed a society collapse—teachers like Mi-ran were encouraged to continue spreading government propaganda and keeping up appearances so as not to draw attention from the regime's surveillance forces. Even as children struggled and starved, they were daily placed in an environment where they were told that everything was as it should be.

Mi-ran played accordion for her students each day, singing them a familiar North Korean tune, "We Have Nothing to Envy in the World," which glorified the Workers' Party and the Great Leader while denigrating the rest of the world. "Even if a sea of fire comes toward us," the song went, "sweet children do not need to be afraid." Another song, "Shoot the Yankee Bastards," encouraged children to kill the American aggressors who were trying to overtake their "beautiful fatherland." Mi-ran read to her students from Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il's many published books. Every lesson, no matter the subject, was peppered with references to the glory of the Great Leader and the evil of the outside world, specifically the Americans and the Japanese.

In this passage, Demick illustrates some of the ways in which government propaganda made its way into North Korean classrooms, like these dark, disturbing songs and propaganda-infused lesson plans. Through these examples, Demick highlights how the regime seeks to assail even young children with isolationist, nationalist rhetoric day in and day out. In this environment, violence is normalized, fear of death is denigrated, objective fact is no longer part of education, and the only thing worth living for is the regime. Living under these circumstances, Demick shows, people can be deceived into accepting and doing anything.

Mi-ran herself didn't know what to believe about the content she was teaching. She herself had always been taught that the U.S. was the enemy—but her mother had often told her stories of American GIs giving out candy as they drove through North Korea during the war. The lessons Mi-ran was instructed to teach about Kim Il-sung's life and his great exploits—including his nearly single-handed defeat of Japan, according to the regime's propaganda—had increased in dramatic details and fervor since his death. North Korean calendars changed, reflecting the modern era's beginning in 1912, the year of Kim Il-sung's birth. The year was not 1994, but Juche 84. Though Kim Jong-il was now the head of state, Kim Il-sung was named the "eternal president" of the country.

Even as Mi-ran continued to dutifully spread Party ideology, she found herself questioning the things she'd been taught all her life: things she was now teaching to a new generation. The country's obsession with preserving and maintaining Kim Il-sung's legacy—and elevating him even higher in his people's hearts and minds—raised some red flags for Mi-ran, who could see the changes in fact and rhetoric taking place before her very eyes.

When Mi-ran's school, which already had a dedicated classroom that served as a kind of shrine to Kim Il-sung, was instructed to build a similar room for Kim Jong-il, a group of teachers devised a plan to take a trip to the port town of Nampo and trade pottery for salt, which they would then trade for glass to help construct a diorama at the center of the room. The plan seemed convoluted to Mi-ran—but she was grateful for the chance to get out of Chongjin and begin devising a way to sneak into Pyongyang and see Jun-sang. It was growing more and more difficult for them to stay in touch—mail service had slowed, and many suspected postal workers burned letters to stay warm at night.

This passage shows the great lengths people were willing to go to in order to glorify the regime in the wake of heightened patriotism after Kim Il-sung's death. It's unclear whether the teachers at Mi-ran's school were genuinely motivated to do anything they could to build a shrine to Kim Jong-il, or whether they were simply afraid of what would happen to them if they didn't express enough enthusiasm about the project. But regardless of their motivations, it is clear that ordinary people were ready to do anything to show devotion for their new leader.

On the long train journey to Nampo, Mi-ran devised a plan. She told the teachers she was traveling with that she was having family problems and that she needed to get off the train at Pyongyang to meet a wealthy relative and ask for money. Her fellow teachers understood her plight and didn't ask questions. At the station, Mi-ran questioned her own plan—her travel papers didn't permit her to wander through Pyongyang. She stopped a station officer and complained that she was going to visit a sick brother but had forgotten her papers. The officer asked for Mi-ran's name and address, in hopes of seeing her again, in exchange for turning a blind eye. Mi-ran wrote down fake information and left the station for Jun-sang's university.

This passage shows how much things had changed in North Korea in just a few short years. Before the famine, sneaking into Pyongyang without papers would've been impossible—but as famine and lack took hold of the country, people's priorities shifted and even officials' attentions were directed elsewhere. Demick begins here to track the ways in which the food crisis in North Korea changed the sociopolitical atmosphere there in small and large ways.

At the university, Mi-ran claimed to be looking for her "brother" Jun-sang. An official made her sit alone in a guardhouse until Jun-sang came to collect her. When Jun-sang at last arrived, he was thrilled to see Mi-ran, and the two of them left campus to take one of their long walks. Jun-sang was impressed by Mi-ran's audacity in pulling off such a stunt. They sat together on a bench and talked. Jun-sang put his arm around Mi-ran's shoulder—it was the most physical touch they'd ever shared. As midnight rolled around, Jun-sang walked a tired Mi-ran to the station so that she could catch the next train to Nampo.

Again, Demick shows how the famine served to embolden some people—especially people like Mi-ran and Jun-sang, who had already begun questioning the regime while things were still relatively good. With things in such a state of chaos and disarray, Mi-ran and Jun-sang perhaps felt they had little to lose—they decided to take some risks in order to feel some happiness and security.

After making their deals in Nampo, Mi-ran and her fellow teachers prepared to return to Chongjin. The night before their train journey back, they slept outside the station. Mi-ran was startled from sleep by a group of people making a ruckus—there was a man nearby who was curled up, dead, beneath a tree. Soon, people pulling an ox cart came by, loaded the man's body onto it, and wheeled him away. Mi-ran knew the man had died of hunger. She feared that the same fate would soon begin to befall her own students, whose bellies had begun to swell, whose hair had lightened in color from malnutrition, and whose abilities to stay awake through a single class were compromised. Back in Chongjin, Mi-ran noticed that many students simply stopped coming to class. She didn't want to know what had happened to them.

The incident at the train station in Nampo awakened Mi-ran to a shift in the toll the famine was taking on the nation. People weren't just hungry—they were dying of starvation. As Mi-ran continued noticing her students' suffering intensifying, she found that she had to embody the same distance and disaffection as at the train station: she couldn't possibly take on the weight of all her students' stories.

That winter, Jun-sang came home to Chongjin and surprised Mi-ran by visiting her at her school. As Mi-ran told Jun-sang about what was happening to her students, she felt a profound sense of guilt—she and Jun-sang were eating relatively well, but still her students were suffering. Years later, Demick writes, Mi-ran would tell her that she still felt sick over having eaten well while her own students were starving. Mi-ran's calculated indifference, Demick says, was a survival skill—in time, Mi-ran would learn to look past starving children on the streets as well as in the classroom.

Demick uses this passage to hint at the long-term ramifications of the things Mi-ran and Jun-sang had to do both physically and psychologically in order to survive as the famine worsened. Mi-ran, Demick shows, would carry the guilt of surviving when so many died through the rest of her life. With this, Demick emphasizes how when people are pushed to the brink, they can do unthinkable things—including coldly ignoring the plight of others in order to keep themselves alive and focused.

CHAPTER 9

When the famine hit, Demick writes, the people of North Korea did not go passively to their deaths—instead, they came up with increasingly creative (and dangerous) ways of feeding themselves: they trapped sparrows, foraged for plants and tree barks, cooked and ate frogs, and even picked kernels of undigested corn from animal excrement. The North Korean government, meanwhile, would barely even admit that the food shortage was real.

Even as people devoted exponential amounts of time, energy, and brainpower to figuring out their next meager meal, the North Korean regime refused to concede that mass starvation had taken hold of the country. This cognitive dissonance left many people in denial themselves—and that denial would have devastating effects for those who, like the government itself, refused to see how widespread, how dangerous, and how unending the famine was.

Mrs. Song was reticent to turn to the black market—but when her and her husband's pay dried up and their food rations ceased, she began selling off their family's possessions to buy soybeans so that she could make and sell tofu. When a fuel shortage began, she could no longer cook the tofu—and so she and Chang-bo, who once fancied themselves skillful cooks, took to foraging in the mountains for weeds, grasses, nuts, and barks to bolster their small rations of cornmeal made from husks and cobs.

This passage begins to show the lengths to which Mrs. Song would go to prevent her family's starvation. She compromised her Communist ideals and turned to illegal trade, and she also began compromising the kinds of foods she would stoop to eat.

When there was nothing left to sell, Mrs. Song and her husband decided to illegally sell their apartment—which was technically owned by the regime, as was everything in North Korea. After earning about $3,000 for the sale, Chang-bo and Mrs. Song moved to a single room. Mrs. Song used the profits to illegally purchase rice, which she and her husband hadn't eaten in years. On her way home from the faraway market, Mrs. Song's tightly packed train crashed—the back carriages were almost entirely destroyed. Mrs. Song survived, as she was toward the front of the train, but she lost most of her rice and suffered a debilitating back injury that would leave her in chronic pain for years to come.

Increasingly desperate to find ways to provide her family, Mrs. Song found herself doing things she never thought imaginable—and enduring things she'd previously thought unthinkable. Demick uses the train incident to illustrate how, as scarcity and starvation began to form the rhythm of Mrs. Song's life, she found herself powerless to fight back against the structural, systemic failures all around her that slowly decimated her, her family's, and her neighbors' quality of life.

As chronic malnutrition seized hold of the population, the most vulnerable—children and the elderly—began dying of ordinarily preventable conditions worsened by starvation. Dysentery and pneumonia overtook the frailest individuals who were so weakened that they were unable to fight off ordinary conditions like colds and stomach flus. Those who refused to steal food or break the law by turning the black market—those who remained innocent and did as the regime told them to do—died first.

Here, Demick describes the painful facts of starvation. Those who believed that the regime would take care of them—or that to lie, cheat, steal, or turn to the black market would be to dishonor the regime, the concept of juche, *and the Great Leader—were the first victims of a famine that the regime allowed to happen.*

Mrs. Song's mother-in-law died in the spring of 1996. Mrs. Song felt she had failed, as a daughter-in-law, to keep her alive. Even as more and more propaganda posters urging citizens to "charge forward into the new century in the spirit of victory in the Arduous March," Mrs. Song realized that things were getting worse. Mrs. Song and Chang-bo moved to an even smaller place, an unheated and crumbling shack. They hardly had any possessions left, and money was running out.

This passage shows how even as loyal citizens like Mrs. Song worked to stay afloat, the regime preyed upon their citizens' faith in them and denied that anything was amiss. By urging citizens to take up the "Arduous March" as a personal, noble cause, the regime spread dangerous misinformation and fueled mass denial, confusion, and desperation.

Mrs. Song and her husband both suffered from extreme lethargy, and Chang-bo had a stroke. After returning home from the hospital, his legs began swelling horribly—a sign of fluid retention brought on by starvation. He began hallucinating and talked incessantly about food. One morning, he offered to take Mrs. Song out to a nice restaurant. Sensing his desperation, Mrs. Song hurried out to beg for food. By the time she returned home, Chang-bo was stiff and unresponsive—he had died alone.

Demick tells the story of Chang-bo's slow, terrible death, highlighting how in his final days he could think of nothing but a real meal. This passage illustrates the long-term physical and psychological effects of starvation and scarcity, both on those who are suffering most acutely and those who must watch their loved ones waste away, knowing there is little they can do.

Nam-oak came to live with Mrs. Song following Chang-bo's death. Nam-oak's dreams of athletic glory had collapsed; now, he worked for the railway system for no pay and no rations. In the winter of 1997, he caught a cold that turned into pneumonia. Mrs. Song went to the hospital and asked for a penicillin prescription. A doctor wrote her one—but when she got to the market to buy it, she found it cost the same as a kilo of corn. Mrs. Song chose the corn. Without medicine, Nam-oak wasted and died—he passed away, like Chang-bo, while Mrs. Song was out foraging for food.

In this passage, Demick shows how people living in an atmosphere of constant scarcity are forced to make devastating, unthinkable decisions. Mrs. Song believed that in buying food to feed her son, she was helping him more than medicine could—yet the decision she made proved to be a fatal one, one she would have to live with for the rest of her life.

By 1998, an estimated 10% of North Korea's population had died. Exact numbers remain unknown, as hospitals were forbidden from citing starvation as a cause of death. Foreign aid agencies gave the country $2.4 billion between 1996 and 2005, but when representatives from these agencies arrived in North Korea to assess the situation, they were shepherded through the showcase capital of Pyongyang and shown a city that appeared to be bustling and thriving. Agencies couldn't assess how serious the famine was, and they could not determine whether the aid rations were getting to those who needed them most. The military stockpiled a lot of the food that came in from the outside world, and the regime sold rations on the black market for their own profits. By the end of 1998, Mrs. Song told Demick during one of their interviews, "everybody who was going to die was already dead."

This passage illustrates how even at the height of a devastating famine, the North Korean regime remained obsessed with presenting a strong, self-sufficient, isolationist façade to the outside world. Their pride, Demick argues, resulted in hundreds of thousands if not millions of deaths. Demick illustrates how the rhetoric of juche *became, in essence, a death sentence for millions of North Koreans who lived at the mercy of their corrupt, incompetent government.*

CHAPTER 10

After Nam-oak's death in 1998, Mrs. Song's mental state collapsed. She could not return to the shack where he had died; she wandered the streets, weeping and moaning, until she collapsed in a starved, hypothermic delirium near her the building where her daughters lived. The girls brought her inside, pooled their money, and bought enough food to nurse their mother back to health. Even once she had recovered, however, Mrs. Song still felt responsible for the three deaths that had taken place within her family in just three short years. Though Mrs. Song wanted to give up, she managed to pull herself together and start a new business.

Mrs. Song, Demick shows, felt deeply and profoundly responsible for the deaths of her mother-in-law, husband, and son. Even though she'd done everything she could to try to save them from starvation, it wasn't enough—and she had to make impossible decisions about their well-being that she continued to question long after each individual passed away. Though Mrs. Song hadn't yet left North Korea, she was suffering from palpable survivor's guilt.

All over the country, those like Mrs. Song who had hit rock bottom began to find, inexplicably, a new, enterprising spirit. People became fishmongers, butchers, and bakers, selling their wares on the black market—even though Kim Jong-il had taken an even harder line against the illegal buying and selling of goods than his father before him, seeing commerce as a "stab in the heart of Communist ideology." Mrs. Song, for example, began baking batches of cookies with the help of her youngest daughter, the newly divorced Yong-hee. Their first batches were terrible—but as the women practiced, they were able to make a sellable product that Mrs. Song could take to the market. The cookies were a hit. Though she usually made just enough to break even and buy supplies for another batch, she was no longer going to bed hungry.

In this passage, Demick shows how many North Koreans found themselves doing unthinkable things during the famine. Though North Koreans were taught from an early age that capitalism was destructive and evil and that all resources should come directly from the state, many found themselves turning to previously unimaginable behaviors in order to get by. Not everything North Korean citizens had to do to survive was painful or degrading—but much of it did fly in the face of all they had been taught.

Many other women like Mrs. Song continued opening small businesses, though they still harbored a great deal of shame and suspicion after a lifetime of propaganda about the evils of a free-market economy. People began collecting and selling medicinal herbs; physicians like Dr. Kim provided medicine, procedures, and notes to help people get out of grueling work shifts at low costs; Mi-ran's mother and father began operating a mill where people could grind up corn. Many women resorted to prostitution, and though Oak-hee did not turn to sex work, she made a deal with a local prostitute in which the woman would pay Oak-hee to use her home for privacy with clients.

This passage, which fills in the blanks about what several of Demick's interviewees were doing to survive during the famine, shows how people had to do the unthinkable to get by. Lines between what was legal and illegal, acceptable and unacceptable were profoundly blurred. North Korea's isolationist, Communist core wasn't breaking down, but its people were.

People began growing fruits and vegetables in small (and illegal) backyard plots. Foreign countries—the United States included—flew in grains and rice, which flooded the black market. China sent toiletries, batteries, lighters, paper, and pens; colorful, soft, and ultra-modern clothing came in from South Korea, which North Koreans euphemistically called "the village below." The market in Chongjin grew and grew in size, drawing customers from the countryside who wanted food, dry goods, haircuts, and more. The market vendors were mostly women—men remained stuck in state jobs that paid nothing, while their wives went out into the market to provide.

Demick shows how even in the midst of an unbelievably dark time, many North Korean citizens took to heart the core values of self-reliance they'd been taught all their lives and found ways to survive. The exposure to goods from the outside world, however, flew directly in the face of the juche *ideology. Demick, then, presents the conflicting drives and desires that were motivating North Koreans at a time of unprecedented turmoil and widespread uncertainty.*

Things were changing in Chongjin—but still, Mrs. Song harbored suspicion about the greed and ambition that the buying and selling of goods was inspiring in her neighbors. The wealth gap was widening; restrictions on those who would have been "economic criminals" a decade ago were loosening; inflation was out of control. The seriously poor were still starving and dying. Mrs. Song watched a young boy succumb to acute food poisoning after eating spoiled fish entrails cast off from a seafood stall at the market, and one night on the way home, she saw two men pulling an ox cart piled with bodies. Not all of the people piled into the card were even dead yet—some were still on the very brink.

Even as things got better for those who were able to participate in the emerging micro-economy unfolding in the illegal marketplaces of North Korea, this passage illustrates that the level of death, destruction, and dehumanization was still pervasive and unprecedented. The sudden influx of capitalism was not the solution to North Korea's profound and widespread devastation.

CHAPTER 11

Kim Hyuck, one of the "wandering swallows," or kochebi, whose parents had died or gone off in search of food, spent his early teen years scavenging and begging at the Chongjin train station, wearing vinyl bags as shoes and an oversized factory uniform for warmth. At 14, he was a skilled thief—yet he was so malnourished that he was no bigger than an 8-year-old. Born into a well-to-do family in 1982, Hyuck mother died when he was young. His father remarried a woman with children of her own—she gave them food, but withheld rations from Hyuck and his brother. They began stealing—when they were caught, their father whipped them and told them it was better to starve than to steal.

This passage provides some context about Hyuck's life. Though he was born into a privileged family, even he was not insulated from the devasting effects of the famine. Hyuck and his brother were willing to do whatever it took to survive, but their father was a man who believed that the regime should—and eventually would—provide everything they needed.

Hyuck and his brother continued to steal. Their father used his connections to get them into an orphanage, where he hoped they'd stay fed and out of trouble. Initially, the boys were fed adequately—but by their first winter there, the children were eating plain salted soup. In the first three months of 1996, 27 children living at the orphanage died. Hyuck and his brother began escaping the orphanage to scavenge for food, eating frogs, rats, and cicadas to stay alive. Hyuck and a friend he met on the streets drowned a dog and barbequed it. He felt guilty about killing animals, but he wanted to live. After Hyuck's brother aged out of the orphanage, Hyuck was left along to fend for himself—he was regularly beaten up by the other children and was once even attacked with an ax.

The mass death from starvation that Hyuck and his brother witnessed at the orphanage confirmed for them that they would have to return to thievery to get by. Though it might be more noble to starve in their father's estimation, they were not willing to end up like the orphans in the home with them. Hyuck and his brother, like Mrs. Song, Dr. Kim, and Oak-hee, found that they would do and endure unthinkable things in order to survive.

After the slashing, Hyuck ran away back to Chongjin. The city was eerily silent and dilapidated. When he returned to the apartment building where he'd once lived, he found that his father was gone; he'd left the new tenants with instructions to tell his sons, should they return, to look for him at the train station. The train station, Hyuck knew, was where people went when they had nothing left. Hyuck wandered through the crowds of starving men and women there, looking for his father, but couldn't find him. Exhausted, Hyuck fell asleep at the train station with the other homeless who sought refuge there.

Hyuck's story continued to worsen as he found himself more isolated than ever, separated from his family and forced to join the huddled masses at the train station. Hyuck's situation continued to grow more and more unbelievable as he descended into squalor and obscurity.

Hyuck became a wandering swallow, joining up with gangs of other children for mutual protection. Together they would steal from market vendors and from slow-moving trains. At night, the children protected one another—there were rumors of adults who stole children and ate them. Stories about cannibals were everywhere. People who lived at the station often died in the middle of the night, leaving cleaning staff to load their bodies onto a cart each morning and take them away to be buried in a mass grave. Hyuck never found his father—and many years later, he told Demick that he believes this is the fate with which the man eventually met.

This passage recounts the terrible traumas and human rights atrocities Hyuck witnessed as a young man struggling to survive amidst a disastrous famine. Hyuck was pushed to the brink by the atmosphere of scarcity and misery in which he lived. He was alone, isolated, and left to reckon with constant physical and psychological damage.

Hyuck began sneaking onto trains and riding around the countryside in search of food, but the woods and orchards were stripped bare. He knew that if he returned to the orphanage, he could make his way to the gray river just beyond it—the Tumen River. On the other side was the lush countryside of China. Though Hyuck knew from his time at the orphanage that the shores of the river were closed military areas, heavily monitored by border police on both sides—but Hyuck was desperate.

This passage shows how as time went on and Hyuck became more desperate—and more traumatized—he found himself considering things he'd previously thought unthinkable. Demick uses Hyuck's story to deepen her assertion that scarcity and starvation push people into committing unbelievable acts—of evil, of courage, or of desperation.

Late one night in late 1997, when he was 15 years old, Hyuck crossed the Tumen for the first time by wading through the icy water. He reached the other side without incident, amazed that he was in another country. He wandered into a small town, where he was instantly recognized at a market as a North Korean due to his oversized clothes and malnourished frame. A vendor stopped him and asked him if he could bring an old-fashioned iron over from the other side of the river. Hyuck realized that there was money to be made selling goods in China.

Hyuck never imagined crossing the river when he was younger—but now, he had been pushed to the brink by the cruelty, starvation, and death he'd born witness to in his years as a kochebi, *and he was willing to do whatever he could to keep himself alive. Crossing into China alone was a betrayal of the regime—selling goods there was unheard of.*

Hyuck began traveling back and forth across the river with North Korean pottery, jewelry, paintings, and household goods strapped to a pack on his back. He learned which spots along the river were under-staffed and poorly surveilled. He never remained too long in China, fearful of being handed over to the police. Hyuck was making more money than he had ever seen in his life. He stopped stealing—he bought himself new clothes, and he could afford to eat every day. Even as his life changed, Hyuck knew that at any minute it could all come crashing down—and once he turned 16, he had to bear the additional knowledge that, if captured, he would be tried for his crimes as an adult.

Hyuck, like all North Koreans, was taught that capitalist greed and help from outsiders were two things that could not be abided. Hyuck, however, wasn't willing to starve, fade away, and die—he was determined to do whatever it took, to survive, even if his life would come under threat in a different way.

CHAPTER 12

North Koreans, Demick writes, have multiple words for prison, the same way the Inuit do for snow. There are detention centers, police units, "enlightenment centers" for the rehabilitation of those charged with smuggling, labor camps, and the most notorious prisons of all—*kwanliso*, or "control and management places" located in the northernmost reaches of the country. An estimated 200,000 prisoners are housed in these gulags today—politicians, descendants of landlords or Japanese collaborators, Christian clergymen, and those who have been charged with insulting the authority of the leadership. Sentences in these camps are life sentences, so few ever emerge to tell their stories.

By introducing the unique and violent ecosystem of North Korea's vast network of prisons and labor camps, Demick turns the focus of the book, for this chapter, to the profound consequences of any criminal or "antistate" activity in North Korea. Though Demick has spent much of the book exploring the rigid societal rules that govern the country, she has not yet examined the practical consequences of defying the state and the Workers' Party. Now, she offers readers a glimpse into just how serious the punishments for the small crimes her interviewees have all committed truly are.

When Kim Hyuck was arrested just after his 16th birthday, a fleet of undercover police from the Bowibu, the national security agency that investigates political crimes, brought him to a holding center where they beat him incessantly and questioned him unendingly about having drawn a map of the easiest border crossings for a Chinese citizen. After a few months, he was transferred to a county jail; there, without a trial, he was charged with an illegal border crossing and sentenced to three years in a labor camp.

Kim Hyuck began making border crossings in order to survive—he knew that if he wanted to eat, he would have to come up with a way to feed himself. Now, Demick shows how Hyuck was forced to face the unbelievably harsh consequences reserved for criminals in North Korea. The famine pushed Hyuck into unthinkable territory—and now, he had to wade into even darker, more painful waters.

At the camp, Hyuck and about 1,500 other prisoners worked from sunrise to sunset, laboring in lumberyards, farmlands, a brick factory, and a mine. The labor camp produced furniture, bicycles, and more. The men were fed one small rice ball padded with corn husks each day. At night, they slept on concrete. The prisoners were mostly "economic criminals," or those who'd been caught working the black market. Many mornings, Hyuck and his fellow prisoners would wake up to find a man had died in the night. Beatings, the withholding of food, and executions were commonplace. Hyuck was released at last in July of 2002 after just 20 months—he was told that his early pardon was in celebration of the upcoming anniversary of the founding of the Workers' Party, but Hyuck believed the camp simply had more "important enemies" than him scheduled to arrive soon.

As Demick relays the terrible conditions Hyuck described within the labor camp where he was held for his crimes, it becomes clear that the desperate North Korean regime turned to prison labor, exploiting a captive workforce to produce goods in an attempt to keep the economy and the production of goods from shutting down altogether. This suggests implicitly that North Korea sought to round up people for petty crimes in order to take advantage of their labor—even if it wound up costing these individuals their lives.

As the food shortage stabilized, Kim Jong-il decided that he needed to be less "tolerant" of those who had resorted to buying and selling goods on the black market during the crisis. The regime ramped up its arrests, bringing anyone who worked as a vendor, trader, or smuggler to a camp. Kim Jong-il sent reinforcements to heighten security along the Chinese border; he also encouraged Chinese undercover police to start patrolling markets and towns on the other side, hunting for defectors and smugglers. He created prisons for the homeless, hoping to keep hidden away the drifters whose presence on the streets revealed just how bad things were.

This passage shows that the increased presence in North Korea's labor camps in the late 1990s and early 2000s was not due only to the government's desire to profit off prison labor, but also due to Kim Jong-il's desire to increase his own power, infamy, and clout by cracking down on those who threatened his regime. Kim Jong-il needed to present a front of relative normalcy and prosperity in order to prove the superiority of juche*, Communism, and the Kim dynasty—and he was willing to do anything in pursuit of that goal.*

Kim Jong-il also purged the 6th Army, a division of the military stationed in Chongjin, and replaced them with new troops from the 9th Army. Rumors of an attempted military coup spread throughout Chongjin—many people waited for something terrible to happen. Demick writes that the more plausible explanation for the purge was that Kim Jong-il wanted control over the infantry's financial activities—the military ran trading companies that exported rare delicacies alongside illicit drugs, which the regime condoned as it made a profit. But when the military was suspected of skimming off the top themselves, Kim Jong-il had had enough.

This passage shows that Kim Jong-il and his regime were more than willing to tolerate corruption—and outright theft of aid materials from the people of North Korea by the military—when it benefited them financially and diplomatically. When those profits were lessened, however, he took decisive and punitive action.

After the purge, even harder crackdowns began. Special prosecutors traveled to the region to investigate factory managers who had organized employees to start an illegal scrap metal trade across the border; the managers were executed by firing squad in a public area near the market. More and more executions began taking place—prostitutes, hoarders, and petty thieves whose only crimes were stealing and selling copper wires from now-defuncted telephone poles were accused of "antistate activities" and gunned down in the streets. Life in North Korea became increasingly chaotic and dangerous, and the rules that had governed life there for so long were changing fast.

This passage shows readers how the government crackdown on "antistate activities" was used to violently, systematically weed out any threat, large or small, to the Communist, isolationist status quo in North Korea. Even as the government took food from hungry citizens and profited off their pain and starvation, it sought to destroy any dissent, industry, or individual enterprise. People doing their best to get by in dangerous, unimaginable times of famine were punished harshly—and sometimes paid for their crimes with their very lives.

CHAPTER 13

Jun-sang was home for summer vacation when, one day, the head of the inminban went around knocking on doors, summoning people to bear witness to a public execution. Jun-sang didn't want to go, but he didn't want to call attention to himself either. He marched with some three hundred of his neighbors to the embankment of a small stream to watch state security execute a man who'd been accused of selling copper wire. Nobody stood up for the man or intervened on his behalf. Jun-sang was growing weary of and disgusted by these "unpleasant discoveries" about his country. During his visit home, Jun-sang had been shocked and dismayed by how many classmates and teachers from his youth had died recently, either of starvation or by execution. Jun-sang now saw corruption everywhere—he was fully disenchanted with the country and its regime.

As Demick returns to Jun-sang's point of view, she begins to examine what it means for a promising, upwardly mobile young North Korean to begin rejecting all he has been taught. Jun-sang knew that the things he was forced to bear witness to were wrong—yet he was uncertain, at this time in his life, about how he could possibly stand up to a regime that systematically executed those who challenged or questioned its actions in any way.

At his university, Jun-sang was, as an elite student, allowed to read some Western literature. Novels like *Gone with the Wind* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* had charmed him—but when he began reading nonfiction about human sexuality, Communism, foreign politics, and economics, he found his eyes opening to the regime's faults. After graduating in 1996, Jun-sang moved into a small apartment in Pyongyang. He got permission to purchase a **television**. Though it was dangerous, he constructed an antennae attachment that would let him watch South Korean television late at night while his neighbors slept. Though officials from a special bureau dedicated to the regular inspection of televisions paid a visit, Jun-sang was able to cover up what he was doing.

As Jun-sang expanded the horizons of his learning, he began longing to see his own country from a different point of view. Jun-sang was waking up to the ideals of the outside world—and he could not satiate his hunger for more information, more connection, and more proof that what he was living through was intense, extreme, and abnormal.

Each night, Jun-sang listened to broadcasts from South Korea that telegraphed speeches from President Bill Clinton about what was happening, from an outsider's perspective, in North Korea. Jun-sang was perplexed and horrified to learn that over two million people had died of starvation, and that 200,000 more were in labor camps and gulags. He now knew how the rest of the world saw his country—yet a part of him wondered if the South Korean news reports were exaggerated, "just like North Korean propaganda."

This passage illustrates how propaganda often relies on misinformation and deception to alter and impede people's ability to understand objective truth. Even as Jun-sang found the validation he wanted about the scope of what was happening all around him, he found himself wanting to believe it wasn't true—and that other places were just as egregious in their use of propaganda and misinformation as his own home.

Jun-sang took many train journeys home to Chongjin. These journeys were arduous and often dangerous, with trains frequently breaking down in the middle of mountain ranges for days on end. On one journey, Jun-sang noticed a young kochebi singing on a platform: "We have nothing to envy," he cooed. Jun-sang knew the song by heart, but he was surprised to hear that the child replaced Kim Il-sung's name in the lyrics with Kim Jong-il's. Jun-sang pitied the child who sang a song glorifying his benevolent father even as he begged for scraps in soaking, filthy clothes. In later years, Jun-sang would look back on this encounter as his breaking point.

As Jun-sang watched a starving young boy sing a paean to the very regime that was causing his suffering, Jun-sang realized just how corrupt and irredeemable his country's government was. Another layer of Jun-sang's anger and frustration here lies in the way in which the young boy swapped out Kim Il-sung's name for Kim Il-jong's—revealing that there is no real loyalty in North Korea to anything but the structure of the regime.

Though Jun-sang had had enough, he found himself going through the motions of being a loyal subject of the regime. He was disgusted with himself, initially, for continuing to attend lectures glorifying the Kim regime and the Workers' Party—but when he began looking out at the faces of his fellow attendees and recognizing the blank look in their eyes, he realized he couldn't be the only nonbeliever out there. Jun-sang wished he could find others to talk to, but North Korea was so repressed and surveilled that no organized resistance to the regime could really take place, even in the form of reading groups or political meetings. Jun-sang told himself to lie low and keep his mouth shut. Even around Mi-ran, he was careful not to speak of his secret **television** antennae, his Western reading, or his burgeoning desire to defect.

The rest of this chapter has focused on the breakdown of Jun-sang's faith in his country's government, the regime's propaganda, and the idea that North Korea was a glorious, self-sufficient place where justice and equality reigned. Now, Demick turns her focus to the ways in which the surveillance state present in North Korea hampered Jun-sang's ability to find any kind of validation, community, or support in his new beliefs. Jun-sang couldn't even connect with those closest to him for fear of endangering not only himself but his loved ones.

CHAPTER 14

Jun-sang and Mi-ran's relationship began to buckle under the strain of being unable to confide in one another. Though in the past, they'd spent hours gossiping and talking about the small, ordinary things in their lives, Jun-sang now felt he couldn't confide in Mi-ran about his anti-regime sentiments. Not only was he afraid of jeopardizing himself—but he didn't want to tell Mi-ran what he'd learned, putting her in a position of having to teach her students about the glory of the regime while knowing, in the back of her mind, about the atrocities it committed each day. Jun-sang had stayed on in a research capacity at his university following graduation, and he saw Mi-ran only twice a year. They were both in their mid-20s now, and their relationship was changing.

This passage illustrates how the constant state of surveillance in North Korea—which grew even more prevalent and pervasive as the fallout from the famine widened—completely changed the nature of Jun-sang and Mi-ran's pure, intimate relationship. Mi-ran and Jun-sang could not discuss anything of consequence; as a result, the intimacy between them suffered, and they second-guessed whether they truly knew the other person.

Jun-sang didn't know how to approach the idea of a future with Mi-ran. He couldn't imagine himself married to anyone but her—but he knew that if they wed, his chances of joining the Workers' Party would be ruined. Privately, he wondered if the regime—which he now knew to be, in essence, the last of its kind except for Cuba—would crumble soon, or whether war would break out. Thinking about marriage seriously was too stressful with such things in mind, yet he mourned the idea of abandoning his relationship with Mi-ran.

Jun-sang found himself unable to communicate with Mi-ran about the fears and concerns he had about their relationship, their country, and their futures—whether those futures would end up being joined or separate. Because Jun-sang knew that he was already engaged in risky activities, he didn't want to implicate Mi-ran or complicate her life any further, and he didn't want to get caught himself.

Mi-ran had marriage on the brain. Two of her sisters were already married with children, and most of her friends were engaged. Mi-ran knew that if she and Jun-sang married, life would be extremely hard and hostile for them both because of her beulsun. Mi-ran was also worried about her job—she had only 15 students as opposed to the standard 50—and her father Tae-woo's failing health. Just before Tae-woo passed in 1997, he begged his children to inform his family back in South Korea of his death. Mi-ran and her siblings had no idea how to contact their relatives in South Korea—but one day, Mi-ran's sister So-hee came home, breathless, with an idea: they could sneak into China with the help of one of her friends. There, they could use a telephone to call their distant family.

Mi-ran, too, found herself gravitating more and more toward anti-regime sentiment and activity. She was contending with major issues: fear for her future, the death of a parent, the burden of watching her students waste away, and the possibility of defecting. She could not communicate any of this to Jun-sang—she knew she had to deal with it all on her own or risk implicating both of them.

After a long conversation, it was decided that Mi-ran, So-hee, their younger brother Sok-ju, and their mother would make the trip together. They planned for weeks, all the while working to maintain an appearance of normalcy. Though Mi-ran's family had never been the most loyal to the regime, they still feared jeopardizing their relatively stable position and harming those closest to them. The night before leaving, Mi-ran unwrapped a packet of letters she'd kept from Jun-sang over the years and destroyed them. Mi-ran knew that though the trip was supposed to be a quick one, there was a chance she would never return. She told herself that even if she never saw Jun-sang again, he would be better off without her.

As Mi-ran and her family began to plan a trip across the border, they knew that they had to cover their tracks carefully and protect those they loved from being associated with them. They were already people of beulsun*—and if they were caught defecting, even just to make a phone call, there was no telling what terrible punishments the regime would bring down upon them and those they loved.*

The next morning, Mi-ran and her siblings left their apartment one by one. Their mother stopped by a neighbor's house to tell them that she was headed off to help one of her older daughters with her children for a couple of weeks, hoping to buy them some time before anyone noticed they were missing. In Chongjin, Mi-ran and her sister met up and headed on foot to meet So-hee's friend who would transport them to the border. As Mi-ran walked through the main thoroughfare of Chongjin, she thought she spied Jun-sang across the street. It didn't make sense for him to be there this time of year. She wasn't even sure if it was really him. Nonetheless, she was tempted to rush across the street and say goodbye—but she knew that doing so would put the entire plan in jeopardy. She looked away and walked on.

As Mi-ran prepared to leave North Korea—perhaps forever—she told herself that Jun-sang would be better off without her: he would be able to pursue his dream of joining the Workers' Party and improve his and his family's lives. At the last moment, however, Mi-ran found herself so desperate to connect with Jun-sang in a real, authentic way one last time that it's implied that she effectively hallucinated him on the street. This reflects her pain at being unable to trust Jun-sang or let him put his trust in her.

After bribing his way to the border, So-hee's friend with the truck dropped Mi-ran and her family at the Tumen river late at night. They crossed at different points to lower their chances of being caught together—which would be evidence of premeditated defection, a crime worthy of terrible punishment. Mi-ran waded across the river alone, terrified but determined to press on. When she reached the other side, she found herself alone in a dark field. Soon, however, she heard Sok-ju calling out for her. She reached out her hand—within moments, he stumbled over and grasped it. They had escaped.

As Demick reconstructs the night of Mi-ran and her family's escape, she pays close attention to the absolute terror that accompanied every step of the journey. To defect from North Korea was to reject its founding ideologies—collectivism, juche, and the superiority of life under the Kim dynasty. To abandon the only way of life she'd ever known was not yet a liberating idea, even with all the pain and suffering she'd witnessed—it was pure terror.

CHAPTER 15

Jun-sang knew that the postal system in North Korea was unreliable—he often went a long time without a letter from Mi-ran. However, when several months went by without any word from her, he became seriously concerned. When he arrived home in Chongjin for winter vacation, his brother told him that Mi-ran and her family were gone—there were rumors they'd defected to South Korea. Sure enough, when Jun-sang went by Mi-ran's house, he found another family living there. He resented himself—Mi-ran had been the brave one all along, and she had defected before him.

This passage illustrates Jun-sang's sadness and frustration in the wake of Mi-ran's departure. Not only was he sad to have lost her—he was regretful that the atmosphere of surveillance and silence in which they lived had kept them from communicating their desires to defect with one another. Had they lived in a less oppressive place, he began to believe, they might have been able to confide in one another and escape together.

Mi-ran was one of only 923 North Koreans who had managed to leave the country between the end of the Korean War and October of 1998. The regime had always taken extraordinary measures to keep its people in place—border fences, heavy surveillance, and the threat of knowing that if one defected, their remaining family would be locked up or worse all tended to keep people scared and compliant. In the late 1990s, however, as the famine and the collapse of the economy took hold, people genuinely felt they had nothing left to lose in leaving.

By contextualizing Mi-ran's escape within the larger landscape of defections during the 20th century, Demick shows how rare it was for North Koreans to actually leave the country. Mi-ran and her family, then, were part of an extremely small percentage of people willing to risk their lives—but Demick suggests that as the famine worsened and the economy continued to crumble, the scales would begin to tip for more and more people fed up with life under the regime.

Refugees made their way into China, and Chinese goods made their way into North Korea. The more congress there was between the two nations, the more the regime feared that "utterly rotten, bourgeois" goods and materials from the outside world would "paralyze [North Koreans] absolute idolization for the Marshal." As North Koreans were exposed more and more often to media and simple goods from the outside world, they began to understand that the country they'd always been taught was the most advanced and superior in the world was actually leagues behind other nations. If imports like nail clippers were such a rarity, how could North Korea be the mightiest place in the world?

This passage shows how as North Korea's intense isolationism began to break down as a result of people's desperation, more and more individuals awoke to the realization that they'd been lied to about their country's history, its place in the world, and its capabilities. The regime was desperate to keep people from finding out the truth—but people's collective desperation was beginning to outweigh their fear of the regime.

Dr. Kim had never imagined leaving North Korea. The winter after Kim Il-sung's death, however, Dr. Kim learned that she was under extra surveillance—she was suspect to the members of the Workers' Party. Dr. Kim was shocked and appalled. She had always given her all to the regime and dreamed of nothing but joining the Party. She realized with a sinking feeling that her hard work and devotion was being exploited. Nonetheless, she continued donating her time by working extra hours at the hospital, hoping to change how her superiors saw her. When she received a surprise visit from a Bowibu agent who asked if she was planning to defect, however, she realized she'd never be able to do enough—and that her life in North Korea was only getting increasingly miserable.

Even though Dr. Kim had always done all she could to prove her loyalty to her country, she nonetheless found herself on a watchlist of suspicious individuals. Dr. Kim began to realize that there was nothing she could do that would ever be sufficiently—no matter how hard she worked or how much of herself she gave, she lived in a regime that could not control its citizens enough. Ironically, Dr. Kim's run-in with the Bowibu, which was meant to scare her off the idea of defecting, had the opposite effect: she realized that the atmosphere of misinformation, surveillance, and isolationism in which she lived was no longer acceptable.

Dr. Kim had stopped working at the hospital. She had lost custody of her son. She had no way of making money other than selling illegal alcohol on the black market. When she ran into a former school friend one day, she learned that the woman had lost her husband and young son just three days apart. Dr. Kim offered her condolences—but the woman robotically replied that she was glad to have "fewer mouths to feed." This was a tipping point for Dr. Kim—she decided at last to pull out the piece of paper her father had given her before his death and try to contact the Chinese relatives listed on it.

Dr. Kim's encounter with her former friend at the market at last pushed her over the edge. Realizing that people were so desperate that the deaths of loved ones were no longer considered a sadness but a blessing, she knew she had to get herself out before she, too, became a version of herself she no longer recognized.

In March of 1999, Dr. Kim walked across the frozen Tumen River alone. When she arrived on the other side, she walked through the countryside until she reached a farmhouse. She pushed her way inside, freezing. On the floor was a metal bowl full of white rice mixed with scraps of meat. She wondered what a bowl of good food was doing sitting on the floor—moments later, when she heard a dog bark, she realized with profound sadness and anger that dogs in China were eating better than doctors in North Korea.

As Dr. Kim arrived in China, she finally realized the extent to which the government had been lying to her. Animals in China fared better than loyal, well-educated human beings in North Korea. Realizing the full magnitude of the humiliation and cruelty she'd endured no doubt let Dr. Kim know that she had made the right choice in defecting, in spite of her lifelong dreams of proving herself a loyal, model citizen.

CHAPTER 16

Throughout the famine, as her family had grown hungrier, Oak-hee had only grown angrier. She had already been contemptuous of the regime prior to Kim Il-sung's death—as circumstances throughout the country worsened and her own marriage grew more tumultuous, Oak-hee decided she'd had enough. Her husband, Yong-su, who had a scrap-metal scam going that provided their family with stockpiles of food, refused to share his resources with Oak-hee's family, keeping the goods locked up in a cellar to which only he knew the code. He often went off on week-long benders, leaving Oak-hee and their children hungry. In August of 1998, after being beaten badly by her husband one evening, Oak-hee left her house in only a nightgown. She walked north along the train tracks until she reached the next town, then snuck onto a train headed for the border town of Musan.

Demick returns to Oak-hee's story in order to show how those struggling to survive the famine turned to terrible behaviors, harming those closest to them in a desperate bid to survive. Oak-hee's cruel husband refused to share their rations with Oak-hee's starving family—but he left even his own wife and children starving when he went off on drunken benders, perhaps trying to escape or blot out the pain and trauma of living through such terrible times. At last, Oak-hee had enough—she had no loyalty to the regime and now no loyalty to her marriage. She could not suffer or pretend any longer.

Oak-hee knew that there was a thriving market in China for North Korean wives. At the Musan station, she waited around until a man solicited her, promising to guide her across the river into China and find her a respectable, resourceful man to "marry." The union would not be recognized by Chinese law, but Oak-hee would be fed, cared for, and, most importantly, she would be far away from North Korea. Oak-hee asked to be set up with a man who didn't speak Korean—she wanted an entirely fresh start. The broker set Oak-hee up with a short, quiet, gentle man named Minyuan. Oak-hee stayed with Minyuan for two years, but eventually, she decided that she needed to return for her children back home. Minyuan cried as he escorted her to the bus station, warning her to be careful on her mission.

Oak-hee's decision to sell herself off as a bride reflects another aspect of Demick's investigation into what desperate people will do when pushed to the brink by scarcity and starvation. Oak-hee's "real" marriage to Yong-su was dangerous—she figured that even a sham marriage to a foreigner would do more to protect her and keep her fed than her alliance with the cruel Yong-su. Still, Oak-hee could not forget about her children—and in spite of the horrors from which she'd escaped, she knew she had to try to fetch them.

By 2000, things in North Korea were different than they had been when Oak-hee defected. More and more people had started to sneak across the border, and officials on both sides were fed up. Crackdowns had been initiated—especially in busy border towns like Dandong, where Oak-hee stopped before crossing the border to try and get a job in a restaurant and save up some money. A Chinese spy, recognizing her as a North Korean, apprehended and arrested her. In January of 2001, she was sent back to North Korea. She served only two weeks in prison—there were so many women like her being rounded up and arrested it was impossible to keep them all locked up given the paltry resources in the low-level labor camps.

Oak-hee's experiences upon return to North Korea reflected a changing atmosphere—and revealed the regime's utter inability to stop or meaningfully deter people from repeatedly defecting. Even though government agencies in both China and North Korea had initiated crackdowns, so many people were desperate and fed up that it was impossible to keep up with the number of individuals seeking passage to China.

Oak-hee snuck across the border again right away, where she found work with a Chinese broker like the one who'd set her up with Minyuan. She was sent on an assignment to fetch a child that had been left behind in North Korea and sneak him across the river—but on her first day of the mission, she was caught again and turned over to the Bowibu. Oak-hee was tied together at the thumbs with two other women—the Bowibu did not have any handcuffs—and sent on a train to a detention center in Chongjin. Oak-hee was right back where she started—and this time, she did not get out of prison so quickly.

Oak-hee was so desperate to find a way to keep herself out of North Korea—and to find a way to get her children out—that she wound up getting apprehended multiple times. Each of her arrests revealed the ways in which the government and its police forces were stretched impossibly thin. This fact only sharpened Oak-hee's resolve and convinced her that her goals were possible with the right timing.

Oak-hee and her fellow prisoners were all defectors, most of whom were women like her who'd tried to sell themselves off in China. The women took care of one another, picking lice from each other's heads and looking out for each other during the long, hard hours making bricks and weeding fields as guards shouted government propaganda at them through large bullhorns. One day, while working in some fields far from the center of the compound, Oak-hee caught sight of an old woman tending goats in a nearby field. Oak-hee talked to the woman through the fence and bribed her. Oak-hee gave the woman her underwear—a rare good available only in China—in exchange for the woman's promise that she would find Oak-hee's mother and tell her where Oak-hee was.

Oak-hee's ability to bribe a woman by offering her a pair of used underwear demonstrates how scarcity and deprivation continued to define life for uncountable North Koreans even years after Oak-hee's initial escape. It also reveals the desperation Oak-hee herself felt to find a way to get another chance at escaping—this time with her children in tow.

CHAPTER 17

When Mrs. Song heard that Oak-hee was in prison, she was not surprised. Though she was resentful that she hadn't heard anything from Oak-hee since she defected three years earlier, she knew she had to find a way to rescue her daughter. Over the years, Mrs. Song had learned that in an increasingly desperate atmosphere, one could bribe one's way out of almost anything. She bought 10 cartons of cigarettes on the black market, asked around until she was able to get in touch with the security office in charge of the labor camp where Oak-hee was being held, and made the trade. Days later, Oak-hee was home—and though she was in tatters and rags, Mrs. Song could tell that Oak-hee had been eating well for years.

Mrs. Song never dreamed of defecting from North Korea herself—in spite of all she'd been through, she remained loyal to the regime. However, she'd learned a trick or two throughout the famine—and while she didn't want to betray her country, she knew that there was more room now for behavior that had been unthinkable just 10 years ago. This illustrates that Mrs. Song had already reached a new point of desperation—opening up the possibility that as time went on and things got worse, she'd soon reach a breaking point.

Mrs. Song and her other daughters bathed and fed Oak-hee, and then they begged for stories about what things were like in China and South Korea. As Oak-hee explained how rich other countries were—and how Kim Jong-il had "turned [his people] into idiots"—her family grew both excited and apprehensive. They knew what kind of trouble they could all get into if Oak-hee was overheard speaking ill of the General. Mrs. Song felt her daughter's speech wasn't just dangerous, but outright blasphemy. Mrs. Song and Oak-hee argued for weeks until Oak-hee at last departed again—this time, she swore that when she crossed the border, she wouldn't get caught.

Even though Mrs. Song was skilled in bribery and trading on the black market, she still refused to engage in or even entertain seditious speech against the regime. This hurt Oak-hee, who began to feel that even after all she'd been through, her mother still cared more for the Great Leader than for her own daughter. Even though Mrs. Song was witnessing a breakdown of the world she knew, she remained unable to surmount the ways in which life in a surveillance state impacted even her most intimate relationships.

After eight months of no word from Oak-hee, a woman showed up at Mrs. Song's door and claimed to have news about Oak-hee. The woman claimed that Oak-hee was living near the Chinese border and doing well—she wanted to share some gifts and food with her mother, but she needed Mrs. Song to come to her. Mrs. Song hesitated—but when she learned that Oak-hee had arranged to have a private car ferry her there, she accepted. In 2002, Mrs. Song left for Musan with nothing more than an overnight bag.

Though Mrs. Song and Oak-hee's relationship was strained, Mrs. Song was desperate to make things right with her daughter—though she was also tempted by the offer of foreign goods and plentiful food in the face of the continuing famine.

In Musan, the woman brought Mrs. Song to a house—Oak-hee wasn't there. The woman said Oak-hee was in China. Mrs. Song would need to cross the border to see her. Mrs. Song was afraid, but she followed her handlers across the Tumen River and into a waiting taxi. In the early morning hours, the car rumbled through the busy streets of the border town, then sped through the countryside to a small farmhouse. Mrs. Song's guides introduced her to the owner of the house and his daughter, ethnic Koreans who treated Mrs. Song kindly and offered her plentiful food and drink. When Mrs. Song asked where Oak-hee was, they told her she was off looking for work. Mrs. Song was terrified that she had been kidnapped, and that everything she was being told about Oak-hee was a lie—but she had no idea how to run away.

As Mrs. Song realized that Oak-hee was not waiting for her in either the first or second location she'd been brought to, she began to fear the worst. Even though it seemed that she was being taken care of and that the people who were guiding her through this strange journey were on her side, Mrs. Song had been made so untrustworthy of foreigners and so fearful of being caught that she began to believe that a nefarious plot was afoot.

The next day, Oak-hee called. She told her mother she was in Hanguk—Mrs. Song had never heard of such a place. Hanguk, Demick clarifies, is what South Koreans call their country. When Oak-hee explained what she meant, Mrs. Song was terrified and furious. She hung up the phone and refused to take any more of the "traitor[ous]" Oak-hee's calls. At last, after several days, she relented. Oak-hee begged her mother to come to South Korea and live with her. Mrs. Song refused—she said she wanted to return to North Korea.

Going to China was one thing—but the idea of defecting to South Korea, which Mrs. Song had always learned was a terrible, traitorous place, was quite another. Mrs. Song had so internalized the regime propaganda machine's rhetoric of isolationism that she decided she would rather return to an atmosphere of scarcity and starvation than cross enemy lines.

Over the next few days, however, as Mrs. Song lounged around the safehouse eating, drinking, and watching soap operas on **television**, she learned from commercials—and the 2002 World Cup broadcast from Seoul—that South Korea was truly a free, wealthy country. The Workers' Party lectures she'd attended over the years had always taught her that television broadcasts from other countries were false, and that they existed only to undermine the regime.

As Mrs. Song watched free, unrestricted broadcasts for the first time in her life, she found herself unable to see them as real or true. This illustrates how completely she'd accepted the regime's propaganda about the evils of the outside world—and how dearly she clung to it in a time of great uncertainty.

The more Mrs. Song watched, the more she realized the broadcasts couldn't be false—after all, she was able to see for herself what existed just in this small village in China. Mrs. Song thought of Chang-bo and Nam-oak—she missed them, and she felt ashamed of losing them. She and her family had all lost out on so much in the name of doing what the party told them, in the name of remaining loyal to the regime. Mrs. Song had always been taught that she had nothing to envy in the world. Now, at 57 years old, Mrs. Song realized she had wasted her life. She knew she had to go to Oak-hee—it was time to leave North Korea behind.

In this passage, Demick shows Mrs. Song reckoning with the pangs of survivor's guilt, the anger of realizing she'd given her life to a regime that abused its people, and the fear of continuing to waste her life rather than embark on a new journey. Mrs. Song's decision to follow Oak-hee to South Korea represents her complete disillusionment with the past, as well as her decision to take control of her life rather than hand herself back over to an authoritarian regime.

CHAPTER 18

In August of 2002, Mrs. Song boarded a flight from China to Incheon, South Korea's international airport. She was carrying a forged passport—a young handler who'd doctored it for her was on the plane, too, just a few rows ahead of her, and had counseled her to claim the passport was real up until the moment she landed in South Korea, at which point she could turn herself in as a refugee and receive unconditional asylum. Mrs. Song was nervous about the journey, but overall at peace with her decision: she knew she was doing the right thing. She'd returned to Chongjin for a month to say goodbye to her other daughters and explain why she needed to fight for a new life for herself—after successfully making it back to China, it was time now to move on at last.

Demick highlights the dangerous nature of Mrs. Song's journey to South Korea. Though much of the hard part was over by the time she boarded the plane, Mrs. Song could have been returned to Chinese or even North Korean authorities as she was just on the brink of beginning a new life. Mrs. Song was ready to leave everything behind and risk it all, however, to pursue the freedom she'd at last realized she deserved.

South Korea—unlike China—has a policy that permits asylum-seekers from North Korea to establish South Korean citizenship, as long as they get to South Korea by their own volition. South Korea—like North Korea—believes that the countries' two peoples are really one, and they feel a duty to helping their fellow Koreans from the north. Some defectors make their way in by flying from China with fake passports, like Mrs. Song; others slip out of China into Mongolia or Vietnam and make their way from there. As of 2009, between one and three thousand North Koreans were making their way into the country each year; Mrs. Song was one of those lucky few.

South Korea and North Korea are bitterly opposed, yet both countries feel a strange sense of longing for reunification and openness in spite of decades of pain and isolation. The South Korean government knows the reality of what is happening in North Korea and is committed to helping those who willingly travel south to make their way in the world.

After stopping in the restroom at Incheon, Mrs. Song was unsure of who to talk to about being a refugee. She approached a janitor, not knowing his role at the airport, and requested asylum. The man steered her toward the immigration office, and Mrs. Song's long process of beginning life in South Korea began. Airport officials got in touch with the National Intelligence Service, the South Korean equivalent of the CIA, and transferred her to a dormitory for newly arrived defectors. There, Mrs. Song endured a month of interrogations meant to ensure that she was not a spy or a fraud seeking to monitor—or recapture—previous defectors, or a Chinese national trying to scam their way into $20,000 worth of resettlement benefits offered to all North Korean refugees.

This passage illustrates how careful the South Korean government is about welcoming new refugees. The government knows they have a duty to those across the border—yet they also know they must protect those whom the regime may be after.

After her stay at the dormitory, Mrs. Song was transferred to Hanawon—a secluded campus 50 miles south of Seoul. Hanawon was opened in 1999 as a kind of halfway house meant to reeducate and acclimate sheltered, starving North Koreans and prepare them to begin life in one of the most technologically and socially advanced countries in the world. Even after three months at Hanawon, during which Mrs. Song was taught about the contemporary world, taken on shopping and beauty excursions, and given a stipend of $20,000, Mrs. Song found herself flustered and overwhelmed by the sights and sounds of the bustling city of Seoul.

By delving into the details of Mrs. Song's stay at Hanawon, Demick illustrates just how profoundly entrenched most North Korean refugees are in the language and rhetoric of the regime. Having been taught about the outside world through the stifling lens of juche*—and having spent years essentially frozen in time within North Korea's undeveloped socioeconomic structure—these people are in need of a crash course in how the outside world really functions.*

After leaving Hanawon, Mrs. Song took a job as a housekeeper and secured an apartment of her own in Suwon, a suburb of Seoul. She saved money and took trips with tourist groups throughout South Korea, China, and even Poland. When Demick met Mrs. Song in 2004, just two years after she'd left North Korea, Mrs. Song was a woman in control of her life—she dressed well, wore makeup, and even had plastic surgery to add an extra crease in her eyelids, a popular procedure among South Koren women. Still, Demick noted that Mrs. Song harbored anger toward the North Korean regime and a terrible sense of survivor's guilt. Over a delicious meal at a Seoul restaurant, Mrs. Song began to cry—she confessed she was thinking of Chang-bo's last words, "Let's go to a good restaurant." Yet in spite of her guilt and sadness, Demick states, "Mrs. Song had arrived."

The portrait Demick paints of Mrs. Song post-arrival in South Korea is a complex one. On the one hand, Mrs. Song has done all she can to move on—she keeps busy, she explores the world, and she participates in common contemporary cultural experiences. Still, Demick observes, Mrs. Song cannot fully escape the survivor's guilt she feels. Demick suggests that Mrs. Song's guilt over the deaths of her husband and her son may spur her to take fuller advantage of the new life in front of her. Though she can't escape her past, she must continue moving forward.

Oak-hee, however, was not as happy in South Korea as her mother. Oak-hee remained troubled, dark, bitter, and obsessed with staying busy. When she first arrived in South Korea, she worked as a smuggler, helping other women escape North Korea, and she was often debt. She took a job at a funeral home to make enough money to bring Mrs. Song over. Later, she became involved in the karaoke business, recruiting young women—all North Koreans straight out of Hanawon—to entertain men at Seoul clubs. As Oak-hee enjoyed more success in the recruiting business, she was able to bring over her sisters, nieces, and nephews—yet she was unable to obtain custody of her teenage children. In her interviews with Demick, Oak-hee often spoke of dreams she had about trying to smuggle her children out of North Korea on her back, dodging men in uniforms who were hunting them down.

Barbara Demick's portrait of Oak-hee's journey in South Korea, like Mrs. Song's illustrates the competing desires to take advantage of all the world has to offer—and to honor and remember those left behind. Oak-hee, Demick suggests, keeps herself busy making money and helping recent refugees to learn the ropes in order to distract herself from the guilt of knowing that her children remain in an authoritarian country with an abusive father. Though Oak-hee has left North Korea behind and made a life for herself, its traumas still follow her.

CHAPTER 19

Demick explores how South Koreans view their North Korean brethren—she suggests that refugees who arrive from North Korea looking gaunt, worn, and decidedly old-fashioned "remind them of a past they would rather forget." The increasing influx of defectors between 2000 and 2005 alone, Demick says, also creates a sense of apprehension about the unstable, overwhelming future that might take place if North Korea were to collapse: as many as 23 million refugees in need of food, shelter, and education would flood over the border. Though the governments on both sides broadcast their great shared desire for reunification one day, Demick suggests that for South Koreans, imagining such a scenario inspires only uncertainty and dread.

Demick includes this passage to contextualize her interviewees' arrivals to South Korea. While South Korea accepts all defectors and helps them adjust to life in South Korea, the larger refugee crisis that looms should the North Korean regime fall remains a source of anxiety and uncertainty. Not only would these refugees need basic support for survival—the collective trauma and grief that would wash across the border would be unimaginable.

Dr. Kim crossed into China in 1999 with no intention of defecting to South Korea—all that was on her mind was finding her father's relatives. She wanted to use their connections to find food, shelter, and work so that she could save up enough money to bring her son over—eventually, she still dreamed of returning to North Korea to work at the hospital. She still felt she owed her country a debt. After seeing the dog bowl full of rice and meat, however, something broke within Dr. Kim—each day she spent with the family of ethnic Koreans who put her up and helped her find her father's family made her angrier and angrier at how she'd been treated back home. When she finally met her relatives, they embraced her immediately as kin. Suddenly, Dr. Kim had no plans of going back.

This passage contrasts Dr. Kim's original hopes of recovering just enough to get back to North Korea and continue paying the imagined "debt" she had to her country and her people against the disillusionment she began to feel once she realized how oppressive, painful, and cruel the treatment she'd faced back home truly was. Dr. Kim found herself embraced by kind, generous people who lived hard but dignified lives—she suddenly could not imagine returning to a country ruled by fear, lack, and deception.

Dr. Kim was caught three times by Chinese police—each time, her relatives bribed her out of trouble. After her third arrest she traveled to Beijing, where she passed herself off as a Chinese ethnic Korean and took a job nannying for a South Korean professor's young child. At the end of the professor's yearlong sabbatical in China, she suggested Dr. Kim return with her to South Korea. Dr. Kim confessed the truth of who she was and where she came from—the professor, overwhelmed with emotions, helped get Dr. Kim to South Korea so she could begin a new life.

Dr. Kim once again found herself moved by the kindness of strangers. She felt she had to hide her past in order to survive in the world—but the professor's kindness showed her that she could own the truth of her past and still find acceptance and support. Dr. Kim was so used to hiding things out of necessity in North Korea, and this impacted the way she approached relationships even beyond its borders.

Dr. Kim arrived in Seoul in March of 2002, but her transition to life in South Korea was not easy. She used her resettlement stipend to buy into a business she later learned was a pyramid scheme. She couldn't use her medical training in South Korea; her North Korean degree was useless, and she'd have to start school all over again. When Demick and Dr. Kim first met in 2004, Dr. Kim expressed regret over her decision to come to South Korea. She still dressed in the stuffy fashions of the north, and she admitted that she'd fantasized about killing herself.

This passage shows that for Dr. Kim—and for countless other defectors—the struggle of adapting to life outside North Korea is a serious one. Years of living on a predetermined course, of learning to be agreeable and compliant, and of living in a hegemonic society have made North Korean refugees ill-prepared for the demands of the modern world. This often plunges them into depression and fills them with a sense of insufficiency.

Years later, when Demick and Dr. Kim reconnected in 2007, Dr. Kim was a completely different person. She'd gotten a fashionable haircut and enrolled in a medical program. She lived in a dorm with young students and she was full of life. Still, however, when Demick asked Dr. Kim about her dreams for the future, she said she hoped to study geriatrics so that one day, when North Korea opened up, she'd be able to bring South Korean ideas of elder care back to Chongjin and open a nursing home.

This passage illustrates that even as Dr. Kim slowly adjusted to life in South Korea, opening up and making friends, there was still a part of her that clung to hopes of returning home. This shows how deep survivor's guilt often runs—and how one can never truly leave behind such intense past traumas.

Demick writes that like Dr. Kim, many defectors experience difficult circumstances in South Korea—their problems, she states, often trail them across the border. When Kim Hyuck was released from labor camp in the summer of 2000, he resolved to cross the Tumen one last time and get out of North Korea for good. Across the border, in China, he found a church in Shenyang—he knew that South Korean churches in China took in refugees all the time. Hyuck claimed he wanted to learn about Christianity. He joined a group of other defectors who prayed and studied the Bible all day every day—he hated swallowing the church's ideology, but he needed food and shelter.

As Demick transitions to Hyuck's point of view, she begins to show just how completely desperate Hyuck was to escape North Korea for good. With no family and no job to speak of, Hyuck was perhaps the most vulnerable of Demick's interviewees—and he had to resort to uncomfortable methods to ensure that he would be able to get out and stay out.

After Chinese police began monitoring the church, the leader of the missionary team told Hyuck he needed to move on. The leader gave Hyuck some money and asked him to lead a group of refugees to the Mongolian border—from there, they could make their way to South Korea. The journey was difficult—border patrol agents on the Chinese side were on high alert, and getting to Mongolia required crossing a long, unforgiving stretch of the Gobi Desert. Hyuck's group wandered in the desert for a night and a day—the youngest boy in their group died. When the Mongolian border police found them at the start of their second night in the desert, they brought them across the border—but a lengthy investigation to ensure no foul play was involved in the boy's death began, and Hyuck was stuck in a Mongolian prison for 10 weeks.

This passage compares Hyuck's painful and traumatic journey to freedom to the relatively easy journeys south that Mrs. Song and Dr. Kim experienced. While all of Demick's interviewees were desperate to leave North Korea, Hyuck's journey specifically reflects the extremes to which people will go when faced with a lifetime of scarcity, starvation, and lack. The things Hyuck witnessed on his journey to Mongolia, Demick suggests, paled in comparison to the terrors he'd already witnessed in North Korea.

In September of 2001, Hyuck and others from his group flew from Mongolia to South Korea. His period of interrogation was especially long and grueling given his shady background and stints in prison—he hated being confined, and he hated being sent to Hanawon. Quick to anger, suspicious of authority, and unskilled in South Korean social etiquette, Hyuck isolated himself from others and had trouble making friends or holding a job. When Hyuck and Demick met again in 2008 he had moved to a busier part of Seoul and enrolled in college—he'd made many friends and started taking classes in English. He'd arrived at last.

Hyuck, like Dr. Kim, had a difficult transition to life in South Korea. Both of them clung to traumas from their pasts in very different ways—and both, for a long time, refused to do the emotional and social work needed to begin forming relationships and pursuing joy. Demick attributes their difficult transitions to a measure of culture shock—and to a healthy dose of survivor's guilt.

CHAPTER 20

Demick writes that though Mi-ran's "tainted blood" threatened her future in North Korea, her family ties to South Korea proved invaluable when she arrived in Seoul. Unlike the other defectors, Mi-ran had family waiting to receive her and to help her adjust. After crossing the Tumen into China, Mi-ran and her family called the municipal office in the South Korean province where her father was born as soon as they could. The municipal office gave them the address of Tae-woo's younger sisters. Sok-ju wrote a letter to them, informing his aunts of where he and his family were staying.

Returning to Mi-ran's story, Demick begins to explain how Mi-ran and her family, though disadvantaged because of their South Korean heritage back in North Korea, would find the tables profoundly turned after leaving the country. Though their family ties were a liability in their home country, they found that having a support system in the form of South Korean relatives would greatly influence the ease of their adjustment to their new worlds.

Within a few weeks, one of the aunts called—she was skeptical that Sok-ju and his family were who they said they were, having not heard anything from Tae-woo for decades. After a DNA test to confirm their relation, both aunts came to China with more relatives in tow. The reunion was joyful—and the DNA tests, both parties saw, turned out to be unnecessary. Mi-ran and her siblings were awed by the uncanny physical and emotional similarities between them and their new relatives. Mi-ran's relatives began the long process of slowing bringing Mi-ran and her family, one by one, from China to South Korea by forging paperwork for them. By January of 1999, everyone was settled in Seoul.

As Mi-ran and her family reunited with their distant relatives from South Korea, they found themselves experiencing the joy of recognition and belonging. All her life, Mi-ran had been held back because of her ties to extant family in South Korea, taught that the outside world was full of evil and temptation—now, she was able to see how much happiness and freedom was available to her.

Mi-ran was socially positioned to get into a good graduate program and make lots of new connections—having a built-in support system in the form of her relatives was an invaluable resource. Mi-ran soon married and, in 2004, gave birth to her first son. Mi-ran, Demick observes, quickly achieved "the Korean dream." Still, when Mi-ran and Demick met for their interview sessions, Demick observed that while Mi-ran outwardly appeared like any other upwardly mobile working mother, deep down, she was still the same young woman whose earliest years had been shaped by her "tainted blood." Mi-ran was still racked with guilt about what she'd had to do to survive and reach this point in her life.

This passage hammers home Demick's central argument about the nature of trauma and survivor's guilt. Though Mi-ran enjoyed an enhanced social position in South Korea and quickly accomplished goals that many people spend their whole lives dreaming of, she remained haunted by her desperate actions in North Korea—and by the pain of remembering what she'd left behind.

Whereas many defectors experience this sense of guilt and shame, for Mi-ran, these feelings were real and concrete. She learned that six months after she and her family defected, her older sisters Mi-hee and Mi-sook were taken away to labor camps in the middle of the night. Though they were loyal to the regime, they were punished for their family members' actions. Mi-ran never learned what happened to her sisters—by 2004, she'd begun to assume they were dead.

Mi-ran had to contend daily with the shame and pain of knowing that her family members in North Korea paid the price for her and her other siblings' defections. In this way, Demick suggests, the North Korean regime seeks to punish those who leave from afar, preying on their sense of guilt and loyalty even as they forge new lives for themselves far away.

Mi-ran also thought frequently—and spoke to Demick often—about Jun-sang and what she believed he'd become. In October of 2005, Demick received a call from an excited Mi-ran: Jun-sang was in South Korea. Demick met up with both Jun-sang and Mi-ran in a coffee shop just a week later. She learned that Jun-sang had already been in South Korea for nearly a year, but that he hadn't reached out to Mi-ran after learning that she was married. Jun-sang, it turned out, remained pained about the absurdity of their situation—they'd never been able to talk openly and honestly in North Korea. If they had, both of them believed, they might have been able to come up with a solution together.

This passage illustrates how the highly surveilled environment in which Jun-sang and Mi-ran first began their relationship continued to affect the way they related to one another even after defecting. The memories of how being surveilled prevented them from truly connecting seemed not just sad but patently absurd in the light of their new existences.

Jun-sang made a relatively comfortable life for himself in North Korea—but his doubts about the regime gnawed at him. He refused to socialize or attend extra lectures, spending his free time watching illegal broadcasts on his **television**. In 2001, he left Pyongyang and returned to Chongjin, where he began saving money for his escape and planning the details of his trip. In June of 2004, he used a broker to cross the Tumen. In China, he worked hard in a brick factory, saving money and trying to find a way to South Korea. After nearly being arrested at a South Korean consulate, he turned to the internet to find an alternate way out—eventually, he read about a pastor in Incheon who helped defectors out through Mongolia. He took the same route as Kim Hyuck, arriving in South Korea in October of 2004.

By charting Jun-sang's journey to South Korea, Demick illustrates how much he was risking in defecting. He enjoyed an elevated social position and the potential for even more success in North Korea, had he stayed the course—but ultimately, Jun-sang could not ignore the truth about the regime. He risked everything—including his very life—for passage to South Korea, believing that he would have a far better life there.

During his debriefing, Jun-sang asked his NIS agent about Mi-ran. The agent looked up information about her, moved by Jun-sang's story of his first love. When Jun-sang learned Mi-ran was married, he decided not to contact her—but just a month later, he ran into Sok-ju at an informal gathering for new refugees. A week later, Jun-sang and Mi-ran met up at last. She picked him up in her car, and they drove to a restaurant just outside the city. Everything they talked about over their meal led them down the road to tragedy—especially when they discussed Mi-ran's abrupt defection. Mi-ran asked Jun-sang why he hadn't come sooner. He had no answer for her. What could have been lingered between them, still painful and raw after so many years.

This passage suggests that a large factor in Jun-sang's willingness to risk so much to come to South Korea was his hope of reuniting with Mi-ran. Demick highlights the devastation they both felt—but that hit Jun-sang especially hard—when they were both forced to reckon with how secrecy and surveillance had derailed their relationship and prevented them from truly connecting with one another. Jun-sang perhaps believed that in coming to South Korea, he and Mi-ran would at last get to have the kind of relationship they'd always wanted—but it was too late for them both.

Demick notes that by the time she met up with Jun-sang and Mi-ran, they'd seen each other several times and seemed "exasperated" with each other. Mi-ran admitted to Demick that now that they could call or text each other and communicate instantly, the slow-burning nature of their epistolary relationship in North Korea had changed. More than that, their social dynamic was altered: Mi-ran was now the wealthy and well-connected one, while Jun-sang was a loner who worked odd jobs and had few friends. Demick wasn't surprised by the change in Jun-sang—North Korean defectors, she notes, often have a tough time settling down. With so many new choices before them, it becomes difficult and even paralyzing to choose one single fate.

Demick uses this passage to illustrate how many North Korean defectors—not just Jun-sang—find that life in South Korea is different and more challenging than they expected it to be. North Korean defectors trade one set of pains and indignities for another. While the struggles in South Korea are arguably easier to deal with and certainly less life-threatening, many individuals still find themselves working hard to cope and stay afloat as they reckon with a new set of social rules and simultaneously try to process and understand their past traumas and lingering survivor's guilt.

Demick also notes that many defectors still dream of returning home. Many left in the early 2000s, she states, believing the regime would soon fall—the persistence of the regime is not just an oddity but a tragedy for those individuals who now have no chance of seeing their families unless the regime collapses within their lifetimes. There is nothing these individuals can do, Demick writes, but wait.

The survivor's guilt that many defectors feel, Demick suggests, influences the ways in which they think about the future. Many still hope for the fall of the regime and reunification.

EPILOGUE

At noon on December 19th, 2011, the North Korean regime broadcasted a news bulletin: Kim Jong-il was dead of heart failure. The government and the people, Demick writes, followed the precise "choreography" of Kim Il-sung's death down to the tiniest detail: a 10-day mourning period ensued once again; once again, people took to the streets to wail and scream. Kim Jong-un, an unlikely choice to ascend to the status of Great Leader as Kim Jong-il's third son, became the world's youngest head of state. Demick notes that in her continuing interviews with refugees, many expressed ambivalence or anger toward Kim Jong-il, whom they blamed for the famine, but felt optimism about Kim Jong-un's ability to open up North Korea and change things for the better.

By demonstrating how the mourning rites in the wake of Kim Jong-il's death were simply hollow repetitions of the same rights that took place following his father's, Demick calls her reader's attention back to Jun-sang's earlier realization after he heard a young kochebi *swap out Kim Il-sung's name for Kim Jong-il's in the patriotic song he sang for tips: the regime's propaganda machine swirls on and on indiscriminately. Whoever is in charge doesn't really matter—the regime demands undiscerning, unthinking fealty from its citizens merely to keep them under control.*

Kim Jong-un looked, for a time, like a new kind of leader: he and his wife appeared in public together often, and he seemed open to economic reform. Within a year of his ascendance to power, however, Kim Jong-un began launching satellites and missiles and conducting underground nuclear tests. U.N. sanctions came down swiftly; in response, North Korea ripped up the 1953 armistice and threatened strikes against the United States. The U.S. bolstered its military presence in the Pacific, while China supported the U.N. sanctions.

Though Kim Jung-un presented a front of innovation and progress that to many seemed positive, he quickly revealed that the innovations his regime planned to make were not social or economic but related primarily to military offensives and threats against other nations. Where Kim Jong-un seemed, for a time, as if he would open up the country in new ways, in the end, the first few years of his regime turned out to center around isolating North Korea even more deeply and striving, at all costs, to prove its self-reliance and exceptionalism.

Kim Jong-un's strange behavior grew more erratic over the years. In December 2013, he had his uncle, the second-most-powerful man in the country, executed; by the end of the year, five of the seven men who had dominated his father's regime were dead, too. Kim Jong-un focused on hosting American basketball player Dennis Rodman and rebuilding amusement parks in Pyongyang. He also oversaw a cyberattack on Sony Pictures's studio network in retaliation for the studio's production *The Interview*, a comedy centering around a pair of journalists, played by Seth Rogen and James Franco, who infiltrate North Korea and assassinate Kim Jong-un.

Here, Demick emphasizes that Kim Jong-un's actions alternate between the genuinely grotesque and the patently absurd. Any threat to his regime or any slight to the cult of personality he is clearly trying to inspire, like his father and grandfather before him, is punished gravely. This indicates that Kim Jong-un, like his predecessors, is completely obsessed with keeping the propaganda machine within North Korea spinning in his favor—even as the country's weaknesses and human rights violations are continually exposed on the world stage.

Though Kim Jong-un's antics since his rise to power have often been strange or ludicrous, North Korea's technological and nuclear capabilities are, Demick admits, frightening. North Korea, she says, has begun to show a "faint economic pulse"—in 2012 and 2013, its economy grew by tiny percentages. North Koreans are allowed to have mobile phones, now, though service is only available through one state-approved provider, and though phones can't make calls outside the country or connect to the internet. Kim Jong-un seems to be making an effort, Demick observes, to "pry open the economy without loosening the regime's grip."

Kim Jong-un's rule has seen small advancements that hint at growing economic and nuclear futures—yet Kim is still unwilling to allow his people any freedoms that will risk his regime's total control over the flow of information coming into and departing from North Korea. He wants the clout of being recognized as a world leader to be reckoned with, yet he will not extend basic human rights to his people.

North Korea seems to be trying to attract tourists by making changes to the showcase capital of Pyongyang and conducting renovations in cities like Chongjin—yet Demick suggests that for most North Koreans, nothing is really changing. She recalls some strange memories from her 2005 trip to Pyongyang: after she and her fellow journalists left the hotel in which they were staying, a U.N. representative also staying there followed up with Demick to tell her that as soon as the press left, the lights went out and stayed out. Demick also recalls seeing kochebi wandering along country roads just outside Pyongyang, searching for food and shelter. After interviewing recent defectors as late as 2012 and 2013, she writes, she believes Kim Jong-un is squandering his people's hopes and goodwill by doing frivolous things like building up theme parks in the midst of an ongoing food shortage.

Though North Korea, under Kim Jong-un, is working hard to affect prosperity, levity, and the capacity for leisure, Demick and other North Korea watchers such as journalist and foreign aid representatives know the truth: things are still scarce and rotten on the inside. Whether Kim Jong-un's frivolity will create enough anger among the amasses to create a tipping point remains to be seen—but it is clear that his focus on creating a stable front has left the starving and financially unstable majority of the population profoundly in the lurch.

Demick's most recent interviewees also tell her that cash bribes, violent crime, and drug addiction—specifically methamphetamine addiction—are all on the rise. People are still hungry, and more and more citizens are homeless. One new interviewee told Demick that she estimates hardly any North Koreans actually feel any belief in or loyalty to the regime anymore; "It is belief in life," she told Demick, that keeps North Korea's people going. Demick is uncertain of how much longer the situation in North Korea will hold—it has defied countless predictions about how long the regime would last over the years. Many of Demick's interviewees, such as Jun-sang, have expressed great despair over North Korea's unbelievable, inconceivable staying power.

Learning that the regime is, at least in the eyes of the people, declining in legitimacy and importance is a double-edged sword for Demick. She knows that if the regime's grip on its people and its ability to control them through propaganda both begin to lessen, there is hope for the future—yet the lack of uprising, revolution, or meaningful political resistance to the regime suggests that there is some indefinable quality which keeps the fabric of North Korea's authoritarian rulership intact.


Demick provides an update on the lives of her original interviewees. Mrs. Song and Oak-hee have brought all the younger members of their family—Oak-hee was even able to get her daughter out. Kim Ji-eun has her medical exams and become certified as a doctor in South Korea; she, too, was able to get her child out of North Korea. Mi-ran lives in a trendy, upscale neighborhood and has begun to learn English; she often volunteers at a reorientation center for newly arrived North Koreans just north of Seoul. Jun-sang lives a quiet life in North Korea and runs a small business; he is married to a woman who also defected. Kim Hyuck obtained his master's degree and began work on a Ph.D. in North Korean affairs; he has testified publicly before the U.N. Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea.

By providing information about the lives of the six defectors whose live comprise the story of Nothing to Envy, *Demick shows how the past continues to follow these individuals even as they grow, succeed, and put down roots in new communities. By showing how the interviewees purposefully remain connected to their pasts—by toiling to rescue their families, marrying other defectors, helping new refugees, or sharing their stories with the world—Demick shows how difficult it is for all of them to escape the pasts from which they've run.*

Demick believes that Hyuck is the most public-facing member of the group because he has no living family. Many other defectors in South Korea, Demick writes, eventually become shy and reticent; they worry about being blackmailed by spies or facing government retaliation against their families back home should they speak out. Though these individuals have left North Korea, Demick states, they still cannot completely escape its terrors.

This passage, which constitutes the book's final lines, contain Demick's overarching thesis after years and years of research on the lives of North Korean refugees. She does not deny the power the regime continues to have over refugees even after they've defected—and she suggests that there is no easy way to leave behind the guilt, pain, trauma, and fear that years of life under an authoritarian regime create within a person.


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