

NOTHING TO ENVY

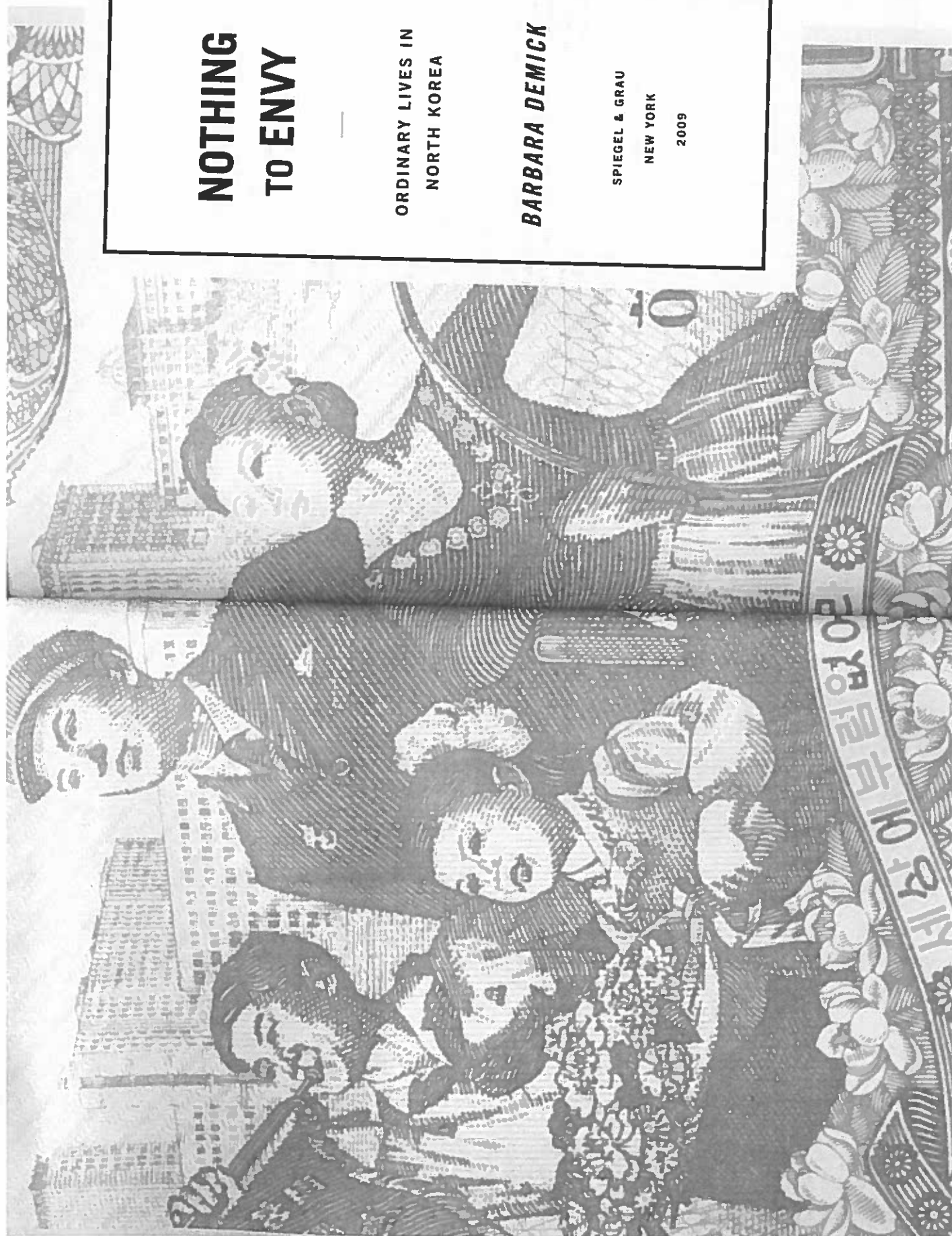
ORDINARY LIVES IN
NORTH KOREA

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shortly after taking power to sweep aside anybody who might challenge his authority. Rival politicians, descendants of landlords or Japanese collaborators, Christian clergymen. Somebody caught reading foreign newspapers. A man who, after too many drinks, cracked a joke about Kim Jong-il's height. "Insulting the authority of the leadership" is the most serious of what are called "antistate crimes." A woman at Mrs. Song's factory was sent away for writing something politically incorrect in a diary. The North Koreans I know whisper of somebody they knew—or knew of—who disappeared in the middle of the night and was never heard from again. Sentences for the *kwansiso* are for life. Children and parents and siblings are often taken away as well to get rid of the "tainted blood" that carries over for three generations. Since they are not blood relatives, spouses are usually left behind and forced to divorce. Little is known about what happens inside the *kwansiso* and few emerge to tell their tales.

Another type of labor camp is called the *kyokhwaso*, which means "enlightenment center," reflecting the camp's purported goal to rehabilitate the wayward. These were for the nonpolitical prisoners, people who had illegally crossed borders, smuggled, or simply conducted business. These camps were less terrifying than political camps because in theory a prisoner could be released—if he or she managed to survive.

KIM HYUCK WAS arrested shortly after his sixteenth birthday. He was staying in the home of a friend in Onsong, not far from the orphanage, which was the closest thing to a home that he'd known, and he always found himself drawn back to it. He had just returned from one of his many jaunts to China—one trip too many, as it turned out, because his travels had attracted the attention of the police.

Hyuck was waiting for the August heat to die down so he could chop some wood. Around four P.M. he went out to the yard in back of the house. He spotted a man, then another, watching him. He could see just enough of them to note that they weren't wearing uniforms, but there was something in the intensity of their gaze that

CHAPTER 12

SWEET DISORDER



North Korean guards stand at attention in Pyongyang.

NORTH KOREANS HAVE MULTIPLE WORDS FOR PRISON IN MUCH the same way the Inuit do for snow. Somebody who commits a minor offense—such as skipping work—might be sent to a *jibkyulso*, a detention center operated by the People's Safety Agency, a low-level police unit, or maybe a *rodong danryeondae*, a labor camp, where the offender would be sentenced to a month or two of hard labor, such as paving a road.

The most notorious prisons are the *kwansiso*—which translates as "control and management places." These are in fact a colony of labor camps that stretch for miles in the northernmost mountains of the country. Satellite intelligence suggests they house up to 200,000 people. Emulating the Soviet gulag, Kim Il-sung set up the camps

made him realize they were looking for him. He took his ax and walked slowly around to the front of the house, thinking he could quickly scale the wall and run. But he could see there were more men in front. Maybe eight in total. So he stayed put and started chopping the wood, as though the crack of the splitting wood could chase away his own anxiety and still his pounding pulse.

The undercover police dragged Hyuck to an office building in the center of Onsong. They turned out to be from the Bowibu, the national security agency that investigates political crimes. It was more serious than he'd thought. While in China, Hyuck had sketched a map for some Chinese traders who wanted to sneak into North Korea. This was tantamount to treason under the North Korean criminal code's Article 52, Betrayal of the Fatherland: "Any citizen of the Republic who flees to a foreign country or to the side of an enemy, including the seeking of asylum in a foreign embassy . . . (or) assists an agency or citizens of a hostile country, by serving as a travel guide or interpreter, or by providing moral or material support . . . shall be subject to the death penalty."

The police quickly extracted a confession with the help of a square wooden stick. They pounded Hyuck on the back, shoulders, legs, feet, and arms, actually everywhere but his head since they wanted to keep him conscious. He curled himself into a fetal position to ward off the blows. They didn't have their own jail, just an office. They kept him locked in a room so small he couldn't lie down and even leaning his bruised body against the walls was excruciating. He couldn't sleep at night and yet by day he felt himself drifting off into sleep or some other oblivion even as he was being beaten. Hyuck had no idea what to expect. For all his misadventures, he'd been arrested only once before—when he'd stolen rice cakes as a ten-year-old. He'd always been the kind of kid who was able to wriggle out of any jam. Now he was being treated as a serious criminal, as an adult. He felt trapped, defeated, without dignity. During interrogation, he babbled away. He would have told his tormentors whatever it was they wanted to know, but all they wanted was to find the Chinese traders and Hyuck simply didn't know where they were.

After a few months, they transferred him to an ordinary county jail where the beatings started all over again.

Hyuck didn't have a trial, but the national security police eventually dropped the charges of treason against him because they'd been unable to find the Chinese traders and didn't want to be held accountable. Hyuck was charged instead with illegal crossing of the national frontier. That in itself was a serious crime, punishable by three years in a labor camp.

KYOHWASO NO. 12 IS LOCATED on the outskirts of Hoeryong, another border town, about forty miles south of Onsong. Hyuck was taken there by train in handcuffs. At the station, he met up with other incoming prisoners. Tied together with thick ropes, they marched through the town and into the mountains to the camp. An engine growled and the heavy iron gate slowly creaked open to admit the new arrivals. Above the gate were quotations of Kim Il-sung. Hyuck was too intimidated to lift his eyes to read them.

Hyuck was first taken to a clinic, where he was measured and weighed. The camp had no uniforms, so prisoners wore their own clothing. If a shirt had a collar, it was cut off because collars were a status symbol, not befitting inmates of a labor camp. Any brightly colored clothing was taken away. The blue jacket that Hyuck had bought in China was confiscated by the guards. A fellow prisoner took his sneakers.

The labor camp held about fifteen hundred prisoners, as best Hyuck could tell, all of them older men. Hyuck was by far the smallest, but not the weakest. He had been surprisingly well fed by the national security agents—they had only a few prisoners, so they'd bought noodles for them at the market. With his first dinner in prison Hyuck understood why the older men looked so knobby and thin, why their shoulders protruded from their shirts like clothes hangers. A guard gave out what was called a rice ball, although actually it was mostly corn, cobs, husks, and leaves. No bigger than a tennis ball, it fit easily into Hyuck's palm. That was dinner. Some days they would get a few beans in addition to the rice ball.

Prisoners were expected to work from 7:00 A.M. to sunset. The camp was a veritable hive of industry, containing lumberyards, a brick factory, a mine, and farmlands. The labor camps produced

everything from furniture to bicycles. Hyuck was assigned to a work crew that chopped wood. Because he was so short, he kept the register of how much wood the others gathered. He was also supposed to keep a log of the time prisoners took to rest. Hyuck didn't consider himself lucky to get this job. How was he supposed to exercise authority over men who were ten years his senior?

"Any punishment they get, you'll get, too," growled the guard who assigned Hyuck his job. "If any of those guys tries to run away, they'll be shot. And you, too."

Somebody did try to run away, although not on Hyuck's watch. The man slipped out of his work crew and ran through the woods, looking for an escape route. But the camp's fences were nearly ten feet high and topped with coils of razor-sharp concertina wire. The man ran through the woods all night, then ended up back at the front gate pleading for mercy. In fact, they spared his life, citing the "generosity of the fatherly leader."

The only time prisoners were permitted to stop working was for meals, sleep, and ideology sessions. During the New Year's holiday they had to repeat Kim Jong-il's New Year's message until they had it memorized word for word. "Our people should accelerate the general advance this year, firmly adhering to the policies placing great importance on our ideology, arms, science, and technology."

At night the men slept on a bare concrete floor, fifty to a room. Since they had only a few blankets, the men huddled together for warmth. Sometimes ten men slept under one blanket. At night the men were so exhausted they were unable to talk, but would scratch each other's backs or give each other foot rubs to relax and fall asleep. To fit more people under the blanket, they often slept alternating head to foot, in which case they could give each other foot rubs.

When he first arrived, Hyuck was as frightened of the prisoners as the guards. He expected hardened criminals, scary, violent men, sexual predators. In fact, one side effect of starvation was a loss of libido. There was almost no sexual activity at the camp and little fighting. Aside from the man who stole Hyuck's shoes, the prisoners weren't nearly as fierce as the children he used to hang out with at the train station. Mostly they were "economic criminals" who'd got-

ten in trouble at the border or the market. The actual thieves among them had stolen nothing more than food. One of them was a forty-year-old rancher who had worked on a collective farm raising cattle. His crime was that he had failed to report the birth of a dead calf, instead taking the stillborn home to feed his wife and two young children. By the time Hyuck met him, he had served five years of a ten-year term. Hyuck often slept under a blanket with the rancher, his head nestled on the man's arm. The rancher was gentle and soft-spoken, but one of the senior guards took a strong dislike to him. His wife and children came twice to visit, but were not allowed in to see him or to send gifts of food, privileges allowed some of the more favored prisoners.

The rancher died of starvation. It happened quietly; he went to sleep and didn't wake up. It was a common occurrence that somebody would die in the night. Often it was obvious in the close sleeping quarters, because the dying man would evacuate his bladder and tiny bubbles would appear on his lips as fluid seeped out of the body. Usually nobody bothered to remove the body until morning.

"Oh, so-and-so is dead," one of the men would remark matter-of-factly before notifying a guard.

The bodies were taken for cremation on the same mountain where the men chopped wood. Families weren't notified until they came to visit. In Hyuck's room alone, two or three men died each week.

"Nobody ever thinks they are going to die. They all think they will survive and see their families again, but then it just happens," Hyuck told me years later when he was living in Seoul. He had returned not long before from a human rights conference in Warsaw where he testified. Afterward he toured Auschwitz and noted the parallels with his own experience. In his labor camp, nobody was gassed—if they were too weak to work they were sent to another prison. Although some were executed and some were beaten, the primary means of inflicting punishment was withholding food. Starvation was the way the regime preferred to eliminate its opponents.

It is hard to confirm Hyuck's account of life in Kyohwaso No. 12, but impossible to refute. The details he described are much in keeping with testimony of other North Korean defectors, both former prisoners and guards.

Hyuck was released from Kyohwaso No. 12 in July 2000. Combined with the time he had spent in police custody, he'd served twenty months of his three-year sentence. He was told his pardon was in celebration of an upcoming anniversary of the founding of the Workers' Party. Hyuck was convinced he was released to make room for a flood of incoming prisoners. The North Korean regime had more important enemies than Kim Hyuck.

"THE FOOD PROBLEM is creating anarchy," Kim Jong-il complained in a December 1996 speech delivered at Kim Il-sung University. He warned that the rise of private markets and trading would cause the Workers' Party to "collapse and dissolve . . . [as] illustrated by past incidents in Poland and Czechoslovakia." 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. This has been well illustrated by past incidents in Poland and Czechoslovakia."

As the food shortage stabilized, Kim Jong-il felt he had been too tolerant during the crisis and that he had to reverse the tide of liberalization. The prisons burst at the seams with newly minted criminals—vendors, traders, smugglers, and scientists and technicians who'd been trained in the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe—once-Communist countries that had betrayed Communist ideals. The regime was striking back at anybody who could possibly be a threat to the old status quo.

At the same time, Kim Jong-il sent reinforcements to patrol the 850-mile-long border with China. Additional border police were stationed along the shallow stretches of the Tumen River where Hyuck had first started crossing. The North Koreans also called on the Chinese government to hunt down and repatriate defectors. Chinese undercover police started patrolling markets and other places where

North Korean escapees might be scavenging food. They allowed North Korea to send its own undercover agents into China, who would sometimes pose as defectors.

If they'd done nothing more than wade across to search for food, escapees might get only a couple of months in prison, but anyone caught trading over the border or having contact with South Koreans or missionaries was sent to a labor camp.

Not even the homeless children were spared in the crackdown. Kim Jong-il recognized that his system could not survive if citizens, no matter their age, rode trains without travel permits and waded across the river into China. He set up what came to be known as 927 centers, named after September 27, 1997, when he ordered the creation of shelters for the homeless. The centers had no heat and little food and sanitation. The homeless immediately recognized them as prisons and made every effort to avoid getting caught by the police.

Chongjin bore the brunt of it. As the capital city of a region that had been home to exiles, dissidents, and misfits since the times of the Chosun emperor, Chongjin was once again at odds with the political center. North Hamgyong province had lost its food supply earlier than other parts of North Korea. Some suggested that Kim Jong-il had deliberately cut off the province because he believed it was less loyal. With the possible exception of Hamhung, malnutrition rates in Chongjin appeared to be the highest in the country. But the effect of this was that the city's underground economy had developed faster.

"Why doesn't the government just leave us alone to live our lives?" the women at the market would grumble among themselves.

"Nobody listens to the government anymore," a young man from Chongjin told me a few years ago.

As much as any city in North Korea, Chongjin had strayed from the party line. By 2005, Chongjin's Sunam was the biggest market in North Korea, with more variety of merchandise than anything in Pyongyang. You could buy pineapples, kiwis, oranges, bananas, German beer, and Russian vodka. Right in the market, you could buy illegal DVDs of Hollywood films, although the vendors kept them under the counter. Sacks of rice and corn obviously intended as humanitarian aid were sold out in the open. Sex was sold just as bla-

tantly. The prostitutes soliciting in front of Chongjin's train station didn't bother to disguise intent. Compared with straitlaced Pyongyang, Chongjin was the Wild West.

Kim Jong-il couldn't let North Korea's third-largest city deviate from the hard line of the Workers' Party. Although now idled for lack of fuel, its steel and iron works, chemical textile plants, and machine works were a vital part of the industrial engine he hoped to rebuild. From a military standpoint, Chongjin was crucial given its proximity to Japan, North Korea's greatest enemy, after the United States. The coastline south of Chongjin was dotted with military installations directed at Japan, including the Musudan-ri missile base from which a long-range missile was test-fired in 1998.

The year after his father's death, Kim began a purge of the 6th Army corps stationed in Chongjin. The 6th Army was one of twenty corps of ground troops in North Korea's million-man army. Its headquarters were in the center of Nanam, a district south of the city center, just north of the coal mines. Late one night, people heard the dull engine roar of dozens of trucks and tanks and smelled the acrid fumes of exhaust. The entire corps of three thousand men, their tanks, trucks, and armored vehicles was pulling out of town. The convoys first gathered around Nanam Station, then moved slowly over the rutted roads, producing terrible thunder. Residents shuddered but dared not rise from their bed mats to peek out the door.

Not a word appeared in *Rodong Sinmun* or on the broadcast news. It was impossible to get firsthand information because the North Korean People's Army typically conscripted soldiers for ten years, assigning them far from their hometowns without any means of contacting their families.

In the absence of hard news, there was rumor. Was the army preparing for the long-awaited war with the American bastards? An invasion by the South Koreans? A coup d'état? The story spread quickly that the 6th Army officers had been foiled in their plans to seize control of Chongjin's port and military installations while fellow plotters in Pyongyang planned to assassinate Kim Jong-il.

At the hospital, Dr. Kim heard from a patient that the coup plotters were bankrolled by wealthy Chinese businessmen.

At the kindergarten, the teachers gathered in the cafeteria to listen intently to a cook who claimed to have firsthand information from a relative who was one of the plotters. He said that the plot was funded by the South Korean president, Kim Young-sam.

A teacher at the school claimed that she saw one of her neighbors, who was related to one of the plotters, being taken away along with his three-month-old baby, because of their tainted blood. It was late at night when the truck came for them.

"They tossed the baby into the back of the truck like a piece of furniture," the teacher whispered. The image of the baby rolling around the back of the truck struck a chord of terror in Mi-ran and for years that terrifying scene would recur both in her waking mind and in her dreams.

In the end, the entire 6th Army was dissolved, replaced eventually by units from the 9th Army from Wonsan. The process dragged on for many months. To this day, the exact reasons remain a mystery.

Intelligence analysts tend to dismiss the story of the attempted coup. Over the years many reports of attempted putsches, rebellions, and assassination attempts have emerged from North Korea—as yet, none of them confirmed. The most plausible explanation about the 6th Army is that it was disbanded because Kim Jong-il wanted more control over its financial activities. The North Korean military ran various trading companies that exported everything from pine mushrooms and dried squid to amphetamines and heroin—illicit drugs being a large source of hard currency for the regime. It was assumed the military had its finger in the theft of humanitarian-aid rice sold on the black market in Chongjin and elsewhere. Supposedly, corruption was rampant within the 6th Army and its officers were skimming off the profits for themselves and, like capos in the Mafia, were punished by the big boss. A military officer who defected to South Korea in 1998 told investigators there that the 6th Army officers had taken profits from the sale of opium poppies grown on collective farms on the outskirts of Chongjin.

Not long after the army purge, there were more strange happenings in Chongjin. Special teams of prosecutors called *groupa* started coming up from Pyongyang to crack down on corruption in the fac-

ories. A particular target was Kimchaek Iron and Steel, the largest steelworks in North Korea, which had been largely idle through the 1990s; only two of its ten smokestacks were operating at any given time. Some of the managers had organized employees to collect scrap metal to trade across the Chinese border for food. When that proved insufficient, they dismantled the machines themselves, selling off the parts at the border. The cash raised from the equipment was used at least in part to buy food for factory employees.

The steelworks' managers—about ten in total—were executed by a firing squad. The People's Safety Agency carried out the executions on a muddy lawn that sloped down from Sunam Market to the Suseon stream.

Afterward, the prosecutors went after smaller targets. They executed people who had stolen copper wire from telephone poles to swap for food, goat thieves, corn thieves, cattle thieves, and black marketers of rice. In 1997, notices went up around Chongjin and other cities warning that people who stole, hoarded, or even sold grains were "stifling our style of socialism" and could be subject to execution.

North Korea's criminal code limited the death penalty to premeditated murder, treason, terrorism, "antistate activities," and "antipeople activities," but these definitions were loose enough to include any activity that might offend the Workers' Party. North Korean defectors in South Korea told of executions in the 1990s for adultery, prostitution, resisting arrest, disorderly conduct. In Onsong, the border town where Hyuck lived in the orphanage, four students were reportedly executed for streaking naked after a bout of drinking.

In the past, North Korea was an orderly, austere, and predictable place. If somebody was murdered, it was usually the result of a gang fight or a romantic jealousy. There was little theft because nobody had much more than anyone else. People knew what the rules were and which lines not to cross. Now the rules were in play—and life became disorderly and frightening.

CHAPTER 13

FROGS IN THE WELL



A student in the Grand People's Study House in Pyongyang, the largest library in North Korea.

JUN-SANG WITNESSED A PUBLIC EXECUTION ONE SUMMER WHEN he was home for summer vacation. For days, sound trucks had been driving by announcing the time and date. The head of the *imminban* had knocked on doors telling people their attendance was expected. Jun-sang didn't care for this sort of spectacle. He hated blood and couldn't stand to see a person or an animal suffer. When he was twelve years old, his father had forced him to slaughter a chicken. Jun-sang's hands trembled as he grasped the bird by the neck. "How can you be a man if you can't do this?" his father berated him. Jun-sang dutifully brought down the hatchet, more afraid of his father's ridicule than of a headless chicken, but refused to eat that night's dinner. Watching the death of a human being was unthinkable to him. He vowed to stay away. But when the day arrived and all the