***Nothing to Envy*** by Barbara Demick

 In spite of the strict restrictions on foreign press, award-winning journalist Demick caught telling glimpses of just how surreal and mournful life is in North Korea. Her chilling impressions of a dreary, muffled, and depleted land are juxtaposed with a uniquely to-the-point history of how North Korea became an industrialized Communist nation supported by the Soviet Union and China and ruled by Kim Il Sung, then collapsed catastrophically into poverty, darkness, and starvation under the dictator’s son, Kim Jong Il. Demick’s bracing chronicle of the horrific consequences of decades of brutality provide the context for the wrenching life stories of North Korean defectors who confided in Demick. Mi-ran explains that even though her “tainted blood” (her father was a South Korean POW) kept her apart from the man she loved, she managed to become a teacher, only to watch her starving students waste away. Dr. Kim Ki-eum could do nothing to help her dying patients. Mrs. Song, a model citizen, was finally forced to face cruel facts. Strongly written and gracefully structured, Demick’s potent blend of personal narratives and piercing journalism vividly and evocatively portrays courageous individuals and a tyrannized state within a saga of unfathomable suffering punctuated by faint glimmers of hope. --Donna Seaman

**Chapter 6**

***Twilight of the God***

In July 1994, Mi-Ran had just one exam to go before she would get her diploma from the teachers’ college. She had been assigned to work as an apprentice teacher at a kindergarten in downtown Chongjin. At noon on July 9, the children had gone home for lunch and Mi-Ran was tidying up the classroom. She was about to unpack her own lunch and join the other teachers in the lounge when suddenly she heard excited footsteps careening down the corridor. She stepped out of the room to see that one of the girls had just run back from home. Her ponytail was damp with sweat and she was out of breath, so agitated that the teachers couldn’t make out what she was saying.

“He’s dead, he’s dead,” the girl shouted, the words spilling out between gasps for breath.

“What are you talking about?” a teacher asked.

“The Great Marshal is dead!”

The term could refer only to Kim Il-sung. The teachers were shocked that anybody, even a child, could talk that way. By kindergarten, children were supposed to know not to jest about the leadership. They took the girl by the shoulders and tried to get her to calm down. She was hyperventilating.

“That’s blasphemy against communism,” a teacher scolded.

“No, no. I saw it on television at home,” the girl insisted.

The teachers still didn’t believe her. They knew well enough that five-year-olds could spin fanciful tales. Besides, the television news didn’t even start until 5:00 p.m. But they were disquieted enough that they wanted to investigate even if it meant leaving their lunch uneaten. The school didn’t have a radio or a television so they ran out into the street. The little girl excitedly steered them toward her apartment a few blocks away. They walked up the stairs and could see a crowd pushing its way toward the television set. Mi-ran tried to squeeze herself in. She couldn’t hear, but she could see the faces around her were all swollen and pale. A low moan emanated from the crowd and rose to the rhythm of sobbing. From the open windows, the heaving sound rose from the streets, which were still wet from an extraordinarily violent electric storm the night before.

Mi-ran was numb. She couldn’t understand it. She was a schoolteacher in training, an educated woman who knew that mortals were made of flesh and blood and lived finite lives. But Kim Il-sung, she thought, was something other. If the Great Marshal could die, then anything could happen.

All North Koreans can recall wit extraordinary clarity where they were and what they were doing when they learned of Kim Il-Sung’s death. Over years of interviewing North Korean’s, I’ve learned to pose the question, “Where were you when you found out?” Invariably the interview subject, no matter how forgetful or recalcitrant, perks up. People who repressed so many of their traumatic memories of the 1990s can suddenly describe with great animation and detail their movements on that day. It was a moment when the ordinary laws of time and perception were frozen by shock.

The year leading up to Kim’s death was one of the most tumultuous since the Korean War. Not only was the economy moribund, not only were China and Russia now cavorting with the enemy in Seoul, North Korea was fast cementing its reputation as rogue state. The United Nations, egged on by an aggressive new U.S. president, Bill Clinton, was demanding that North Korea open its nuclear facilities to inspection. In March 1993, North Korea declared that it would pull out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in order to pursue the development of nuclear weapons, setting off the first post-Cold War nuclear panic. By the next year, as North Korea moved ahead to reprocess plutonium from its nuclear reactor at Yongbyon, a sprawling nuclear campus forty-five miles north of Pyongyang, the Pentagon was drawing up plans for a preemptive strike. The North Koreans in turn were warning of imminent war. At one point, Pyongyang’s negotiator famously threatened to “turn Seoul into a sea of fire.”

In June, the former U.S. president Jimmy Carter made a surprise three-day visit to Pyongyang. Carter elicited from Kim Il-sung a tentative agreement to freeze the nuclear program in exchange for energy assistance. Carter also conveyed an invitation to South Korean president, Kim Young-sam, to visit Pyongyang. The landmark summit between the leaders of the estranged Koreas was set for July 25, 1994.

On July 6, Kim Il-sung went to inspect a guest villa in the mountains north of Pyongyang where he intended to host his South Korean counterpart. He also dispensed his famous “on-the-spot guidance” at a collective farm nearby. The day was scorching, nearly 100 degrees. After dinner, Kim Il-sung collapsed with a massive heart attack. He died a few hours later. The announcement of his death was delayed for thirty-four hours. Although Kim Jong-il had been designated the heir two decades before, Pyongyang needed to prepare the announcement of the first hereditary succession in the Communist world.

At the time of his death, Kim Il-sung was eighty-two years old, well beyond the life expectancy for Korean men of his generation. He had a glaringly visible goiter the size of a golf ball on his neck. It was obvious to everyone but the North Korean masses that he was nearing the end of his days, but there was no public discussion of Kim’s deteriorating health. He wasn’t merely the father of their country, their George Washington, their Mao, he was their God.

Mrs. Song was home making lunch for herself and her husband. Her factory had closed by then and Chang-bo had pared back his hours at the radio station because he seldom got a paycheck anymore. He was in the main room waiting for the television news to begin. They had heard there would be a special bulletin at noon, which they assumed was about the ongoing nuclear negotiations. The television news had done a special bulletin the month before, when North Korea announced it would no longer cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency. Chang-bo, the journalist, closely followed the twists and turns of diplomacy. Mrs. Song, on the other hand, by all the talk of nuclear weapons. She had more immediate concerns—such as how to make yet another meal of corn porridge look appetizing. Suddenly, she heard her husband snap his fingers.

“Something’s happened. Something big, he called out.

Mrs. Song poked her head through a pass-through that separated the kitchen from the main room of the apartment. She saw right away that something was amiss. The television anchorman wore clothes of mourning, a black suit and tie. She dried her hands on a towel and went into the living room to watch.

*The Central Committee of the Worker’s Party of Korea, the Central Military Commission*

*of the party, the National Defense Commission, the Central People’s Committee and*

*the Administrative Council of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea report to the*

*entire people of the country with the deepest grief that the Great Leader Comrade*

*Kim Il-sung, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Worker’s Party of Korea*

*and President of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, passed away from a sudden*

*attack of illness at 2:00 a.m. Our respected fatherly leader who has devoted his whole life*

*to the popular masses’ cause of independence and engaged himself in tireless and energetic*

*activities for the prosperity of the motherland and the happiness of the people, for the*

*reunification of the country and the independence of the world, till the last moments of his*

*life, departed from us to our greatest sorrow.*

Mrs. Song went blank. She felt an electric jolt shoot through her body as though the executioner had just pulled the lever. She’d felt this way only once before, a few years back when she’d been told her mother had died, but in that case the death was expected. She’d never once heard anything about Kim Il-sung having any kind of illness; only three weeks before they had seen him looking every bit the robust statesman greeting Jimmy Carter. This couldn’t be true. She tried to concentrate on what the television broadcaster was saying. His lips were still moving, but the words were incomprehensible. Nothing made sense. She started to scream.

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

Her husband 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.

After her marriage, Mrs. Song’s oldest daughter, Oak-hee, had quit her job at the propaganda department of the construction company, but she was frequently called to volunteer for theater performances in the neighborhood. She had been trained as a broadcaster, exhorting workers to fulfill their quotas through the loudspeaker of a sound truck, and her crisp, authoritative voice was much in demand. Oak-hee couldn’t exactly refuse when she was asked by the local police to narrate a play urging public cooperation. In all earnestness she had to recite lines such as, “Let’s catch more spies to protect the fatherland,” and “Confess if you’ve committed a crime.”

Trudging home from rehearsal, exhausted and looking forward to her lunch, Oak-hee noticed that the streets were deserted. She and her husband and their two children lived in an apartment kitty-corner to Chongjin’s bustling train station.

When she got upstairs, she was also surprised to find the door locked, as she expected her husband to be at home. She heard the sounds of a television coming from another apartment. She nudged the door open to peer inside. Her husband was sitting alongside their neighbors, cross-legged on the floor. His eyes were rimmed in red, but this time he wasn’t drunk.

“Hey, what’s going on? Why is the news on at noon?” she asked.

“Shut up and watch,” her husband barked. Mindful of his often-violent temper, Oak-hee obeyed.

Everyone in the room was in tears—everyone, that is, except for Oak-hee. She felt utterly blank inside, not sad, not happy, maybe just a little irritated. She was unable to thing about anything except her growling stomach. *Kim Il-Sung might be dead,* she thought, *but I’m not and I need to eat.* She sat as still as she possibly could to avoid bringing attention to herself and then after a respectable amount of time stood up to leave.

“Okay, I’m going home to make lunch,” she told her husband.

He gave her a nasty look. Although his drinking and bad temper had kept him out of the Workers’ Party, Yong-su fancied himself a senior official, taking it upon himself to offer guidance to everyone around him. He liked to instruct and scold. AT home, he was the one who dusted the father-and-son portraits on their wall. Oak-hee refused. Now, Yong-su glared at his wife, who was so obviously unmoved by the death. He hissed at her as she left the room, “You’re not human.”

Oak-hee went back to her apartment and fixed her lunch. She turned on the radio to listen as she ate. The announcer was already talking about the succession.

*The victory of our revolution is assured as long as our dear comrade Kim Jong-il,*

*the only successor to the Great Leader, is with us.*

As she sat alone in the apartment, the enormity of it all started to sink in. Any hope that the North Korean regime might change with the death of Kim Il-sung was quickly dashed. The power had passed to his son. Things weren’t going to get any better. She heard her father’s words replaying in her ears. “The son is even worse than the father.”

“Now we’re really fucked,” she said to herself.

Only then did tears of self-pity fill her eyes.

Kim Hyuck, the boy who had stolen pears from the orchard, was twelve years old when Kim Il-sung died. He was in his first year at Chongjin’s Malum Middle School, the equivalent of seventh grade. The morning the death was announced he was debating whether to go to school. He hated the place for many reasons, not the least of which being that there was rarely enough food for him at home to bring a lunch. He spent most of his time looking out the window, thinking that if he were outside he could go off and find something to eat. He’d either go back to Kyongsong county to the orchards or cornfields, or steal something from a vendor near the train station. He had played hooky the day before and the day before that. He dreaded going back today because his teacher was sure to beat him for all the days he’d missed school. He was already hours late and was dragging his feet ever slower, wondering whether to turn around.

When he saw his friends skipping away from the school, Hyuck was delighted. They had been told to go home to listen to an urgent bulletin at noon.

“Hooray! No school,” Hyuck shouted as he dashed away with his friends.

They headed to the market. They thought they might be able to beg or steal some food from one of the stalls. But when they got there, all the stalls were closed and the place was deserted. The few people they saw had their heads down, crying. Suddenly, Hyuck didn’t feel like playing anymore.

In Pyongyang, Jun-sang was enjoying a lazy Saturday morning. He was propped up in bed with a book on his knees, indulging his favorite pastime at the university. At home, his father wouldn’t permit him to read in bed, saying it would ruin his eyesight. Even early in the morning with the windows propped open, it was a stiflingly hot day, and he wore just a t-shirt and shorts. He was interrupted by one of his roommates, who came in to tell him that all the students were assembling in the courtyard at noon for an urgent announcement.

Jun-sang got up with annoyance and pulled on his pants. Like others, he assumed the bulletin was about the nuclear crisis. He had to admit he was nervous. Despite the Carter visit, Jun-sang was convinced his country was headed for a confrontation with the United States. A few months before, all the students at his university had been asked to nick their fingers in order to sign—in blood—a petition swearing they each would volunteer for the Korean People’s Army in case of war. Of course everybody obliged, although some of the girls balked at cutting their own fingers. Now Jun-sang was bracing himself for the end of his university career, if not his life.

“This is it. We’re definitely going to war,” Jun-sang told himself as he marched out to the courtyard.

In the courtyard, nearly three thousand students and faculty were lined up in formation, ranked by their year, major, and dormitory affiliation. The sun beat down with full force, and they were sweating in their short-sleeved summer uniforms. At noon a disembodied female voice, tremulous and sorrowful, came booming through loudspeakers. The loudspeakers were old and produced scratchy sounds that Jun-sang could barely understand, but he picked up a few words—“passed away” and “illness”—and he grasped the meaning of it all from the murmur going through the crowd. There were gasps and moans. One student collapsed in a heap. Nobody knew quite what to do. So one by one each of the three thousand students sat down on the hot pavement, heads in hands.

Jun-sang sat down, too, unsure of what else to do. Keeping his head down so nobody could read the confusion on his face, he listened to the rhythm of the sobbing around him. He stole glances at his grief-stricken classmates. He found it curious that for once he wasn’t the one crying. To his great embarrassment, he often felt tears welling in his eyes at the end of movies or novels, which provoked no end of teasing by his younger brother, as well as criticism from his father, who always told him he was “-soft like a girl.” He rubbed his eyes just to make sure. They were dry. He wasn’t crying. What has wrong with him? Why wasn’t he sad that Kim Il-sung was dead? Didn’t he love Kim Il-sung?

As a twenty-one-year-old university student, Jun-sang was naturally skeptical of all authority, including the North Korean government. He prided himself on his questioning intellect. But he didn’t think of himself as seditious or in any way an enemy of the state. He believed in communism, or at least believed that whatever its faults, it was a more equitable and humane system than capitalism. He had imagined he would eventually join the Workers’ Party and dedicate his life to the betterment of the fatherland. That was what was expected of all who graduated from the top universities.

Now, surrounded by sobbing students, Jun-sang wondered: If everybody else felt such genuine love for Kim Il-sung and he did not, how would he possibly fit in? He had been contemplating his own reaction, or lack thereof, with an intellectual detachment, but suddenly he was gripped with fear. 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. And certainly they didn’t know him. If they did, he would be in trouble.

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.

At first, he kept his head down so nobody could see his eyes. Then he figured out that if he kept his eyes open long enough, they would burn and tear up. It was like a staring contest. Stare. Cry. Stare. Cry. Eventually, it became mechanical. The body took over where the mind left off and suddenly he was really crying. He felt himself falling back to his knees, rocking back and forth, sobbing just like everyone else. Nobody would be the wiser.

Within a few hours of the noon announcement, people all around North Korea began converging on statues of Kim Il-sung to pay their respects. By one frequently cited figure there are 34,000 statues of the Great Leader in the country and at each of them loyal subjects prostrated themselves with grief. People didn’t want to be alone with their grief. They burst out of their homes and ran toward the statues, which were in fact the spiritual centers of each city.

Chongjin is home to some 500,000 people, but has only one twenty-five-foot bronze statue, at Pohang Square. People filled the vast square, and spilled over into the front lawn of the Revolutionary History Museum directly to the east. The crowds extended down the wide Road No. 1 all the way to the Provincial Theater and radiated out into the surrounding streets like spokes from a wheel. From above, the people looked like a line of ants streaming toward a common goal.

Hysteria and crowds make for a lethal combination. People started to surge forward, knocking down those in line, trampling people already prostrate on the ground, flattening the carefully trimmed hedges. From blocks away, the noise from the square carried through the humid air and sounded like the roar of a riot. The weather alternated between violent downpours and searing heat. No one was allowed to wear a hat or carry a parasol. The sun beat down on the bare heads and the wet sidewalks turned the streets into a roiling steam bath. People looked like they were melting in a sea of tears and sweat. Many fainted. After the first day, police tried to rope off the lines to keep the crowd under control.

The mourners were organized by their work units or their classes at school. Each group had to bring flowers—mostly chrysanthemums, the traditional flower of death in Asia—or if they couldn’t afford them, wildflowers that they picked themselves. They lined up in rows ten to twenty-five people wide, waiting their turn, like waves to be swept forward. Those that were too overwrought to stand upright would support the others by their elbows. Once in front, they approached within a few feet of the statue and fell to their knees, lowering their heads to the pavement and then looking up with awe. Kim Il-sung loomed overhead, filling the field of vision with his presence, his head rising above a tall grove of pine trees, as high as a three-story building, his bronze feet alone taller than any human being. To the supplicants at his feet, the statue was the man, and they addressed him directly in conversation.

*“Abogi, Abogi,”* the old women wailed, the Korean horrific used to address either one’s father or God.

“How could you leave us so suddenly?” the men screamed in turn.

Those waiting in line would jump up and down, pound their heads, collapse into theatrical swoons, rip their clothes, and pound their fists at the air in futile rage. The men wept as copiously as the women.

The histrionics of grief took on a competitive quality. Who could weep the loudest? Who was the most distraught? The mourners were egged on by the TV news, which broadcast hours and hours of people wailing, grown men with tears rolling down their cheeks, banging their heads on trees, sailors banging their heads against the masts of their ships, pilots weeping in the cockpit, and so on. These scenes were interspersed with footage of lightning and pouring rain. It looked like Armageddon.

“Our country is enveloped in the deepest sorrow in the five-thousand-year history of the Korean nation,” intoned an announcer on Pyongyang television.

The North Korean propaganda machine went into overdrive, concocting ever weirder stories about how Kim Il-sung wasn’t really dead. Shortly after his death, the North Korean government began erecting 3,200 obelisks around the country that would be called, “Towers of Eternal Life.” Kim Il-sung would remain the president in title after death. A propaganda film released shortly after his death claimed that Kim Il-sung might come back to life if people grieved hard enough for him.

*When the Great Marshall died, thousands of cranes descended from heaven to fetch*

*him. The birds couldn’t take him because they saw that North Koreans cried and screamed*

*and pummeled their chests, pulled their hair and pounded the ground.*

What had started as a spontaneous outpouring of grief became a patriotic obligation. Women weren’t supposed to wear makeup or do their hair during a ten-day mourning period. Drinking, dancing, and music were banned. The *inminban* kept track of how often people went to the statue to show their respect. Everybody was being watched. They not only scrutinized actions, but facial expressions and tone of voice, gauging them for sincerity.

Mi-ran had to go twice a day for the ten-day mourning period, once with the children from the kindergarten and once just with her work unit of teachers. She began to dread it, not just the grief but responsibility of making sure the fragile children did not get trampled or work themselves into hysteria. There was one five-year-old girl in her class who cried so loudly and so demonstrative in her grief that Mi-ran worried she would collapse. But then she noticed the girls was spitting in her hand to dampen her face with saliva. There were no actual tears.

“My mother told me if I don’t cry, I’m a bad person,” the girl confessed.

A well-known actress from Chongjin found herself in the uncomfortable position of being unable to force out her tears. This not only put her politically at risk, but professionally. “It’s my job. I’m supposed to cry on demand,” the actress, Kim Hye-young, recalled years later in Seoul.

Hyuck and his school friends went to the statue frequently because there were sticky rice cakes handed out after you bowed. They would pay their respects then get back in line for another rice cake.

Among the millions of North Koreans who took part in the mass display of grief for Kim Il-sung, how many were faking? Were they crying for the death of the Great Leader or for themselves? Or were they crying because everybody else was? If there is one lesson taught by scholars of mass behavior, from the historians of the Salem witch hunts to Charles Mackay, author of the classic *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, hysteria is infectious. In the middle of a crowd of crying people, the only natural human reaction is to cry oneself.

No doubt many people were sincerely overcome with grief at his passing. Whether it was due to shock or suffering, many older North Koreans suffered heart attacks and strokes during this period of mourning—so much so that there was a marked increase in the death rate in the immediate aftermath. Many others showed distress by killing themselves. They jumped from the tops of buildings, a favorite method of suicide in North Korea since nobody had sleeping pills and only soldiers had guns with bullets. Others just starved themselves. One of these was the father of Dr. Kim Ji-eun, a pediatrician at the municipal hospital in Chongjin.