JOHN SWEENEY

NORTH KOREA
UNDERCOVER
INSIDE THE WORLD’S MOST
SECRET STATE
To the forgotten of the gulag
The woman was paper-thin
A sign hung from her neck.
‘Selling my daughter, 100 won’
[100 won is roughly 73 US cents or 47p]
Jang Jin Seong, ‘Selling My Daughter’

The Leader is the supreme brain of a living body, the Party is the nerve of that living body, and the masses are only endowed with life when they offer their absolute loyalty
Juche, the guiding philosophy of the North Korean regime, set out in Kim Jong Ils Ten Principles

Life, in the abstract, in its great coach – how nice;
But amidst vomit and outrage the real thing triumphs,
It flows, sewage and decay . . .
I suffer moons, hungers, cruel Christs of pus . . .
I give in bone the explanation of this, my misfortune.
‘Pieta’ by North Korean gulag inmate 1967–74, Ali Lameda
Preface to the American Edition

North Korea is mad, bad and dangerous to mock. Kim Jong Un may appear a fat clown but when his tyranny bites its venom, like a cobra’s, blackens flesh. In 2013 I went undercover to the dark state for BBC Panorama. Pyongyang feels like the set of some weird version of The Hunger Games. North Korea’s go-between kicked up a great fuss about our documentary and, to cut a long story short, the BBC apologised and I ended up losing my job.

So I feel great sympathy for the makers of The Interview, Seth Rogen and James Franco, who came up with a bold comedy idea about two dumb-ass American journalists getting an interview with Kim Jong Un. Along comes the CIA and they’re ordered to assassinate Kim. The movie has too many butt jokes but it is funny and good. There is a show-stopping moment when the hitherto entirely moronic celebrity interviewer asks a simple question of Kim Jong Un: ‘why don’t you feed your people?’ The North Koreans called The Interview ‘an act of war.’ There followed a massive hack of the almighty Sony Picture Corporation.

The North Koreans denied hacking Sony but nevertheless called it a ‘righteous deed.’ When the film wasn’t shelved, a peculiar outfit calling itself ‘The Guardians of Peace’ made more threats: ‘We will clearly show it to you at the very time and places The Interview be shown, including the premiere, how bitter fate those who seek fun in terror should be doomed to... The world will be full of fear. Remember the 11th of September 2001.’

The idiom is pure North-Korglish, hate-speak with clunky English grammar boiler-plated in Pyongyang. Despite their denials of being responsible for the hacking, North Korea remains the prime suspect. The leaks show how the Japanese boss of the parent company, the Sony Corporation, worked hard to tone down the satire’s sting. Kazuo Hirai, the chief executive of Sony proper, instructed the Sony Pictures boss, Amy Pascal, and she emailed the film’s director, Rogen, to enfeeble the scene which culminates with Kim Jong Un’s head exploding. Pascal requested: ‘no face melting, less fire in the hair, fewer embers on the face.’

Rogen replied: ‘This is now a story of Americans changing their movie to make North Koreans happy.’ But in time chunks of the film, including ‘the entire secondary wave of head chunks,’ were deleted. Then Sony killed the movie, pulling it from release on Christmas Day 2014. The bad news for North Korea was that this was widely seen as a cave-in to a mad dictatorship. President Obama diplomatically rebuked Sony and on Twitter one wit replaced the famous ‘HOLLYWOOD’ sign with one boasting ‘NORTH KOREA.’ Sony reversed its decision and The Interview was watched in a small number of independently owned picture houses across the States but by millions more on the internet.

Kim Jong Un’s minions should have been more wary of the Barbara Streisand effect, that if you try and suppress something in the West, you may end up giving it afar wider publicity. The great virtue of the Interview affair is that it has shone alight on the darkest government in the world and for that we have reasons to cheer Rogen
and Franco. North Korea is a clown state but it is also evil. The simple aim of this book is to set out to Americans the nature of that evil and how it might be ended.

The European who has known North Korea the longest is Izidor Urian, who first went to the newly Stalinized state in 1948. The journey from his native Romania to Pyongyang by train took the best part of 14 days. Izidor ended up being Ceausescu’s interpreter when he visited the founder of the state, Kim Il Sung, in the early seventies. On YouTube you can see Izidor, a real-life Zelig, crouching in the back of the massive limousine carrying the two despots when Ceausescu went to Pyongyang:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qd3H9X-Yl2k

I tracked Izidor, now a very old man in his late eighties, to his home in Bucharest. How long has the regime got? Izidor and I both agreed that Kim Il Sung’s grandson, Kim Jong Un, was making a hash of power: openly bloody, reckless, foolish.

‘Forty years?’ said Izidor.

My take? Kim Jong Un could fall in forty months. How is that possible in a society whose people know nothing about the outside world? For example, the average North Korean doesn’t know that the Americans have landed on the moon, that Michael Jackson lived and died, and that Elvis lives again. For the vast majority of people, there is no internet. The regime shoves propaganda down people’s throats all the livelong day, telling them they live in the most perfect – and most racially pure – society in the world.

The good news is that I suspect more and more North Koreans are beginning to realise that that claim is a stinking lie. The reason is simple. North Korea’s information lockdown is no longer possible in the digital age. Just as the tyranny of Libya fell because people who hated the moronic, botoxed rule of Muammar Gaddafi realised via the internet and social media that they were not alone, North Koreans are beginning to understand that too. The most powerful moment of optimism I felt in North Korea was the day when we visited the DMZ – the very south of the country – and one of the very bright LSE students I was with, an American, realised that his iPhone would work, piggy-backing off the signal from mobile phonemasts in the very north of South Korea. If we could do that, then so could a North Korean with a smuggled Chinese-manufactured phone. Likewise, North Koreans who live in the very north of the country can piggy-back signals from the very south of China. We met people who had seen Homeland, Mission Impossible – the complexity of explaining Tom Cruise’s devotion to the Church of Scientology to a North Korean was beyond me – and even, I suspected, Team America in which Kim The Second, Kim Jong Il, sings: ‘I’m so ronery and sadry arone’ while the skeleton of Hans Blix swims in the shark tank, his suitcase full of nuclear secrets still handcuffed to his hand.

I sang ‘I’m so ronery’ in Pyongyang – to myself, very quietly – because I was, am, and always will be confident that the Kim regime is a force for evil in the world and evil should be challenged, not accommodated. That challenge is all the more difficult because the North Koreans have now exploded three nuclear devices below ground. Making a nuclear bomb is one thing. Delivering it is quite different. Thus far, the North Koreans have not been able to shrink a nuke so that it can sit on top of one of their rockets. Thus far, their best bit of rocketry has been to fire a missile over the waist of Japan, splashing into the Pacific on the eastern seaboard of that country. That is a very, very long way from Los Angeles. The other thought to bear in mind is that any
military challenge to the United States or its ally South Korea will be regime suicide. If North Korea dares strike, Kim Jong Un and his merry men will die, very quickly. Common sense tells us that threats of nuclear war from Pyongyang are empty bluster, but the hate-speak masks a human rights tragedy on an immensurate scale. The evidence of defectors, which numbers more than 25,000 people, points to the gulag being as hellish as Nazi concentration camps. That is the clear message from the United Nations Commission of Inquiry into human rights abuses in North Korea.

Calls to have Kim Jong Un hauled up in front of the International Criminal Court will be frustrated by China and Russia. The Kremlin is currently happy to back a regime that does not threaten it but does irritate the West. Beijing is vastly more powerful. If China wanted to crush the Kim tyranny, it could do so very easily. But the ultra-conservative security and military complex that runs China to this day fears an American ally, South Korea, moving up to its borders, so better, in its view, to put up with a tricky and occasionally obnoxious neighbour than have a US proxy there instead. The other regional stakeholders, South Korea, Japan, and the United States, fear any sudden transition from the status quo. War is not an option with an adversary with nuclear weapons tucked away somewhere underground. Stasis is better than a mob armed, not with pikes, but nukes.

For the moment the key to unlocking the poor, wretched people of North Korea from their prison-cell state lies in the hands of the Chinese government, and there is little sign of Beijing lifting a finger. On the contrary, there is powerful evidence that the Chinese routinely break international laws they have signed up to and send back refugees from North Korea, causing the victims fresh misery.

That picture could change. The Japanese right is pressing the Americans, by asking: ‘why should we abjure nuclear weapons if the North Koreans have them?’ That question causes unease in Beijing. The Stalinist show-trial of Kim Jong Un’s uncle, Jang Sung Taek, and his execution in 2013, reportedly by being bitten to death by savage dogs although most likely by the traditional method of nine grams of lead to the back of the head, conveyed a message to China. Uncle Jang was China’s man in Pyongyang and the message from Kim Jong Un was don’t mess with me. For the moment, the subterranean pressures in Beijing favour toleration of the North Korean tyrant. That, too, could change.

Regime change in North Korea is most likely to happen when a general, perhaps head of the rocket division, realises that he may soon die because his toys won’t work properly. Rather than accepting his fate, he may realise that killing Kim Jong Un is the better solution. The thing which could easily tilt it is someone powerful in China telling that North Korean general: ‘if you shoot Kim Jong Un, we won’t mind.’

As some point, the regime will get crushed by its own internal contradictions. The land is poor and mountainous and unless North Korea trades with the rest of the world it cannot feed its own people; if it trades, people will mix with the outside world and realise that the regime has been telling them a great big lie. The great famine of the late nineties, in which maybe four millions died out of a population of 20-odd million, was a shearing point. From the famine onwards, people knew in their hearts that the regime could not feed its subjects. I write that but am continually drawn to the internet. On YouTube you can watch videos of mass weeping at the death of Kim Jong Il in 2011, a man who presided over the famine. Do they mean it? Or are they mucking
about?

The answer to that is tricky and conflicted. Yes, it seems, many, many millions of North Koreans continue to be brainwashed – and I use that word deliberately – but a much smaller number are beginning to become sceptical. The point is that the sceptics, the people who watch South Korean videos showing the good life, the food, the cars, the clothes that ordinary people in the world’s 11th most successful economy enjoy, smuggled in on thumb-sticks, are growing in number. We in the West should do more to help that.

I believe that my former employer, the BBC – by the way, still a great thing – should broadcast into North Korea as it broadcast into Nazi-occupied Europe during the Second World War. I believe that American broadcasters, such as Voice of America, should boost their output.

Charles Robert Jenkins was an American GI who made the long mistake of crossing the DMZ and defecting to North Korea in 1965. One of the best moments of his 40 years in the dungeon state was listening to a dramatization of Of Mice And Men on Voice of America, beamed from Japan.

The West’s broadcasters should pump out the work of great organisations, like the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, based in Washington DC, but also the froth and giddy sillinesses of Western culture, in English and in North Korean. They should broadcast Baywatch and Miami Vice and Star Trek from the sixties, eighties, and nineties – remember, no North Korean has ever seen these shows – and report the saga of The Interview, warts and all, and show the North Koreans that a society or a company or a culture that can admit that it can get things wrong is far better than one that denies the very possibility of failure.

Information is light and the people of the dark state of North Korea need more of that than anything else. America: use your power to switch on the light.

John Sweeney
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Translating text from one alphabet to another is always fraught. Koreans write their names, to us, backwards, so the surname comes first. The South Koreans hyphenate the forenames, making the second name lower case; thus I would be Sweeney John-paul. But North Korean practice, according to former British ambassador John Everard, is to write ‘each syllable with a capital letter and without a hyphen between the last two. Thus I write Kim Il Sung rather than Kim Il-sung,’ I follow that advice.

Where necessary, I have disguised the identity of people on the trip and North Koreans.
NORTH KOREA UNDERCOVER
Introduction

The Air Koryo jet floated down to earth, the ground below tree-less, bleak. The plane landed smoothly enough, but then we wobbled down an immensely long and bumpy runway, past banks of earth, sinister watch towers and threadbare sprigs of barbed wire, straight out of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. Down the planes steps, one small leap and on to North Korean concrete. I thought to myself: What in Pyongyang do we do now?

The longer you spend in North Korea, the less fearful you become. Fear is fuelled by ignorance. The simple goal of this book is to make the world’s most secretive state a little less unknown, to map this terra incognita that loves to tell us: Be afraid. It ain’t easy.

Understanding North Korea is like figuring out a detective story where you stumble across a corpse in the library, a smoking gun beside it, and the corpse gets up and says that’s no gun and it isn’t smoking and this isn’t a library. It is like no where else on earth. No ads burble. No traffic dragon roars. No birds sing. Kim Il Sung and his son Kim Jong Il smile down at you from a giant diptych hoarding. No one smiles back.

Kim Il Sung is Kim the First, but in the regime’s iconography he comes across as an über-effeminate God-the-Mother, all mumsy and 1950s, a celestial Doris Day. Kim Jong Il, aka Kim the Second, is God-the-Lousy-Elvis-Impersonator in bouffant hairdo and elevator heels, creepy, beyond weird. Kim Jong Un is Fat Boy Kim, threatening thermo-nuclear war against the United States one day, reportedly having his ex-girlfriend machine-gunned the next.

Our frog-green tourist coach kicks into life and our black-suited minder, Mr Hyun, breathes into the mike: ‘At the moment the situation is very tense. Nobody knows when the war will be provoked but we will be safe. Our bus has the mark of the Korean International Travel Company so the Americans won’t strike our bus. Ha ha ...’

Is the threat of nuclear war real? Has it ever been? Three words: I don’t know. What I do know is this: they took us along a vast motorway. There were no cars. They took us to a university. There were no students. They took us to a library. There were no books, at least no books worth reading and certainly no George Orwell’s 1984 – I did ask; a bottling plant, no bottles; an electricity-generating machine factory, no electricity; a children’s camp, no children; a farm, no animals; a hospital, patients, but only in the morning. Then the lights went out. The dictatorship tells lies about ordinary things.

The evidence from our eight days inside North Korea, when Kim Jong Un’s threats of thermo-nuclear war were at their most frenzied, suggests – how topit this diplomatically? – that the regime is full of dross. If North Korea launches a nuclear strike, the regime and everybody in it will die. The working hypothesis of *North Korea Undercover* is that Kim Jong Un’s talk of nuclear war is a confidence trick and that the Pyongyang bluff is blinding us to a human rights tragedy on an immense scale.

To make the confidence trick work, the regime keeps everybody – outsiders and its
own people – in the dark. Understanding what happens in front of your eyes is beyond strange. You are left wondering at your own grip on reality, like the moment in *The Matrix* when Neo sees a black cat walk by, and then another black cat walks by just like the first one, causing Trinity to warn him: ‘A *déjà vu* is usually a glitch in the Matrix. It happens when they change something.’ During our trip we saw no cats and one dog.

Time and again a glitch in the North Korean matrix has you scratching your head. Did I see that? Is that for real? It is, of course, deliberately crepuscular, an exquisitely constructed fog machine. North Korea feels like Kafka written in an alphabet no one can read. But in the murk, the regime hides its cunning.

Kim the Third’s hysterical threat of nuclear war is part of a bleak but clever logic that has kept the dynasty in power long past its two great benefactors – Soviet Russia and Communist China – are dead and gone or mutated beyond all recognition.

The madness shines so bright it’s hard to make out the survivalist logic lurking in the dark. Go see Kim Il Sung. The Great Leader, the Sun of the Nation, the Iron All-Victorious General, the Marshal of the Mighty Republic, the Eternal President is the subject of total love from his nation of 23 million people – or is it three million less? – and grants them an audience, every day of the year.  

Accessible, yes, but you can’t talk to the nation’s head of state because Kim the First has not been alive these past nineteen years. This makes the Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea the world’s only necrocracy. That is: government by zombie.

The living-dead god lies in warmth and light in a glassbox, a waxwork. The hideous goitre or growth the size of a grapefruit on his neck so artfully airbrushed out of all photographs in later life has been, in death, surgically removed. But be wary of mocking the zombie-god too much: in 1945 this thing in the glass box created the most successful tyranny in modern times, a hereditary gangsterism whose lock on power is still strong.

In life, Kim Il Sung was a thug, hand-picked by Stalin’s gang to take over the half-nation which emerged from Japanese occupation in the wake of the second world war. In 1950 Kim One, convinced that the people of the South would flock to his banner, started the Korean Civil War in which around three million died. Three years later the boundaries of his state were back to where they had been when he started the killing. At the De-Militarized Zone or DMZ, the colonel in charge told us that the Americans had started the war, a lie so big every North Korean appears to believe it. Kim the First created a personality cult that has brainwashed his people for three generations, and a gulag system for anyone who questions that brainwashing. At Pyongyang’s Kumsusan Memorial Palace our minders – good people, zombie master – made it clear that we must bow to Kim the First, and we did, three times.

In a second chamber, the Great Leaders son, the Dear Leader, lies in a second glass box. The story goes that the son had the father murdered after a bitter row in which the ailing and flatulent old man finally woke up to the starvation afflicting his people.  

Funnily enough, they whisper, all the doctors and security agents attending the dying Father of the Nation died mysteriously or vanished into the gulag.  

True? False? Who knows? The best book about North Korea, someone said, was written in 1592 and it is called *Richard III*.
Kim Jong Il in death still looks like Bad Elvis. His image to the rest of the world was nailed by *South Park’s* brilliant puppet show film, *Team America*, in which he sings:

I’m So Ronery
Soronery
Soronery and sadry arone.

I dared to sing that in North Korea while no one was listening, and even so it scared the pants off me. The puppet-masters appear to have got the roneriness wrong. Kim Two reportedly pleasured a human bed of hand-picked North Korean beauties and when he got bored with them, busty whores from Sweden and Bavaria were flown in for his entertainment. 4 For a longtime, the West wondered whether he was a monosyllabic halfwit with only one sentence ever uttered in public: ‘Glory to the peoples heroic military!’ But the real man was smarter than that. Defectors report that K2 was a sly, thoughtful Bond-villain-without-the-white-pussy-cat, a man of some charm and a self-deprecating wit. At one of his lavish parties for the elite, he told the beautiful South Korean actress whom he’d had kidnapped, Choi Un Hee: ‘I’m as small as a midget’s turd, aren’t I?’

When a group of dancing girls started screaming: ‘Long live the Great Leader!’ Kim Two told Choi’s husband, the South Korean film director Shin Sang Ok, also kidnapped, ‘All that is bogus. It’s just pretense.’ 5 He could say that, but no one else would dare.

And how can you satirize this? That during the 1990s Kim Jong Il presided over a man-made famine in which as many as three million people died. Zeros dull the mind. A North Korean defector told me the story of why he got out. The decision was forced on him, he said, after his three-year-old niece, at the height of the famine, gorged herself on dried corn, and then her stomach burst. They call the famine the ‘Arduous March’. Orwell’s great insight into the totalitarian mind-set was to point out how Big Brother took over language and rendered it his servant, and that people with free minds had to push back against this insidious linguistic trick. North Korean Newspeak may call the March Arduous but it was also wholly unnecessary, an indictment of the regimes failure to feed its own people. This malfunction is even more dark when you consider that just on the other side of the DMZ lies one of the most successful societies on earth. South Korea is rich and, these days, democratically handsome. (It has its own troubles too. South Korea has one of the highest suiciderates in the world, with it being the most common cause of death for those under forty.) Part of North Korea’s tragedy is that it cannot evolve into a tyranny less harsh. All it can do is stay the same, or die and be swallowed up by its southern twin, which is, according to some estimates, around thirty-eight times richer, its citizens on average three inches taller than their northern brothers and sisters. As regime death is not an option for the Kim dynasty and the Pyongyang elite, the nation lurches on, zombie-like, pitiable, blackly comic and scary in equal measure.

The United Nations estimates that one in four of the country’s children is currently suffering from hunger and malnutrition – and 4 per cent are severely malnourished. 6
These figures may well understate the true horror. Faking statistics in a country with no journalism is easy. But even if we take these figures at face value, it’s likely several thousand infants and children, in the poorest parts of the land, far away from the Pyongyang Belt, are starving to death as you read this book. Had we seen them out of our tourist coach, our minders would have said: ‘Nophotos.’

And then there is the suffering of the invisibles in the gulag. The North Korean regime runs a system of concentration camps in the burning cold of the mountains in which the best estimate is one million people have died over the three generations the Kim dynasty has been in power.

Prisoners inside the gulag suffer ‘unspeakable atrocities’, according to a preliminary report by a United Nations Commission of Inquiry (COI) into Human Rights in the DPRK. North Korea blanked an invitation to take part, but once hearings in Seoul began, the DPRK’s official news agency, KCNA, described them as slanderous and labelled the hearing participants as ‘human scum’. The head of the inquiry, Australian judge Michael Kirkby, said: ‘Truth is a defence against “slander”. If any of the testimony the COI has heard on political prison camps, international abductions, torture, starvation, inter-generational punishment and so forth can be shown to be untrue, the Commission invites the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea to produce evidence to that effect. An ounce of evidence is worth far more than many pounds of insults and baseless attacks. So far, however, the evidence that the COI has heard has largely pointed in one direction – and evidence to the contrary is lacking.’

Do the maths: three million dead in the war Kim Il Sung started; add three million dead from the famine under Kim Jong Il; add one million dead in the gulag and other fatal consequences of political and economic oppression and that equals: seven million people.

Kill seven million people and you would think everyone in North Korea lives in gibbering fear. But Zombie and Sons are adored. People are happy, joking, witty, full of fun. I’ve been to a dozen or so dictatorships, more often than not undercover: Communist Romania, Czechoslovakia, Albania, Iran, Iraq under Saddam, Libya under Gaddafi, Syria, Chechnya, Zimbabwe, Serbia under Milosevic, Cuba, Belarus and North Korea. The latter was the tyranny in which I felt the least sense of personal threat. You can get mugged in Cuba.

Ordinary tyrants demand devotion. In North Korea, the devotion comes pre-programmed. Our minders suggested we bow to Kim Jong Il, too, and we did, three times. On the way out of the Mausoleum, two women were weeping. Nothing compared to the mass mourning which took place after he was announced dead in 2011. Watch it on YouTube. It is a terrifying exhibition of mass grief for a man who must be judged by rational minds as a monster. Do they mean it? Or is this mass fakery in the twenty-first century?

The regime began with Kim Il Sung, a street wise guerrilla fighter gifted a state by Stalin’s generals. Japanese occupation had been a great national insult, and for many in the North it was good to have a Korean ruler, however authoritarian. The bloodshed of the civil war followed, after which peace was a blessing. That Kim II Sung started the war, no one in North Korea can say. In the mid-1950s, as de-Stalinization began to
pick up speed in the Communist world, North Korea galloped off in the opposite direction. Kim the First’s propagandists first developed a powerful and vicious national Stalinism. This mutated into Jucheism, home-baked Jabberwocky plus a Brobdingnagian cult of personality. As the old man’s powers weakened, his son Kim Jong Il built up the Juche cult, rebaptizing it Kimilsungism. Bits of national Stalinism, Jucheism and Kimilsungism are all spouted by the regime when it suits, but the real belief system of the DPRK, the one aggressively fired at its people through television, propaganda posters, the radio and loudspeakers dotted across the nation, is that old black magic: racial purity. There is a subtle difference from Nazi ideology proper: the Koreans of the North are not a master race who must overlord other races, but pure children who must be protected by the Leaders, Great, Dear and Fat, sorry, Young.

Like Hitlers Third Reich, the regime is depressing lypopular with masses of North Koreans. They are joyfully in thrall to a political religion. The slavishness of its adherents reminds one of Americas death cults, but in North Korea they don’t have Kool-Aid. They have nuclear bombs.

The regime’s race cult chimes with popular but dark tropes in Korean history. The Nazi-style ideology equates racial purity with human goodness. The impure haveno right to life, which is why the evidence suggesting that the regime commits infanticide is profoundly disturbing. The UN Human Rights inquiry reported: ‘A North Korean woman testified how she “witnessed a female prisoner forced to drown her own baby in a bucket”.’ In my eight days in North Korea, I saw two people who were disabled, and they were both adults. In Africa and Asia and Latin America, you see crippled beggars all the live-long day. The absence of North Korean disabled babies, infants or children raises one troubling question: where are they?

Under Kim Three, it has been goodbye to the last echoes of Communism. In the spring of 2012, giant pictures of Marx and Lenin adorned a building on Kim Il Sung Square; on our trip, one year on, Karl and Vlad had vanished.

Kim Jong Un is now the third generation Kim to lead the dark state. At thirty years of age, he is a fat young man in a very thin nation. He was educated in a fancy schoolin Switzerland, so he knows the truth about North Korea, even if no one else does. Footage shown on North Korean television shows him visiting a rocky beach on a gunboat. Soldiers crowd around.Kim the Third retreats to the gunboat, which slowly backs away from the beach. The soldiers plunge into the freezing sea, in a state of religious ecstasy. It is beyond bonkers.

On the day Kim the Third threatened to use his nukes in athermo-nuclear war against the United States, we visited the De-Militarized Zone (or the DMZ or the Zee) where the two halves of Korea meet. The colonel in charge said: ‘Don’t worry aboutit,’ and patted me on the back. We drove back to Pyongyang and rocked up at a karaoke bar where our minder, Mr Hyun, sang ‘My Way’. Thermo-nuclear regrets? Too few to mention. Was this talk of Armageddon for real? Or a shadow game directed at Kim Three’s own people, to make them line up behind him?

The government of North Korea tells big lies: about killing and famine and power. But the regime cannot lie about the darkness. Salute, reader, the Outer Space Treaty of 1967. In space, there is freedom of movement and freedom of speech, two things not available in the Kims’ utopia. The iconic image of North Korea taken from deep
space was captured in 2011 by a satellite launched by NASA and NOAA, the American equivalent of the Met Office. The satellite boasts an instrument called the Visible Infrared Imaging Radiometer Suite, which you can think of as a very sensitive digital camera, producing images of the light emitted by human activity. This gives you the view you might get if you peeked out of the window of the International Space Station, around 500 miles up.

The weather satellite looks down on the face of the earth and shows the world at night, the great cities sparkling with light: New York, London, Moscow, Beijing, Seoul. The capital of North Korea, Pyongyang, emits a feeble glow-worm but the rest of the country lies in darkness so deep you could easily make the mistake of thinking that this land does not exist. And about the truth of the darkness, Kim the Third can do nothing.

In this book are the stories of witnesses to this dark state, among them seven defectors from the North; an IRA man from West Belfast who spent two months in North Korea learning to make bombs; Ceausescu’s translator; an American soldier who ran away to the North and, forty years later, managed to get out; an Italian senator; an Italian chef; two translators who endured ‘cruel Christs of pus’ in the gulag; and a sculptress who vanished from Italy and died unknown to her family, two decades later in Pyongyang.

But locked inside the dictatorship, the people of North Korea do not know how dark their government is. Brainwashing, according to the world’s great authority on the subject, Professor Robert Lifton, an American military psychiatrist who treated US servicemen captured in North Korea, requires constriction of information. The less people know, the more they put up with. From the outside, the less we know, the more our fears grow.

The regime tells big lies about itself, about history. Tonail its quintessential dishonesty, I went to North Korea for BBC Panorama posing as a history professor. I told a lie to the dictatorship. I did so because the regime ordinarily bans journalists or minds them so tightly that they see next to nothing. The one exception is Associated Press, which boasts an office in Pyongyang. However, AP Pyongyang has been accused of running ‘chirpy, upbeat stories rather than real news’, effectively, to paraphrase Basil Fawlty, of having a tacit policy of ‘Don’t mention the gulag.’ AP dispute the argument that they self-censor as ‘erroneous’.

Going to North Korea undercover sometimes felt like being inside the movie Argo but readers should be aware of a strange paradox: although it treats its own people cruelly, the DPRK treats foreign guests with almost comic deference. So long as you do not proselytize Christianity, especially if you are a Korean-American missionary, no harm will come to a foreign tourist. North Korea is not Torremolinos. It is much safer.

As a group of students and a fake professor, we were honoured guests of the regime. The best – least bad – comparison I can think of is travelling around Nazi Germany in 1936 during the Munich Olympics. Michael Breen, Kim Jong Il’s biographer, also went undercover to North Korea, pretending to be something other than a journalist: ‘As foreigners, we felt safe. The worst that could happen was that we would be expelled.’ Nothing happened to him. Nothing happened to us.
Inside North Korea, we were accompanied pretty much for every single moment by 'tourist guides' Mr Hyun and Miss Jun. By filming inside North Korea without there being’s blessing, we were accused of endangering the guides. We did not, according to Simon Cockerell of Koryo Tours, generally a critic of our Panorama: ‘The guides in the tour shown on the programme are fine. They are still working and I saw them personally when I visited North Korea last week [April 2013]. They were not shown saying anything out of the ordinary and the reporter – other than the raw fact of being a reporter – didn’t get up to anything wildly illegal in North Korea.’

Cockerell, who has visited North Korea 119 times, says that North Korea is safe for foreign tourists: ‘We have run thousands of tours over twenty years and we have never had anyone detained, questioned, molested, ejected or arrested.’

Of President George W. Bush’s three axes of evil, Saddam’s Iraq, the Ayatollah’s Iran and North Korea, the latter is by far and away the safest to visit but also the worst place to live in. Sergeant Charles Robert Jenkins of the US Army defected to North Korea in 1965. Thanks to extraordinary luck and the power of love, he got out after forty years inside what he calls ‘a giant demented prison’.

He is right, but prisons have guards, not guides. Behind the question: ‘Did you endanger the guides?’ lies an assumption that North Korea is a normal place to visit.

North Korea is not normal. No ordinary person is free to move around inside the country. No ordinary person can leave it, ever. No free speech. No rule of law. No parliament, worthy of the name. Brainwashing for three generations. The guides work hard to present as normal a picture of North Korea as possible. To push back against the raising of difficult questions, the regime, subtly, pressures foreign visitors to comply with its world view. Obey the guides or they will suffer – that is the message. That pressure is effective.

But should it be complied with? The guides, of course, are real flesh-and-blood people. So, too, are the 100,000 political prisoners in the gulag. But they are invisible. By not ‘endangering the guides’, is it possible that you are doing a greater disservice to the invisible victims of the regime? When our guides showed us nonsense – for example a hospital with patients, but only in the morning – I mentally imagined the 100,000 or so souls in the gulag cheering us on. But those cheers, and even more their screams, are silent to us. Just because we cannot see or hear them does not mean they do not exist, as Chapter 19: ‘The Gulag Circus’ sets out.

The human factor kicks in, as ever. Our guards or minders were sweet people but also agents of a dark regime. Richard Lloyd Parry of The Times put it bluntly: ‘They are privileged, well educated, and (by North Korean standards) well-informed servants of a totalitarian dictatorship. As human beings, they are as various as the rest of us. But putting aside their friendliness, curiosity or the lack of it, their job is to lie, bamboozle and obfuscate.’

There has been a lot of controversy about the mechanics of the trip. My own position is that the people invited to come to North Korea were LSE students and alumni, but it wasn’t an LSE trip. The students were told, twice, that a journalist was coming, and they were warned that there was a risk of arrest, detention and the possibility they might not be able to go on a return trip. On the day the group met, the North Koreans carried out a nuclear test. It was all over the news. Anyone who wanted
to drop out could have done so. Long before we left London my name was on the paperwork. Again, from my perspective, there was no intention to deceive the students.

We went as part of a tourist trip, arranged through the KFA, the Korean Friendship Association, which has been described as being ‘like one of the more improbable cults’. The KFA’s President is Alejandro Cao de Benós or, to use his Korean honorific, Zo Sun Il, which means ‘Korea is One’. The Spanish IT consultant, who likes dressing up in North Korean uniform, has been criticized by the *Independent* as an ‘ideological brown-noser’. The newspaper cited anonymous critics, describing him as ‘the perfect example of the useful idiot’. Another said: ‘In my view, he’s a narcissist. And he loves the power and control he has over there. He does have real influence. People are frightened of him, and he likes that power. I think his primary motivation is that he’s special there.’ A third said: ‘You can’t possibly believe that stuff if you’ve been there. To come back and tell North Korean people that everything they hear is correct – that the rest of the world is evil, out to cut each other’s throats, that war and oppression is everywhere... he perpetuates that. He’s not forced to; he does that for personal gain and power and prestige. It’s horrible.’

In his defence, Cao de Benós told the *Independent*: ‘I will take this as a type of jealousy from people who have no goals in their life. I have lived a life of big things. I didn’t want to dedicate my life to be a slave in the capitalist system. My dream was to be a part of the revolution.’

Once our party was back from Pyongyang, safe and sound, I went on BBC World News, and said the regime was ‘mad and sad and bad and silly, all at the same time’.

The North Koreans saw my interview, and Cao de Benos, writing as the Special Delegate for the Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries of the DPRK, fired back: ‘I am now in communication with LSE representatives... To obtain a visa without declaring the real purpose of the visit is against the law... We will ignore this incident if Mr. Sweeney stops his journalistic activities regarding the LSE–DPRK visit. Otherwise if the related programme is broadcasted, I will be left with no choice but to expose all the real story and data. And the only one to blame for this will be Mr. Sweeney... You decide.’

Cao de Benós made good on his threat. The London School of Economics, my old university, was supplied with the information we’d given to the North Korean embassy in Beijing. The LSE’s director, Craig Calhoun, had been in Beijing at the same time that we were.

The LSE went public with North Korea’s information on us, condemned what we had done and called for the programme not to be broadcast. The BBC stood firm, and our documentary was aired. A row started which has yet to be resolved.

The story splashed in *The Times* and there were questions in Parliament. On Twitter, I was compared to Jimmy Savile, and to Saif Gaddafi, someone who really has a doctorate from the LSE. Getting in and out of the world’s most secretive dictatorship is not easy. One solution is not to bother. But it is important that journalists try to shed light on dark places where freedom of thought is suffocated. One of the great North Korea watchers, Andrei Lankov, has noted: ‘No foreigner is allowed to do independent research in Korean libraries, let alone archives. Indeed, typically a foreign visitor is
simply denied access to the library catalogues.’

Before transmission, a few students were worried about appearing in our film. We blobbed them out. We did not mention the LSE, nor did we ever intend to. But then, of course, a very public row blew up with arguments on both sides. The BBC Trust is examining complaints about our Panorama. For that reason, now is not the time and place to discuss these issues further.

More than six million viewers watched our Panorama: ‘North Korea Undercover’. That’s one in ten people in Britain. They saw the ordinary lies the regime told us and listened to defectors – testimony the regime does not want heard. It was broadcast on 15 April, the ‘holiest’ day in the North Korean calendar, it being Kim Il Sung’s birthday, timing which left one of our defector contributors gurgling with joy.

North Korea remains the most rigidly controlled nation on earth, but some of the technological marvels of the twenty-first century are beginning to melt the ice-pack. Two million people have mobile phones, but they can only use them for internal calls. At the DMZ, one of the students I was travelling with switched on his iPhone and picked up a signal from phone masts just across the border in South Korea. He tweeted: ‘At the DMZ, #JustChillin.’ I switched on, and also picked up a signal. If we could do that, so could a North Korean using a smuggled Chinese mobile phone. The regime’s icy grip on information is beginning to crack.

Yet the Kim dynasty remains in place almost a quarter of a century after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Perhaps the greatest mystery of this dark nation is: why haven’t the people overthrown the tyranny? Barbara Demick’s brilliant, harrowing study of the famine in the 1990s is called Nothing to Envy. But a quick survey of the states that have a stake in what happens in North Korea – South Korea, China, Japan and the United States – could be summarized as ‘nothing to gain’. South Korea may dislike the tyranny, but does it really want to deal with 20-odd million half-starved and miserably poor compatriots? Does China want a US ally creeping right up to its border? Does Japan want a bigger, stronger all-Korea competitor? Does the United States and the rest of the world want a terrifying transition, when the nuclear-armed tyranny falls and something different takes its place? Or is stasis the lesser evil? In 1987, President Reagan went to West Berlin and told the Soviet leader: ‘Mr Gorbachev, tear down this wall.’ Nothing like that bold command is being said today.

The threat of Armageddon cannot be lightly dismissed. Professor Brian Myers, an expert on North Korean ideology, told me: ‘We may see a thermo-nuclear war. I’m sure it’s not the North Koreans’ plan to unleash that kind of a thing but it might come to that as a result of a disastrous miscalculation.’ The counter argument is that in the darkness of North Korea we may be missing something darker yet: that fear of change and in particular an over-hyped fear of thermo-nuclear war, a war which Kim Jong Un must know he would lose, very badly, very quickly, is obscuring the reality of a nation suffering immense misery. The tyrant’s threat is masking his people’s agony.

Everything here represents my own views and not those of the BBC. If you believe the press cuttings, there are times when I must seem to my colleagues a random trouble generator. I apologize to them, and to the great British public, who pay my wages, but to do difficult journalism maybe you have to be a member of the awkward squad.