

The World's Most Dangerous Cult: North Korea

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Midnight Facts for
Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

(Note: transcript consists
of episode outline)

Some people might quibble with the title of this episode. And they probably have a point. If you Google the word cult, the first definition that pops up is "a system of religious veneration and devotion directed toward a particular figure or object." So...religion. Based on that definition, the largest cult in the world is Christianity. But when we

think of a cult, the ones that come to mind all include the worship of a living figurehead. David Karesh, Jim Jones, Marshall Applewhite, Charles Manson, Keith Rainiere...a very human leader who is worshipped as a god. And as far as I'm concerned, the largest cult in the world is the entire country of North Korea. And that's terrifying, because that means that the largest cult in the world also has nuclear weapons and the fourth largest military on earth, after (in order of size) China, India and the United States. Can you imagine if NXIVM had nukes? If they tried to arrest Keith Rainiere and he just took out Nebraska. I don't know why anyone would target Nebraska. Cult leaders are crazy, Who knows why they do what they do, that's their entire MO. However, this is the one area where North Korea diverges from the

standard cult. Kim Jong Un isn't crazy. If he were, maybe he'd be easier to deal with. Just give him a whistle and some legos and let him play in the corner naked. Or maybe he would've already blown up the entire world. Regardless, as we'll see, Kim Jong-un is genuinely not crazy, except maybe like a fox. He understands the western world, and knows exactly what he's doing. Let's start by talking a little bit about how North Korea became North Korea. Korea has historically had the misfortune of being positioned geographically between China and Japan, and in the tug-of-war between these two budding superpowers, Korea played the role of the rope. The first Sino-Japanese war was a year-long conflict between China and Japan that began in 1894 and quickly turned into an absolute rout by the Japanese that booted the

Qing dynasty out of Korea for good. So for all intents and purposes, Korea was Colonized by Japan in the early 1900s, and it's very rare that a colonial power is friendly and benevolent to the inhabitants of the country they are colonizing. Consistent with historical standards, this was a vicious occupation. The period in Korea from 1910 to 1919 is known as the "Military Police Reign Era." Not the most appealing-sounding era. Not a time travel most-see highlight. "You've just created a time machine, are you going to visit the Renaissance, the Vikings era, Ancient Greece?" "Eventually. You know what I've always wanted to see? A once-proud population crushed under the bootheel of a foreign military dictatorship. Up until now I've only been able to fantasize about watching families ousted from their

homes to work as sharecroppers for a brutal occupying force." The Japanese absolutely denigrated and debased the Korean population. By 1932, over 50% of farmable land in Korea was controlled by Japanese landowners, who forced their Korean tenants to pay exorbitant taxes, decimating families and forcing countless wives and daughters of Koreans into prostitution. When World War II broke out, Japan made the fateful decision to support Nazi Germany, and the even more fateful decision (I don't know if a decision can be more or less fateful? Fate is just fate, right? Something can't be more inevitable than another inevitable thing). Anyway, they made a decision that was at least as fateful as every other fateful decision to bomb Pearl Harbor, which gave America an excuse to enter the conflict, which

would lead to the flattening of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Japan's unconditional surrender in 1945. Oops. You've heard of that book, a series of unfortunate events? This was like "a series of truly fucked up decisions that lead to inevitably horrific consequences." It was all very fateful. So the Japanese were expelled from Korea in the wake of WW2, and the Koreans celebrated what would no doubt be the beginning of a wonderful era of peace and prosperity and autonomy during which the Korean people would control their own destiny and build an independent country as they saw fit. L-o-l. Immediately after the end of the war, America and Russia began struggling over massive swathes of territory, as the American government attempted to champion capitalism while Russia

endeavored to spread Marxist ideology far and wide. When it came to Korea, Russia had a decision to make. What type of resources should it commit to maintaining a presence in North Korea? Who should it install to lead its puppet government? Enter Kim Il Sung. Or more accurately, *re-enter*. Kim's parents had fled Korea when Kim was a child to escape the Japanese occupation, settling in Manchuria in northeastern China where young Kim became heavily involved in the communist party. When the Japanese finally invaded Manchuria, Kim was one of the leaders of the guerrilla resistance. He was regularly featured on Japanese "most wanted" lists, and was nicknamed The Tiger for his tenacity and ruthlessness. The Japanese would reportedly apprehend Kim's first wife, attempting to use

her as leverage, and eventually kill her. Not sure who is the most tiger-like in this scenario. "Kim Il sung is the most wanted man in Manchuria, we call him the butcher of innocents, and when we find him we shall tear him limb from limb and rape and murder his entire family. Even if we *can't* find him we shall rape and murder his entire family. Because that guy is bad news."

Kim eventually had to flee Korea with Japanese troops at his heels; he took refuge in Russia where he was viewed by Stalin as a potential asset. He was absorbed into—and re-trained by--the Russian army, and would eventually become a Russian general in World War II, doing what he did best, Tigering all over the Japanese. When Russia and the allies were victorious in World War II, Kim was the natural choice to install as a

figurehead over the newly communist Northern tip of the Korean Peninsula. In 1948 Kim and Russia established the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, apparently with a straight face, the DPRK. That's a bold move, cotton. Let's see if it pays off. It's like the "holy church of Satan." Meanwhile, the United States was becoming established in the south. One of Kim's first acts as leader was to invade South Korea, he seems to have made the decision independently out of a sincere yearning to reunify Korea. To this day the north won't stop talking about reunification and how much they want to unite the entire peninsula under one rule. North Korean rule, specifically. They don't want reunification so badly that they're willing to compromise on the "iron dictatorship" aspect. So in

1950 Kim's forces, Sporting Russian military equipment and funded by Russian rubles, attacked the south across the 38th parallel, sparking a 3 year proxy war between Russia and the US in which Koreans were recruited to fight against other Koreans for two countries to which they had no particular allegiance and which certainly did not have their best interests at heart. The war was fought to a stalemate, it ended anticlimactically in 1953 with a ceasefire. an Armistice. No peace treaty, just an agreement to pause the horrendous slaughtering. Temporarily. "We want to make it very clear we reserve the right to do more slaughtering. families being torn apart and constant death and destruction is honestly becoming a little tiresome, but we're not ready to give it up completely." To put the

Korean War in context, approximately 3 million people died in a war that accomplished literally nothing: it came to a halt with the north and south still divided, nothing resolved, 3 million pointless deaths. Since no peace treaty was actually signed, technically the two countries are still at war. This is just a timeout. They're taking a breather. They're like, "Whoa, hold on, we're almost completely out of military-aged men, let's take a few years off to raise a new generation of cannon fodder. So after the ceasefire was declared in 1953, the Russian-backed government occupied the north, led by Kim il Sung, and the American-backed corrupt dictatorship of Syngman Rhee ruled the south. And the average Korean had no input whatsoever, on either side. How crazy is that, the life of your descendants today is

dictated by whether you happened to live north or south of an arbitrary geographical line that was created when two countries decided to divvy up your land. If you lived 4 miles to the south, your family might now be occupying a modern democratic high-tech economic powerhouse. 4 miles north, and you were never heard from again. No one knows exactly what the hell is going on up there, but after everything I've seen in my research, I'd recommend the south.

So Kim Il Sung might've seemed like the obvious choice as leader from a Russian perspective, but in Russian hindsight he certainly wasn't the best one. Because he pretty much immediately started going rogue, he would not get with the program.

Kim began crafting an

elaborate cult of personality, positioning himself as more than human, a Korean deity destined to rule. Kim had been born on the same day the Titanic sank in 1913, and that coincidence was woven into the mythos, it was depicted as being symbolic of the sinking of western imperialism even as the east simultaneously rose to prominence with the birth of an earthly god. Kim presented himself as infallible, and benevolent. He established the nationalistic policy and credo of "Juche," or self reliance. This is how North Korea officially declared its independence from the Soviet union, and simultaneously began closing its borders to the outside world. Kim's legend grew to ridiculous proportions, the Cult really began to take form. As a "perfect person" Kim doesn't use the toilet. Why would he? His body is 100%

efficient and doesn't create waste. Meanwhile, he was becoming fat and he needed to wear glasses because his perfect body apparently couldn't see for shit. And didn't shit. This paragon of godly virtue also kept a harem of underage girls, like any divine being. Wasn't it Jesus who said, "bring me a bevy of nubile young women so that I may violate and exploit them"? Speaking of Jesus, Officially North Korea is an atheist state, but obviously the country is in fact one of the most profoundly religious in history; every single citizen of North Korea either worships or at least pretends to worship the same earthbound Gods, the Kims. To this day giant portraits and statues of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong ill are everywhere, side-by-side, looming over citizens and visitors alike like dual Big Brothers from 1984, keeping

a watchful eye on their adoring subjects to make sure those subjects remain sufficiently adoring. If you don't adore your beloved leader enthusiastically enough, your beloved leader will mow you down with a hail of bullets, so you'd better make with the adoration or at least learn to fake it and be convincing. And it's honestly really hard to tell when you see interviews with everyday North Koreans, how much of the effusive praise is manufactured and how much is real. Look at the way QAnon cultists talk about Trump, and you'll quickly realize that it isn't hard for even supposed capitalistic freedom-lovers to drink the Kool-Aid and genuinely worship a wannabe tyrant. Kim Il-sung ruled for 46 years, dying in 1994. His son, Kim Jong-il, took over at age 53 and only ruled 17 years. He wasn't the first

choice for successor, but he ingratiated himself to his father by creating highly effective propaganda videos and becoming the head of media and public relations. Kim Jong Il was an extreme film buff, who would eventually kidnap a South Korean director and his actress wife in an effort to upgrade North Korean cinema. After enduring years of incarceration and likely torture, the two would indeed help create movies for the North Korean masses (or the members of the masses who weren't starving and could afford a ticket). Kim had been born in Russia when his father was still in the Soviet army, but that didn't make for a great story. So like his father, Kim Jong Il created an entire mythology and superhero origin story. He had supposedly been born on the legendary mount paektu (peck-two), a sacred

volcanic mountain and the highest peak in Korea. At the moment of his birth, a new star appeared in the sky, the season changed from winter to spring, and soldiers spontaneously broke into song. It sounds pretty creepy, actually, everyone around you busts out singing and you're just like, wait, did I miss a meeting or something, this is like a flash mob except weird and terrifying, but ok. Kim was celebrated as a great warrior who had helped drive the Japanese from Korea, which is indeed badass, considering he would have been a toddler at the time of Japanese expulsion. He also famously claimed to have invented the hamburger, and shot 11 holes in one during his first ever golf outing. Such random brags. "Kim Jong Il has won every hot pie-eating contest he's ever entered, and he always gets the USB to go in on the first

try. He only sneezes twice a year, and he has never walked into a room and then completely forgotten why he walked in there and then walked out and immediately remembered. He does not snort milk or any other liquid out of his nose regardless of how hard he laughs. you'll never spot a speck of dandruff on Kim jong Il's shoulder pads. Not because he doesn't have dandruff, or wear shoulder pads, but because the color of his dandruff immediately adjusts to match the color of his outfit. Each flake of dandruff is a loyal and cooperative member of the party.

In 1991, the Soviet union collapsed, and North Korea had suddenly lost its benefactor. The resulting lack of resources and funding resulted in a famine that killed hundreds of thousands of North Koreans.

This occurred just as Kim Jong-Il was assuming power, and also coincided with massive floods that only added to the tragic circumstances. There were reports of cannibalism in the countryside. It was grim.

Also, it's worth pointing out that at the time, the North Korean defense budget was over \$6 billion. Kim could've diverted a tiny fraction of that budget to purchase food to feed the starving multitudes, but he went a different route.

Kim Jong Il was, in a word, a nightmare. There's pretty much nothing redeeming about this guy. His father was a complicated figure, his son is an *extremely* complicated figure and we'll get to that, but Kim Jong-Il, IMO, was just a piece of shit. He emphasized and expanded the role of the military in government, a policy he referred to as Songun, or "military first."

The mark of any great leader: prioritizing the military over peaceful citizens. Speaking of leaders, his father had been known as the "great leader," and in order to distinguish himself Kim Jong Il adopted the honorific "Dear Leader." Which feels like a cruel joke because he was quite possibly the least endearing dictator in history, and that's a low bar. He always wore sunglasses in public, he basically never smiled. He was as inept as he was unlikable. From **The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia**, "Kim had a reputation for being almost comically incompetent in matters of economic management." He was, however, an effective diplomat, in the sense that he didn't actually nuke any other country and managed to stay in power. So there's that. In 2008, Kim Jong-Il

suffered a stroke, and it couldn't have happened to a nicer guy. He survived but the writing was on the wall: Unable to effectively fulfill his duties as cultleader, he began grooming his 24-year-old son to take control. Now, Kim Jong-un was not the natural successor. He wasn't the eldest son of Kim Jong il; he was in fact the youngest. His older brothers were ahead of him in line at succession, but for various reasons fell out of favor. This is true: one of the main reasons his eldest brother was eliminated from the line of succession is that he attempted to visit Tokyo Disneyland using a false passport, and got caught. This was super embarrassing for North Korea. Partly because he was undermining communist values and partly because you just can't maintain that badass dictator persona when you're yelling

“whee” while spinning around in giant tea cups. It’s impossible to recover from that. Combined with some statements he had made endorsing western-style reforms, he was banished to Macau. Similarly, Kim Jong-un’s other older brother, Kim Jong-chul, got caught attending an Eric Clapton concert. He was also considered too effeminate. You know, not super manly and virile like fat little Kim Jong-Un.

So the youngest son became the anointed successor, but Kim Jong Un differed from his father in that he had actually experienced the western world. As a teenager he and his brothers attended school in Switzerland under assumed names and identities. While there Kim Jong Un embraced western culture, becoming an avid basketball player fan and skier. He was in fact

described by friends at the time as being reasonably athletic, and a decent basketball player. Kim would return to his home country but never forgot his friends; years later he would even secretly fly one of his high school buddies to North Korea to hang out in his mansion, play basketball and reminisce.

After the sudden death of his father by heart attack in 2011, Kim Jong-un took over at age 28. He'd only had three years after his father's stroke to prepare, and at first he was woefully inept as a ruler and had zero military training, but the North Korean propaganda machine immediately shifted into high gear. Coinciding with Kim Jong-un taking the reins, the state released a flowery documentary depicting Kim Jong-un riding horses, and teaching military commanders how to properly cock and fire a gun.

Of course all of Kim's shots inevitably hit the Bullseye of a nearby target. His expert marksmanship was accomplished via some ridiculously clumsy cutscenes.

As the youngest Kim took power, the world collectively held its breath, waiting to learn whether the regime would crumble under the guidance of the young, inexperienced dictator. But Kim silenced his doubters with a series of ruthless orders that cemented his power. If you're bored, check out the Wikipedia article titled, "List of officials purged and executed by Kim Jong-un." Notable entries include O Sang-hon, the former deputy security minister, who was executed by flamethrower. Perhaps most memorably, Kim assassinated his own uncle with an anti-aircraft machine gun. I take that back, his

most notable murder was the assassination of his SmDisney-loving half brother via VX Nerve Agent in the airport in Kuala Lumpur Malaysia. This story is bonkers. First, North Korean operatives posed as video producers who were supposedly creating YouTube content, and they recruited two Asian prostitutes, offering them around \$100 per video. These videos consisted of so-called "pranks," in which the women were instructed to approach strange men on the street and touch their faces or kiss their cheeks to provoke a funny reaction. Each woman performed the prank a number of times, and they were thrilled to be making easy money. Each would later report that they were excited to quit their careers and had begun dreaming of becoming YouTube influencers. On February 13 2017, the two

women, one Vietnamese and the other Indonesian, who never met throughout the entire fiasco, were separately brought to the Kuala Lumpur airport and instructed to "prank" a pudgy middle-aged Asian man. The assignment was to slather oil on the man's face and then quickly apologize, walk away, and wash themselves off in the bathroom. Instead of the promised oil, however, each woman was reportedly given a different component of VX2 poison, a brutal nerve agent. The components were harmless until combined. At approximately 9am, while heading toward the gate for his 10AM flight, Kim jong un's half brother was approached from behind by a woman who playfully covered his eyes in a "peekaboo" gesture, then apologized and hurried away. Seconds later, a woman wearing a

white jacket emblazoned with the letters LOL rushed toward him, wiped a cloth with an oily substance on his face and disappeared into the crowd. 15 minutes later, Kim Jong-Nam was dead. Both women would be charged with murder, and both would be free within a year, only one having been convicted of the relatively minor charge of voluntarily causing hurt by dangerous weapons or means. I think that's fair, because obviously they didn't know what they were doing, but I think everyone who does YouTube prank should be thrown in jail. Unless they're Third World prostitutes, but everyone else, all of these "prank" channels, that would be a good use for VX nerve agent. The only prank I support is murdering YouTube pranksters with VX nerve agent. I would subscribe to that channel. "Smash that like button if

you want to see Logan Paul die a horrendous death." Ultimately it is estimated that Kim purged at least 348 members of his family and government. So look, he's a bad guy. And I wanna make that clear before I say what I'm about to say. That's never a good start to a statement. "I realize this guy is a mass murderer, but hear me out." I will die on this hill, probably via flamethrower, but there are some positives when it comes to the Kim Jong-un regime. He has invested heavily in infrastructure and shown moments of vulnerability, like when he cried while giving a speech during the Covid crisis and apologized to his people for not doing enough and for "failing them." His father and grandfather would never have done that. He was filmed visiting a family of the lower classes, and he and his wife sat on the floor at their table to

have a talk with them. Obviously it was a photo op, but putting himself on equal footing with commoners is not something his father would have done. Possibly his grandfather, definitely not his father. He also married a well-known North Korean musician and singer, and the two of them are seen together constantly. According to reports, he dispensed with the harems that his father and grandfather used to keep, and by all accounts the marriage appears to be genuine. Kim seems to be patterning his actions and behaviors on the presidents of western countries, rather than strictly following in the footsteps of his dictatorial predecessors. These might all just be calculated moves by a young man who is much more savvy than his relatives, but I think that his time in the west had an impact on him. I think he

wants to change the direction of the country, but I think he's conflicted, I believe he feels the pressure to live up to the Legacy of the dictators who came before, and I don't think he wants to give up the money and the power.

So what is life like in North Korea? Well, there are approximately 25 million people in the country, though for obvious reasons it's hard to get an exact count. Indoctrination of citizens starts early. Children visit propaganda museums depicting fake exhibits showing American atrocities, some real but most dramatically fictionalized. Americans are depicted as evil caricatures. One long-running and beloved animated cartoon called "Squirrel and Hedgehog" tells the story of Flower Hill, a community of adorable animals who are constantly

under attack by vicious Japanese weasels and American wolves. The state controls all of the media, the TV stations play almost exclusively nationalistic content and movies are chock full of patriotism and propaganda. Public executions are a well-documented tradition. Citizens of North Korea can only choose from a certain number of approved hairstyles, and Kim Jong Un's is off limits. The society is hierarchical; citizens are categorized into three classes based on the loyalty of their families going back generations. So if you aren't sufficiently loyal to the state, your entire family and family line will suffer. You're not just dooming yourself, you're dooming future generations.

The so-called "elite" class are very loyal and thus very wealthy.

The "wavering" class are the

standard white and blue-collar workers who are still extremely loyal despite their modest and often challenging lives.

Finally there is the hostile class, who toil in enforced peasanhood. Gulags, or prison camps, are prevalent.

The country has been operating under various international sanctions for the majority of its existence.

The black market

North Korea classically benefited from being a mineral rich state, but as the country became increasingly isolated, international sanctions prevented North Korean companies them from legally selling and trading goods. So North Korea has in many ways shifted to a black market economy. These operations are coordinated by the infamous office 39. For instance, through

underground foreign connections, North Korea has access to some of the high-quality printing presses used to create American currency, and as a result they've been able to produce incredibly convincing copies of American bills. Forgery is an entire industry in North Korea. And the forgery doesn't end with American currency. They also produce counterfeit American cigarettes, selling fake Marlboros around the world. And then of course there are the illicit drugs. North Korea has been compared to a mafia organization; except imagine if the mob controlled an entire country. North Korea also evades international sanctions by creating shell companies in nearby China, ultimately laundering funds through a complicated network of banks and financing. They even pay foreign countries to "reflag"

North Korean cargo ships, so that they can transport items and products under the auspices of a foreign entity.

And of course there are the weapons. They deal arms to all of the organizations that we least want to be armed. Despite their military technology, everyday technology lags far behind the rest of the world. If you look at satellite imagery of Asia at night, China and South Korea are sparkling with the lights of giant modern cities, while North Korea is a gaping black hole in the middle of the civilized world.

Well the average North Korean has limited access to the Internet and millions don't get within miles of a computer, the North Korean military has sunk massive amounts of funding into cyber warfare and hacking capabilities. We could (and

might eventually) do an entire episode on the infamous Sony hack.

Considering that North Korea is a hotbed of crime, much of it targeting American companies and infrastructure, why hasn't America taken military action? Well we have to talk about the X-Factor, North Korea's ace in the hole: nuclear weapons.

While Russia refused to give nuclear weapons tech to North Korea, they did give them the ability to use nuclear power for energy generation, which provides the building blocks on the path to weaponizing nuclear energy. Later, a nuclear scientist named AQ Khan traded nuclear tech for IBM tech, and helped North Korea create Uranium enrichment centrifuges. One of Kim Jong Un's first acts was to aggressively expand the nuclear program. Way

back in 2006, North Korea tested their first nuclear bomb. By 2009 they were detonating Warheads that had about half the destructive force of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. In 2017 they had achieved nuclear weapons with more than eight times the power of the Hiroshima bomb. If NK could detonate one of its bombs on NYC it would take out more than 5 million Ppl. Obviously creating bombs is only half the battle. You can't just blow up a bomb, that would be counterproductive. You have to first get them far enough away so that they don't turn your own backyard into a nightmare irradiated hellscape. So what about the delivery mechanisms? North Korea has made massive strides in ICBM technology, and now credibly claims that they could reach America, undoubtedly Hawaii and

Alaska and the West Coast, but very likely they could reach further into the heart of the country. Basically, they have enough. The fact is that North Korea now is a nuclear armed nation and we no longer have the option of taking out their nuclear program. We could've done that 20 years ago, not today. That cat is out of the bag. If we were to attack, we would certainly decimate their country. We would level North Korea. But it would potentially cost millions and millions of lives in America, and certainly millions in South Korea. Bullying North Korea is no longer a viable option. So their strategy ultimately has worked. They relentlessly pursued nuclear power, knowing that it is the great equalizer. It puts a tiny poor country on the same footing as a giant superpower. America has a bilateral defense treaty with South Korea. If North Korea

attacks, America is obligated to respond.

Fun facts about North Korea: Right across the border of the demilitarized zone lies a fake town intended to lure South Koreans to the north. No one is fooled. North Korea isn't alone in its passive aggressive shenanigans: South Korea blares pop music via massive speakers at the North Korean troops on the DMZ

Let's bust some myths about North Korea. North Korea is not off-limits. You can travel to North Korea, you simply have to have a reason, and you have to be willing to travel with a translator or more likely a small team of translators. They will determine where you're not able to go, they will make sure you don't film, or at least that you don't film

anything they don't want you to film.

Much of the footage of Pyongyang that you see in documentaries is a decade or more old, and the city has modernized to an amazing degree over the last 10 years. A stream of drug-and-extortion-and weapons-dealing money will do that. Much of Pyongyang looks more like Miami than Detroit. Under Kim Jong-un, buildings have been painted in pastel colors, skyscrapers appear clean and modern. North Korea has bowling alleys and grocery stores and museums. Karaoke bars are popular.

Even though the state is supposed to control the doling out of resources and housing, an underground real estate market has sprouted, with the tacit support of the new regime. When the government hands out a new apartment to a

member of the party elite, they will often immediately flip the old one, pocketing the proceeds. In Pyongyang There are water parks. Tennis courts, basketball courts. There are concerts, massive celebrations, all of them of course patriotically-oriented but with the same pageantry of an American Fourth of July celebration or parade. I watched about ten documentaries—most of them will be cited in the transcript, but I might have lost track of a couple—in addition to my online research, and I would recommend at least taking a look at “have fun in Pyongyang” A documentary that feels more than a bit like propaganda but focuses on the every day life of North Koreans in Pyongyang. It paints a ridiculously rosy picture, and glosses over a galaxy of harsh truths, but it’s eye-opening nonetheless. Because the

truth is always more complicated than it seems. North Korea is in many ways an increasingly modern country clinging to an outdated and unsustainable mindset of feudalism. It is a country of serfs situated around a city of lords. The privileged in Pyongyang live with the fear of being exiled, and the provincial peasants in the countryside dream of being promoted to the big city. Even though the country functions as a plutocracy, rule by the rich and elite, it espouses the values of communism, and while that stands in contrast to the ideals of the western world, there are some arguable benefits. The individual is not celebrated, it is the community that is important. Everyone knows the same songs, everyone watches the same TV shows, they learn the same dances. When you're raised to believe that your leader is

God and God is infallible, you develop a blind unswerving loyalty and sense of confidence in the state. Are the people of North Korea free? Definitely not. are they all starving and miserable? Definitely not. Are they happy? That's harder to say. I think there's a case to be made that ignorance can be bliss. And also that so-called individuality isn't as great as it's cracked up to be. None of us is really a unique snowflake. We like to think we have so much freedom here, but we all have to conform in myriad ways. We've talked about this before. We all have to act a certain way in public, and cover our genitals. You can't walk down the street with your balls hanging out, you'll be dragged off to jail. We're not some utopian free society. You can't go to the opera without shoes on. If you start dancing quietly by

yourself in the corner of a library, you're not hurting anyone, but you'll be asked to leave and eventually forcibly removed and probably institutionalized. We have a degree more freedom in North Korea, and a degree less of a sense of community. But maybe we won't be so different for long. the internet is really good at bringing the wider world to the attention of places that are supposedly insular and protected. and Kim jong un has tasted the western world, and he wants to modernize his country while still maintaining his iron grip, which may not be possible. Eventually the people are going to know what they're missing. Eventually they'll have Instagram and vandalism and drug abuse and hookup culture. And sure, upward mobility and all of the great things about the west.

There's so much more we could talk about, we could talk about the woman who may in fact be the enforcer and the power behind the dictator. I'm not talking about Kim Jong-un's wife, I'm talking about his younger sister.

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