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The horrors of life in North Korea
By Lawrence J. Haas

They live on the other side of the world, imprisoned in a nation whose leaders fear progress and prevent modernity.

Isolated from all others, brainwashed to believe that their country is the best on Earth, they live in horrific conditions – with little electricity and running water; with malnourishment producing a generation of stunted growth, bloated stomachs, and flaky skin; and with life a daily struggle to survive.

They are the people of North Korea, and their anguished tales of life during the famine and economic chaos of the 1990s and beyond come to us through *Nothing to Envy* – a new book by *Los Angeles Times* reporter Barbara Demick who relays the stories of six North Koreans, all of whom eventually escaped to freedom.

This is no easy book to read. The writing is hardly poetic. Indeed, it's stilted, even clunky, at times. Nevertheless, the book is 294 pages of must reading, for it reminds us of what can happen when authoritarian leaders choose to do whatever they must to maintain power.

The book begins in dramatic fashion, its first page decorated with a satellite photo of North and South Korea at night.

To the south, lights fully engulf Seoul and its surrounding neighborhoods, and robust pockets of light brighten the skies over other population centers. To the north, an eerie nothingness blankets the country, with a tiny patch of light emanating from Pyongyang while the rest of the land appears startlingly black from the sky.

It is an ominous introduction for what awaits the reader, the dark sky a fitting symbol for the life that lies below.

Imagine a nation of relentless government control, where people live in varying levels of dilapidated housing based on their job and status; where people can decorate their walls only with portraits of their leader Kim Il-sung and, after his death, his successor son, Kim Jong-Il, and government officials make surprise home inspections to make sure the portraits are clean; where cars are few and owning one largely illegal anyway; where the government sets and enforces hairstyles and dress codes for men and women; where people can neither travel to another city nor spend the night in someone else's home without permission.

Imagine a land where the government watches everyone, and everyone watches everyone else – neighbors, friends, even family members; where a remark or a reflection in one's diary about the leader can mean death for the perpetrator and send his or her family to prison for life; where no one knows who's an informant so no one expresses unhappiness about anything; where long

days of work are followed by nights of mandatory ideological training to further indoctrinate the masses on the wonders of North Korean communism; and where the few people who are lucky enough to own TVs or radios have access only to anti-Western tirades or other government-approved content.

Imagine a land where the government media carries tales of the leader's powers to make trees bloom and snow melt; where teachers instruct five-year-olds to worship these leaders and to thank them for all the blessings they bestow on their people – until those children and older ones stop coming to school, their bodies too weak from malnutrition to walk before they eventually die of starvation.

Imagine a land where young people know almost nothing of dating and sex, their only means of entertainment and companionship a night-time walk in the darkness; where children celebrate not their own birthdays but only those of their leader and his son; and where teenagers must collect “night soil” from toilets for use as fertilizer and walk it to a warehouse miles away.

Imagine a land where money is scarce and people discouraged from shopping (for the government supposedly provides whatever anyone could want); where doctors are forced to make their own medicine if they hope to treat anyone; and where women do the family laundry in feces-infected streams.

Imagine a land where the starving people grow up shorter than earlier generations, their heads unduly large for their under-developed bodies; where people eat rats and mice, frogs and sparrows, dandelions and weeds, and even the undigested corn kernels that they pick from the feces of farm animals; where women turn to prostitution in exchange for food; and where homeless children wander city streets in packs to steal food or scavenge the countryside for whatever the land might offer.

Don't imagine. Read this book.