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A LOVE AFFAIR IN PYONGYANG

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ONE SUMMER NIGHT at the beginning of the 21st century, two dozen cultural activists from Berlin traveled to Pyongyang for the opening of a German library. The connecting flight in the Chinese border city of Dandong was canceled, without any reason being given. At about midnight, they were ordered by telephone to board a train that had been specially dispatched by the North Korean tourist office to fetch them.

The advertisement with Chinese characters glowed in the black mirror of the border river as the train pulled up. The foothills of the Paektusan volcano, half belonging to China, half to North Korea, stretched down to the water's edge, gleaming with the colors of advertising. A neon blue tooth sailed past the window. Even the doctors' offices, as the Germans saw during their stop, were lit up like fairground stalls in Dandong. Everything in this city was made of light.

The train accelerated with force. The advertising became a lava flow, images melting into it. Lips kissing. Champagne glasses. Palm trees.

Halfway across the Sino-Korean Friendship Bridge, they suddenly saw pitch-black tarps covering the windows.

The Germans were frightened.

But as it turned out, they were not tarps after all. It was the total darkness of a night without electricity.

Claudia Aebischer, president of the Association of European Libraries, was the only one who had previously been to the country. She had warned her fellow passengers of mild shock and now watched them wince anyway. She herself was strangely unmoved but remembered well the panic of her first trip, less than four months earlier.

A light pulsed above the rust-red door. It had become cooler. All cell phones were now off the network and would remain so for the duration of the trip. In Pyongyang, they would also

have their passports taken away. Claudia Aebischer saw the effect of this on her fellow travelers, even though they had been prepared. It's over!, their faces said.

To relax, she took a six-pack of Tsingtao beer out of her luggage. She offered it to the others. When no one wanted any, she put it in the middle of the floor and drank a bottle while standing. Her fellow travelers were considerably younger, most of them journalists. However, they did not appear to be closely affiliated. One was a lifestyle columnist. She accompanied a surf instructor who had set his mind on opening the first surfing school in North Korea. Some bloggers were along for the ride. Typing their initial notes into their smartphones. A journalist avoided her gaze, instead showing her an ear shaped like a question mark. There was a lot of ambition on board if you asked Claudia, the kind found in the young. People who, in reality, had no clue why they were striving so desperately.

But, she realized with a start, these were the thoughts of a stern grandmother. She didn't usually think that way.

She smoked.

She had co-founded a dozen libraries and language schools in the Southeast Asian region. This would be her last professional trip. Resigning the position was the right thing to do after all these years. She had also decided to finally start a long-delayed book project. I guess I'm a little lonely and confused because nobody else knows yet, she told herself. She wished she had been able to let someone in on the news.

The young people looked up at her anxiously. They seemed to wish for some words of reassurance. Claudia was happy to oblige. She told them about a Kyöksul fight she had been allowed to watch during her first stay. Kyöksul was a martial art she had practiced until her herniated discs put an end to it.

She told them about the congeniality of the North Koreans. Yes, they had been courteous to her.

They are also very grateful for any interest in their country, she said.

More! More reassurance! They looked up at her.

An enemy of sitting, Claudia spoke down to her fellow passengers.

They would not see the real country, just the theater of Pyongyang. And in this Pyongyang, the Pyongyang of foreigners, the military is certainly everywhere, but there are also everyday things. They would even see normal people.

It wasn't a lie. In Pyongyang, there were tailors. Doctors. Specialists in the care of paper. First-time inlaws wept tears of joy on boulevards and in front of Kim monuments, while festively dressed newlyweds had their pictures taken. There were glass blowers. There were taxidermists. There were even traffic jams, as a driver of one of the many cabs without customers had been proud to point out to Claudia. There were children. Children slid down the trunks of wooden playground elephants onto normal sand, just North Korean sand.

And outside the city gates, you can see normal North Korean poverty, she continued. The labor camp there is open to visitors, at least on Tuesdays, which are the days of open doors.

A little joke.

It wasn't observed, as she had seen.



Later, some of her fellow passengers closed their eyes. Their torsos protruded from illuminated dark yellow luggage and rocked gently back and forth in the train. The young people were tastefully and simply dressed, with smooth facial features and attractive hairstyles. They were a beautiful and passive generation, allowing themselves to be rocked into adulthood.

Maybe not that funny. In the reflection of the windowpane, they had the appearance of dolls sitting on a shelf.

Which was again the perspective of a grandmother, she noted. Clumsy, actually. It wasn't anything about the individuals, only about the gradually changing fashions. Such changes were fundamentally correct and important and they were an occasion for discussion. Claudia was considered a devoted emissary. Young at heart and thirsty for knowledge. Normally.

Outside, the first reddish outlines of prefabricated buildings appeared. Battery-operated lights on the two paintings that must be hung in every apartment produced the dim light of Christmas. When you knew they were Führer portraits, their lighting regulated by a timer, the Christmas glow turned into the brightness of hell.

She spared the others this information.



The morning dawned sulphur yellow. Claudia saw three children in dirt-stained army jackets, big as tents, standing on the edge of a settlement. Machine guns leaned against a wall. A yoked ox was grazing on a field.

What she saw next, she didn't understand. A face in front of her own. It was feminine, Asian and expressed astonishment. Opposite her, two train windows between them, was a North Korean woman traveling at exactly the same speed. She had probably also just wanted to look out at the landscape. The crazy thing was how long it lasted. That random eye contact lasted for at least half a minute.

At first, it was nothing.

Then it was "you don't know me." I don't know you. We'll never see each other again.

Then it was weird. How is it you and me now. In this moment. In this ever-lengthening

moment. To stare so deliberately. So uncomfortably aware.

But wait a minute. I, Claudia, will build a bridge lightning fast. I'll come to you and we'll share or swap our lives....

The next moment she thought, "What childish nonsense". First a grandmother, now a child! Maybe I should get some rest.

The North Korean woman had disappeared.



In Pyongyang, the day was radiant. The members of the German delegation pulled their wheeled suitcases onto the circular station forecourt. They looked like new. Clean and secure. There was hardly any activity. Some guards stood at attention in corners that did not look as if they needed to be guarded. Claudia didn't see the beautiful face from the train anywhere.

A friendly agent greeted her in English. He introduced himself as their driver. Not entirely without reason, because he did drive the bus they took just afterward, and yet he had clearly been in attendance in at least one military academy. An unofficial collaborator of the State Security Department. Or IM or MFS. *Agent* was Claudia's all-around descriptor. Apart from movies and popcorn, he didn't remind her of anything.

The agent told jokes into his microphone. He hoped the Germans would not bump their heads on the ceiling. He did sometimes chauffeur a basketball team on this bus. But one from here.

When no one but Claudia reacted with a friendly chuckle, he added an explanation. Koreans are known to be short.



Even later, at lunch in the hotel, Claudia's fellow travelers managed only strained smiles

at best. They exchanged whispers about the things that seemed particularly suspicious. The five cashiers in the hotel shop, all looking identical in their eyes, ranked high on the list. As soon as the door of the shop had opened, they pecked away on their oversized calculators, pretending to be wildly busy, even though they had hardly any customers. How many people were staying in this ghost hotel? Spread out over thirty-four musty floors? Ten? They were also suspicious of the agent. He strolled by conspicuously often and close to them, the young Germans whispered, using a mobile phone as an alibi, which didn't even work

He who whispers, lies, Claudia thought. She remembered an old East German proverb when she saw the cashiers. *We pretend to work and they pretend to pay us.* But she kept it to herself. She wanted to get away from the grumbling.

"Do you like kimchi? It's prepared with red chili peppers here in the north," she said aloud. "Better than in the south. I'll order some."

There was nothing she wanted less to hear all the clichés and horrors that can't be left out of any report covering North Korea. The eleventh floor did not appear on the elevator buttons, it would be noted. Possibly listening devices were hidden there.

Or not.

Twelve hairstyles are allowed for North Korean women. Men have a choice of only eight hairstyles...

She had had enough.



In the afternoon they had the mandatory visit to the mausoleum. In rows of two, they paraded for five hours past medals, pennants, and trophies.

In the crypt, they bowed to the Kims' Snow White glass coffins. Grey faces on a red

cushioned background. The place did not have a mood-lifting effect, Claudia had to admit.

"Is it possible that a woman has been following us since we arrived?"

"I recognize the man at the corner, too. But he has different clothes."

Anything was possible, Claudia knew, and she was glad for the cheerful bellboy, the sensible woman at the reception, and everyone else who made a normal impression. It astonished her how much she identified with the country. On her first trip, she had the feeling of being *in Germany* the whole time. Now she felt more like *Jena*, where she came from - and the others were *Berlin*.

At dinner, the group surprisingly thanked Claudia for her reassuring manner. The one or two North Koreans they had spoken to for longer had actually been quite relaxed and normal. And kimchi tastes good with red chili peppers, they said. This was directed at the agent who was looking at his — actually functional — cell phone.

Claudia had recommended the topic of food to them. It's always the number one stabilizing force for small talk. The agent, who split into three agents over the evening, promptly recommended more side dishes and drinks. Claudia, who spoke fluent Russian and a little Korean, helped out with suggestions for translation.

Some of the young women looked up at her perceptibly. It flattered her. She was considered an intellectual woman. Commentator. Author. Ex-taxi driver from the East. Somebody who had fought her way through. She had not experienced her childhood in Jena as an affliction. On the contrary. Her parents, lecturers at the Technical University, had offered her a privileged life. My Sunday's child, her mother called her.

After the peaceful revolution, she often had a guilty conscience. She had been so well off, and as a teenager, she cared little for people who fared worse. She had had little interest in

people from other backgrounds.

In Pyongyang, this guilty conscience returned. Smells caused something inside her to splinter. Associations flowed forth. During her first visit to the hotel, she noticed the aroma of a cleaning agent. She hadn't smelled that since she was a child! On the streets in front of the apartments, she was touched by the earthy smell of peat briquettes, whether pleasant or unpleasant, she didn't know.

The memories were fairly good. The thoughts were not. Happiness and shame lay close together.

Pyongyang gave the final push to her decision to resign her position. Where it would lead, she didn't know.



Lying on the bed in her room, Claudia Aebischer contemplated Kim Jong-il and Kim Il-sung. Apple-cheeked, they peered out of their golden frames on the opposite wall. She was increasingly enjoying the ginseng schnapps from the minibar. Smoking was permitted everywhere. It was true. A trip to North Korea was a trip back in time to the early eighties. If not to an alternative past. Here the official numbered year was 107, after Kim Il-sung.

As she walked barefoot across the swamp-green carpet of the hotel hallway to explore the floor, a young woman flitted past her. She knew right away. It was the woman from the train. During her last visit, she had noticed several similar attendants around her. But none with a face that was so peculiarly approachable. Not one that triggered such a diffuse flow of emotion. Usually, that only came from smells that had been long forgotten.

The light went out. Claudia's throat suddenly dry as dust. She slipped past the islands of light from the Kim portraits and entered a stairwell. It was like looking into the space behind the

matrix. As if you've left retro reality and are seeing the raw space of the real world for the first time. It reverberated and exuded a construction site chill, and it was far in the future and freshly and dazzlingly painted white. There was no more sign of her attendant.

CLAUDIA AEBISCHER was fifty years old. She had written three narrative nonfiction books. Kyöksul. Weimar. Poverty research. She had not written the literary work that had loomed before her in her youth. The poetry thing, as she called it to herself. This non-book accompanied her.

The last six months, and the decision to leave her position, had thrown her into a strange second puberty. She wondered what had prevented her from becoming a writer back then. Why hadn't she at least tried?

Her tentative answer was that she had been doing too well in her adult life to really take a chance at anything else. The subject of this one big book would have covered *Everything*, of course, and it was therefore a risk. She had managed the non-fiction books without too much effort.. Most recently, she had set her sights on macro photography. Her enthusiasm for the landscapes of the tiny, sparked by the exhibition of an acquaintance from Amsterdam, was unbroken. Still, now it seemed like a bad joke to write a book about the very small. A feel-good essay for amateur photographers? said a sardonic voice inside her. Is that all you're going to do?

Family: none.

Her parents long dead.

After ten years, she could almost burst into tears because of it.



At breakfast, Claudia thought she could see how the writers among her fellow travelers were already working on their articles in their heads. She also thought she knew what these articles would sound like. Stylish. They would repeat in style what they had learned. They would cleverly and ironically describe the surface of the theater and conclude,

"That's all you get to see in this country."

But maybe I can see more, it occurred to her. The others still have to prove themselves. They have to be serious, but me? Aren't I old and free?

Smoking, she stood at the window.

Pyongyang was a city of few colors. The dull silver sun stood above a field of freakishly symmetrical residential blocks. The helical buildings on the Scientists Street shimmered in an unexciting marzipan pink. No music. No place to sit. No groups of people. No clusters of teenagers. No stores or restaurants recognizable as such, no signs, no cafes, no noise. Only prefabricated buildings, wide streets, monochrome walls. Snow-globe silence reigned under the dazzling sun.



They waited for their expected interpreter in front of the hotel. Her name was Sunmi, and she spoke fluent German, the agent revealed. She would present the future German Library to them, which until now only the German ambassador had seen on the inside.

Claudia had visited several buildings during her first visit. For a long time, it remained unclear which one would win the competition. All of them were detached villas, very impressive. After all, the North Koreans were mainly concerned with the media, with appearances both internal and external. Claudia was aware of the symbolic value of such projects. This time it seemed even more significant than usual.

While the other Germans would leave soon after the opening, she would remain on site for another three weeks to assist with the establishment of the facility. At most, a few party cadres would be expected as visitors. They would pretend that the library was open to all.

And Claudia? She'd put a good face on this bad game. Angry opposition was not appropriate. Not here, she thought, listening to herself to see if it was true. Clearly. Why would

you get their hackles up?

So she would be able to write. Undisturbed. The German Library in Pyongyang would be her enclave.

The tour bus was decorated with smiling dolphins. North Koreans liked anthropomorphized animals. The streets were free of advertising, while the murals were surreal. Claudia knew the style from East Germany, but there it had been workers and peasants, happiness leaping from their eyes. Here, accordion-playing frogs, drum-beating rabbits, and even mushrooms were all part of the socialist family.

The interpreter rode in on a yellow Vespa. A brand-new vehicle, Claudia immediately thought. The helmet sat like a bullet on the head of a tremendously upright woman. She took it off, placed it judiciously on the luggage rack, and stood with dutiful tautness in front of the group. She placed her fingertips against each other to say a formal greeting.

"I welcome you to our country, which we call Koryŏ.

Her gleaming black hair was artfully braided and pinned tightly to her head with hairpins. Her voice had a quiet, intimate strength.

Sunmi was the woman.

The woman was Sunmi.

Claudia did not remember what Sunmi had worn during their first two encounters, on the train and in the hotel. But now she had transformed into an official, wearing a uniform, and something about her touched Claudia's heart. It had to do with Sunmi's sternly raised eyebrows and with the stiffness of the uniform, contrasted with the — presumably — warm-breathing creature underneath.

"SUN-MI".

She said her name several times and asked people not to call her *Sunny* under any circumstances. Some tourists tended to do that. But she was not American, as one could easily recognize. She was a German scholar. Her doctorate was on the era of German Romanticism, whose achievements she held in high esteem. Unfortunately, she would now have to take their passports. But they had no need of them here. Hence one was in the picture.

Hence, she said.

Handing over her passport gave Claudia a brief, panicked moment this time as well. Strange, actually, she thought. As if your passport could save you in the event of a wrongdoing or a conviction. Here! Perhaps you have overlooked something. I am German!

Sitting next to Sunmi on the bus, Claudia said quietly, "I think we've met twice before. You didn't want to be seen. And maybe you weren't allowed to be. As my observer. But I guess it didn't work."

Later, she couldn't say what exactly had possessed her to say that. Longing for an honest reaction? Hunger for intensity?

Sunmi, in any case, immediately countered, "You didn't see anyone. You lie." But the small deviation in the script, as would become apparent, was to trigger a whole sequence of deviations.

TWENTY YEARS EARLIER, on the Pota collective farm near Paektusan, fisherwoman In-suk, Sunmi's mother, died. Sunmi was eleven years old. Much later, she would tell Claudia about this time as if it were a fairytale. And Claudia would put herself in the shoes of the North Korean orphan as if nothing was unusual. She would think, how liberating not to have to manage her own mistrust! To follow along, to sympathize, not be suspicious, to just be a private person.

So. Once upon a time, there was a blood-streaked newborn in Sunmi's arms, her half-sister. Her mother had died giving birth to her. No sooner had the mother's eyelids closed forever than the newborn demanded care. And so Sunmi was too busy to mourn.

There was also no time to mourn in the next days and weeks. In the morning Sunmi attended the revolutionary school near the volcano Paektusan, her baby sister wrapped in a chest cloth. In the afternoon she fished in the river on the border. With one hand she pressed her little sister to her chest so she would not fall out, with the other she caught up the small gillnets.

Sunmi's father had been dead for five years. The soldier, whom Sunmi suspected was her little sister's father, was long gone. The one-story cottage in which they lived would have suited a family of three or four, according to Sunmi's sense of justice. It was too big for the two of them.

Every Thursday and every Sunday, Sunmi waded over to China to the market. She sold the fish, and her little sister pursed her lips and snapped like a fish from the cloth. That helped business. At that time, the Yalu River was not a strictly guarded border in this region, and the famine that drove many to flee had not yet broken out.

Sunmi liked the Chinese market. She liked the foreign volcanologists, recognizable from their mountain boots and that they stuffed large quantities of halibut into their plastic backpacks.

It gave them energy for the climb. She liked the foreign languages that mingled inside her with the radio sounds and the reading of newspapers.

At the market, all languages merged into one. It was the market language that her mother had also been able to speak just on intuition. She could sing along with the others. There were differences, but in this place, Sunmi thought, they seemed like variants, like dialects. Moreover, in other languages, the names of the fish and the seafood sounded like the animals. Glibsy gliby. Multi-limbed multi-limby. When the voices hardly made a sound, it was talk of herring and butterfish. If a customer's face showed irritation, the vocabulary could be modeled in speech. Sunmi learned this multi-armed language while speaking and playing.

One day a man from the party showed up at the school. Sunmi learned she was gifted. She belonged to Pyongyang, he said. It happened in the teachers' room where she had been ordered to go. She received a folded paper made of strong cardboard, like a book without pages. A certificate of giftedness. She had heard of such a thing.

That evening as her little sister was asleep, Sunmi stood in front of the wall in the largest room of the house. There hung the portraits to which she bowed after meals. At first, she had also wanted to bow for the sake of the certificate, but when she found herself wanting to cry from gratitude, she simply stopped and cried for as long as she could.

Late summer arrived. The Yalu glowed yellow from the foliage, though it was now flowing faster and wider. Its path down from Paektusan led through three climate zones, through forests. The size could be read by the loads it carried towards the Yellow Sea.

Sunmi became acquainted with a girl named Ha-un. Ha-un had received a beauty certificate because she was as graceful as a water nymph. Sunmi assumed that was the case. She

couldn't see it. Ha-un always wore long stockings, gloves, and a jacket with a bell-shaped hood, as if it were the depths of winter. In Pyongyang, she wanted to climb out of this protective shell as white as snow, Sunmi understood. Those who had come through the summer so white didn't want to tan on the last few feet of the journey.

Ha-un's certificate had a travel permit attached. Sunmi did not have one. What was the point of a study permit for Pyongyang if she was not allowed to travel to Pyongyang?

It had to be an oversight, they both decided. Of course, Sunmi was authorized to travel. And also her *baby*, Ha-un said.

Sunmi did not correct her. Afterward, she was annoyed because she disliked this false image of herself as a young village mother, still a child herself, like so many others. In Pyongyang, someone like Ha-un, dressed in good clothes, going out to restaurants, and traveling in cars, might not have children until their mid-twenties.

In late autumn, Ha-un began her journey. To cheers and by train.

By winter, Sunmi had enough of brooding and prevailed upon herself to set out, even without permission. With her baby sister and on foot. The snow was deep. Sparkling, it rounded the edges of the rocks and houses. A peaceful blanket of rice lies over everything, Sunmi told her sister. She imagined she understood the meaning of the sentence through the sound.

Winter would protect them. Few people, hardly any inspectors. And anyway, if a girl with a certificate and a child on her chest took on these hardships, who was going to condemn her for not having a travel permit?

Still, she avoided people. The first night they spent under a snowy bridge. Crystal-clear stalactites to the left and the right would shield them from the wind, and beneath the river's cover

of ice clung black catfish that she could cook in the fire, Sunmi imagined. It didn't have to be this way. She had left her birth house to a neighbor woman. Accepting money for it was wrong, she knew. However, she had been able to purchase twenty jars of Chinese baby food and six original packaged jars of sunshine and metabolism vitamins. She was proud of that. No one could blame her for failing as a substitute mother. This outweighed the wrong that had been done.

The following night they were taken up on a horse-drawn cart. An old man held the reins. He looked trustworthy. For several hours they jolted through the new powdery snow. The man liked to talk quietly to himself, which calmed Sunmi. *Palate tooth*, her mother had called people of that age. At the highest, toothless age, when a person is still alive despite all laws of nature, a tooth grows in the middle of the palate, Sunmi's mother had explained. An old man's tooth or palate tooth, to grind with. However, this almost never happened because you had to live past eighty.

Sunmi thought about how she didn't want to give her baby sister a name without her mother's approval. Still, she would have to do it soon.

If she lifted the chest cloth, her baby sister moved her little nose in her sleep, and the snot underneath was not frozen, so warm was Sunmi's body, although she couldn't feel it herself. A few times she nudged her little sister, and she sweetly wrinkled her nose. Then she left her in peace.

The white-sugared towers of Pyongyang appeared on the horizon. The old man wanted to head for the coast. Sunmi continued on foot. She did not suspect it would be more than a day's walk. She was feeling quite urban in front of these tall buildings.

Her baby sister was already dead. The morning sparkled above the snow-covered fields.

They passed gigantic concertinas of frost-covered iron and empty manufacturing halls. The lanterns on the sides bent like white flowers. Then, after a hill up and a slope down, she discovered it. And after the panic and the helplessness and the despair, after she had buried her little sister, at night came the guilt that ate her up from the inside —.

Claudia lost the naivety of simply following along. She suddenly realized, I don't know what this is. I have to be more careful here. This is where my imagination is stymied.

But Pyongyang! Yes, Pyongyang, it went on.

Once upon a time, there was a capital city that was like a sun in a land of winter. And outside the gates of the city, there was a hill from which one could see far, far away, and there was a macrocosm and the microcosm in one, two cosmoses that were united in this view. The crest of the coniferous forests behind the city glowed green-purple, and the city itself lay as a bright light in front of the crest, and arteries and bogs opened up along the river, crystal-yellow and dragon-scaled.

And in the city, there were walls of books. They were so high that Sunmi had to use a ladder. The university studies were hard. It took two or three months before she measured up to her ambitions and achieved what she had been in her school: the best in her year.

University. Dormitory. People's canteen. Between them was a narrow strip of yard. With male accompaniment, Sunmi would have been allowed to take a closer look at the capital. But she had no accompaniment and she preferred to study.

For the first time in her life, she took a shower.