

An alarm blares, waking you from your warm dream. The sun has not even risen, but it's time for you to do so. The alarm continues to ring out for a few more seconds until it finally ends.

This alarm is not one you can simply press the snooze button on; this alarm wakes everyone up, announcing it is time for work. This alarm is heard by the whole, great city of New York.

You feel blessed to be able to live in the capital city of your country, The United States. Each night at dinner you thank your amazing leader that you have this wonderful privilege. You have not actually been to any of the other cities in the country, for you need permission and specific travel forms just to leave your own, but everyone says New York City is the best city.

You are eating breakfast when suddenly you are plunged into darkness; the only source of light comes from the small rising sun. You sigh and continue in the dark. Power outages are very common so this darkness is not exactly unfamiliar. You finish your breakfast and head out the door and off to work to start your thirteen-hour shift in the factory. You pass the elevator that sits frozen in time. It should not work anyways because of the lack of power, but it has not functioned for decades. The elevator is more of show, a façade. It is then when you realize there are a lot of things similar to that elevator in this country.

This thought resurfaces as you walk to work. You stare at the six-lane highway. It is deserted. Occasionally a police car or truck rolls by, but for the most part, the roads stay empty. You imagine what it would look like if each lane were filled with cars; this makes you laugh, what a crazy thought.

Hours later, you are still at work like any other day. This routine has been the same since you graduated school and you were placed into this job. Suddenly two police officers burst through the doors. It is not uncommon for guards to circulate the rooms, checking up on us to make sure we are completing our jobs, but the urgency of these officers is a surprise. Someone must be in trouble.

The police officers make their way closer and closer to the back left of the room, where you sit. Your heart starts to quicken its pace. You remind yourself that you have done nothing wrong and there is nothing to worry about, but the officers keep coming closer and closer. Suddenly you lock eyes with the shorter one of the two and they quicken their pace until they are running towards you, at you. You hold up your arms in a position of surrender. They grab you and throw you on the ground, handcuff you, and then place a blindfold over your eyes, plunging you into darkness for the second time that day.

An eternity later, the blindfold is finally removed. It takes a few minutes for your eyes to adjust. You don't recognize this place; it looks nothing like New York. Instead of buildings and skyscrapers in the distance, all you see are hills and mountains. The ground only consists of dirt. A few shabby huts surround you. The last thing you see frightens you the most though. Encircling the entire area is a large barbed wire fence. It's then when you realize you've been thrown into a Labor Camp. No one will ever tell you why you're here or when you will be released, but each night as you go to sleep after working for eighteen hours in the mines, you thank your Great Leader for not placing you into a Prison Camp.

This isn't some fictional story made to tell the tale of some dystopian story that resembles the hit franchise, *The Hunger Games*. Replace "The United States" with "North Korea," and "New York City" with "Pyongyang", and you have not only a true story, but a common story.

So why did I add this story? It was not just to shock you, the reader, into realizing how problematic North Korea is, but as Bruce Cummings states in North Korea: Another Country,

“No society can be understood without knowing where it came from”^I. This paper will dive into the concept of where North Korea came from and how it became the way it is. It is regarded as a completely censored and repressed country. We look at North Korea as a reason to make us, Americans, feel honored to live in a country that bleeds freedom, but what if we aren’t as blessed as we’d like to admit. What, really, is true freedom, and what is Censorship?

North Korea, because of their extreme censorship, knows very little about the foreign world and what they do know is corrupted; because of this extreme isolation, the foreign world, or us, know very little about North Korea. But there is also very little taught about North Korea in the American education system.

The Korean Peninsula is cut viciously in half down the 38th parallel. On one side sits South Korea, the other, North Korea. North Korea is the “most isolated country in the world.”^{II} It’s the country that is completely walled in. One border lies on the divide between the two Koreas, the second border lies between North Korea and China, and the third border being the ocean. High voltage fences and tough guards heavily guard these borders. This brings up a question though: Do these borders exist to keep intruders out; or, do these borders act as prison bars, keeping the civilians in?

The answer to that question is both. It is extremely difficult for any foreigner to be allowed to visit the country, especially Americans, and it is also extremely difficult and dangerous for Koreans to flee the country. If you are caught attempting an escape, you and your whole family are sent to live in a prison camp for the rest of your life, or you are immediately executed while your family is sent to the camps. And getting across the border isn’t all there is to it. If a Chinese or South Korean officer catches you, it’s straight back to the country of North Korea you go.

No one really gets in, no one really gets out. But that’s not all that isolates the country. The media is completely controlled by the government. Computers and cellular phones aren’t commonplace. Each household owns a radio that can never be turned off, only turned down. Only news that is allowed to be broadcasted is aired. The television channels are extremely limited. There is zero connection to the outside world where connection is currently the biggest fad. Everything is completely run by one family, the Kim family.

This causes the North Korean exceedingly corrupted view of the foreign world. Everything they know has been carefully spoon-fed to them by Kim Jong Un and his father, and grandfather who ruled before him.

These borders don’t just affect the North Koreans though. Like I mentioned earlier, the borders also keep the outside world from getting in. This means we know very little about the country, and everything we do know is what we’ve been allowed to know. Many documentaries and videos that follow foreigners touring the country are very similar: they are only allowed in the capital city Pyongyang, government minders watch their every move, and interviews with other civilians are not allowed.

Very recently Kim Jong Un allowed CNN to tour his brand new water park. It is an extensive park; each ride was tested by the leader’s council members to ensure they are safe, when miles out of the prized city, Pyongyang, lives thousands of malnourished, ill civilians. It is all about the façade in North Korea, the face that is presented to the rest of the world. Cummings

1. I Cummings, Bruce. North Korea: Another Country. New York: New, 2003. Print. 128.

II National Geographic: Inside North Korea. Dir. Peter Yost. Perf. Lisa Ling. Nation Geographic Television, 2006. Netflix. 2007. Web. 03 Nov. 2014. <http://www.netflix.com/WiMovie/70061970?sod=search-autocomplete>>.

mentions in *North Korea: Another Country*, “the overwhelming concern for “face” (another word for dignity) and proffering a perfect facade defines the street layout of Pyongyang.”^{III} Tall buildings filled with flower boxes rise up near the border between North and South Korea. The buildings are designed to intimidate the South Koreans, but the reality is the insides are completely deserted; no one lives or works in the apartments. When South Korea planted their flag 30 meters high, North Korea made their flag 50 meters tall, the tallest flag mount in the world.

North Korea’s favorite thing to show off to the rest of the world is their Mass Games, which documentary film maker, Daniel Gordon is invited to record and follow the lives of twelve and fifteen year old girls, Kyon Sun and Kim Song. Every few years North Korea hosts the largest choreographed dance in the world. Thousands of girls, boys, and adults train vigorously just to be able to perform for their “Great Leader.” It is an extremely expensive event, which lasts for two weeks with two performances a day. Entire lives are devoted to the dance and many times the leader doesn’t even make an appearance. The two girls hoped Kim Jong-Il would show up during the 2003 Mass Games, but sadly learned he never made it to any of the performances. They mention their understanding for his lack of appearance, for they know he is very busy running the country. Meanwhile the rest of the country starves or suffers in one of the many prisons or labor camps.

In the documentary, *Camp 14: No Control Zone* a man named Shin Dong-Hyuk tells his life story of growing up in a labor camp. He was born into it and knew nothing else. There was no concept of family in the camp. He spent his days in the camp school or working. Their only meals consisted of two scoops of porridge a day, one if you’d done something wrong that day. When he was thirteen he was taken out of the labor camp and thrown into a prison camp because his mother and brother had attempted to escape. He was tortured for weeks until he was finally thrown into a cell where an elderly man tended to his burns and scars. Shin tells it was the first time anyone had shown any type of human affection towards him. He was finally brought back to the labor camp, just on the day of his mother and brother’s public execution. He didn’t cry when the bullets rang out, he didn’t know he was supposed to. Later while he was working, Shin met a man who was new to the camp. This man told Shin stories of the outside world, all of it was new to him. It was this man that convinced Shin Dong-Hyuk to flee the camp. He was only fifteen when he fled, the older man died during the attempt. Shin says he left the camp not for the freedom, but for the chance to try cooked chicken. He then successfully escaped North Korea when he was only sixteen.

All of this gives us a corrupted view of North Korea. We only base our facts of the place on assumptions and the tales of refugees who successfully fled the communist country. But some documentaries offer a different perspective, like in *A State of Mind*, the documentary that followed the two girls who participated in the Mass Games. Both girls live in Pyongyang and live a somewhat privileged life compared to the rest of the country. This causes the interviews of the family members to touch on common subjects but with an uncommon perspective. Kyon Sun’s grandfather speaks stories of the war:

“When I was young I didn't know if the US Imperialists were bad or good, but through our war in the 1950's I saw the brutal bombing of our country and the atrocities suffered by our people. I saw things being done that no human could do. I became more enraged

III Cumings, Bruce. *North Korea: Another Country*. New York: New, 2003. Print. 140.

about US Imperialism and felt that we had to rid this land of US Imperialism completely.”

After hearing this and seeing the brutal images of naked children wailing in the rubble and smoke, it is hard to not reach a level of understanding with his hatred towards the United States. Most citizens of North Korea really believe their communist country is the best way to stand against the United States. “In Korea the family is the strongest unit, yet nothing transcends the passion and devotion shown for the leaders.”^{IV}

There is also a lack of knowledge of the country due to the lack of education about it. From my own personal experience, I had no idea the country even existed until I was twelve years old. I remember sitting down in my World Cultures class one afternoon and learned that that day we would be watching a movie, I was ecstatic as any student would be. That movie turned out to be a documentary and that documentary turned out to be *National Geographic, Inside North Korea*. It wasn't quite the pleasant class I'd expected but I definitely wasn't bored. I was intrigued, amazed, and horrified that a place like this actually existed. It all seemed fictional. A small discussion followed the film but never once was North Korea ever brought up in a class again.

It wasn't until very recently that I learned about the Korean War. The name of such war was silently familiar, like it had been mentioned once before in a conversation long ago, but little was actually known. Which is extremely surprising because not only was America involved in the war but one of the reasons it even began. We played a massive role in the Korean War but not once have I been formally taught about it in any history class. The war is actually often referred to as the “Forgotten War,” which clearly makes sense.

So here, reader is your not-so-formal history lesson about the Korean War. Korea had just been liberated from Japan's rule in 1945, only to be divided by the United States and the Soviet Union. By 1948, two countries had been established: communists in the north, anti-communists in the south. The timing of Japan's capitulation was actually quite consequential for Korea. Had the Suzuki Cabinet (the last prime minister of Japan's cabinet) accepted the Potsdam Declaration (the declaration that called for the surrender of all Japanese forces during WWII) in early August, the United States wouldn't have dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Soviet Union then would have not entered the conflict against Japan, and Korea probably would not have been divided into two occupied zones, author Wada Haruki explains in *The Korean War*. August 15th, Moscow accepts Washington's proposal for a division and all Korean hopes for a single independent country have been dashed.

The war officially began in 1950 and lasted for three years until it was suspended by a truce agreement, “an estimated four million people, many of them civilians, were killed in the three year war and to this Korea has remained divided.”^V To this day, North or South Korea never signed a peace treaty. The Korean War is still not safely in the past, even though it was six decades ago. Haruki writes that the war deserves careful scrutiny, critical observations or examination because of tensions on the Korean peninsula continuing to flare. The war was

IV A State of Mind. Dir. Daniel Gordon. Perf. Pak Hyon Sun and Kim Song Yun. Kino International, 2005. Snag Films. Ted Leonsis, 2008. Web. 7 Nov. 2014. <http://www.snagfilms.com/films/title/a_state_of_mind>.

V A State of Mind. Dir. Daniel Gordon. Perf. Pak Hyon Sun and Kim Song Yun. Kino International, 2005. Snag Films. Ted Leonsis, 2008. Web. 7 Nov. 2014. <http://www.snagfilms.com/films/title/a_state_of_mind>.

complicated. Patrick O'Donnell states, "Nobody understood, and unlike WWII, nobody seemed to care about the Korean War."^{VI} Not many Americans understood nor cared, perhaps because this war didn't end with the great victory the US is so accustomed to.

It is constantly set as black and white, North Korea is bad and South Korea (+America) is good! It is easy to admit the faults of your enemy but to admit your own, that something the US has never been too great at. Cumings adds a new perspective: "Washington never tires of accusing the North of terrorism, assassination plots, and the like, but few understand that the South also mounted hundreds if not thousands of terrorist attacks on the North."^{VII} And once the war ended, America introduced nuclear weapons into South Korea, despite its prohibition. They deemed the nuclear arsenal would be kept under exclusive American control, and only be used in the event of a massive and uncontrollable North Korean invasion.

So why is this war so quiet, so "forgotten"? America was definitely involved; American soldiers cluttered the battlefields. American soldiers still stay deployed in South Korea, guarding the borders and keeping a watchful eye on their neighbors. Maybe North Korea isn't the only country that deals with isolation and controlled information. Our media is corrupted, our schools' curriculum restricted. Is America, "the land of the free," really that *free*?

I'm not saying North Korea is above the United States, I'm not even saying the States are even as awful as North Korea, but instead asking you, the reader, to step back and reevaluate this country. It isn't as perfect as many make it out to be, not even close to perfection, but you don't have to just sit back and accept it. Nor do you have to accept the conclusion that North Korea is doomed for eternity and will never escape their communist system and leaders. There is a now generation of people who were just children when the famine struck North Korea in 1994 through 1998 that killed roughly two million people. They never experienced life in North Korea before the country began to deteriorate and "have no warm memories of a stable regime."^{VIII} This generation grew up depending on black markets for food. The young North Koreans are more independent than their parents and older generations. Other than the usual food sold and traded in the black markets, you can find data-filled USB thumb drives and foreign DVD's that help spread knowledge of the outside world to the Koreans. This knowledge isn't being used to start a revolution and overthrow the government, or even flee the country; instead, the young North Koreans are using it to help the economy. Yeonmi Park, a 21 year old North Korean, stated, "My generation, they're not really worshiping the Kim regime sincerely, just pretending. That's what we call the black market generation." These are the citizens who will grow and change their country for the better.

VI O'Donnell, Patrick K. Give Me Tomorrow: The Korean War's Greatest Untold Story--the Epic Stand of the Marines of George Company. Cambridge: Da Capo, 2010. Print. 5.

VII Cumings, Bruce. North Korea: Another Country. New York: New, 2003. Print. 56.

VIII Wee, Heesun. "The Kids Bringing down North Korea's Regime." CNBC. N.p., 2014. Web. 17 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.cnbc.com/id/102146454#>>.

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