

barrasing truth. Neither was suffering for lack of food. What Jun-sang's father couldn't grow in his vegetable patch next to the house, they bought on the black market with their stash of Japanese yen. Oddly enough, Mi-ran was eating better than she had in years, a result of having left the college dormitory for her parents' home. In the midst of the economic crisis, somehow the family's poor class standing didn't matter so much. Mi-ran's gorgeous eldest sister had married surprisingly well, her good looks trumping the troubled family background. Her husband was in the military and used his connections to help the rest of the family. Mi-ran's mother continued to find new ways to make money. After the electricity went out, she couldn't operate the freezer she used for her soy-milk ice cream, but she started a few other businesses—raising pigs, making tofu, grinding corn.

A DECADE LATER, when Mi-ran was a mother herself, trying to lose her postpregnancy weight through aerobics, this period of her life weighed like a stone on her conscience. She often felt sick over what she did and didn't do to help her young students. How could she have eaten so well herself when they were starving?

It is axiomatic that one death is a tragedy, a thousand is a statistic. So it was for Mi-ran. What she didn't realize is that her indifference was an acquired survival skill. In order to get through the 1990s alive, one had to suppress any impulse to share food. To avoid going insane, one had to learn to stop caring. In time, Mi-ran would learn how to walk around a dead body on the street without paying much notice. She could pass a five-year-old on the verge of death without feeling obliged to help. If she wasn't going to share her food with her favorite pupil, she certainly wasn't going to help a perfect stranger.

THE GOOD DIE FIRST



Propaganda poster for the Arduous March.

IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT PEOPLE REARED IN COMMUNIST COUNTRIES cannot fend for themselves because they expect the government to take care of them. This was not true of many of the victims of the North Korean famine. People did not go passively to their deaths. When the public distribution system was cut off, they were forced to tap their deepest wells of creativity to feed themselves. They devised traps out of buckets and string to catch small animals in the field, draped nets over their balconies to snare sparrows. They educated themselves in the nutritive properties of plants. They reached back into their collective memory of famines past and recalled the survival tricks of their forefathers. They stripped the sweet inner bark of pine trees to grind into a fine powder that could

be used in place of flour. They pounded acorns into a gelatinous paste that could be molded into cubes that practically melted in your mouth.

North Koreans learned to swallow their pride and hold their noses. They picked kernels of undigested corn out of the excrement of farm animals. Shipyard workers developed a technique by which they scraped the bottoms of the cargo holds where food had been stored, then spread the foul-smelling gunk on rooftops to dry so that they could collect from it tiny grains of uncooked rice and other edibles.

On the beaches, people dug out shellfish from the sand and filled buckets with seaweed. When the authorities in 1995 erected fences along the beach (ostensibly to keep out spies, but more likely to prevent people from catching fish the state companies wanted to control), people went out to the unguarded cliffs over the sea and with long rakes tied together hoisted up seaweed.

Nobody told people what to do—the North Korean government didn't want to admit to the extent of the food shortage—so they defended for themselves. Women exchanged recipe tips. When making cornmeal, don't throw out the husk, cob, leaves, and stem of the corn—throw it all into the grinder. Even if it isn't nutritious, it is filling. Boil noodles for at least an hour to make them appear bigger. Add a few leaves of grass to soup to make it look as if it contains vegetables. Powder pine bark to make cakes.

All ingenuity was devoted to the gathering and production of food. You woke up early to find your breakfast and as soon as it was finished, you thought about what to find for dinner. Lunch was a luxury of the past. You slept during what used to be lunchtime to preserve your calories.

Ultimately it was not enough.

AFTER THE GARMENT FACTORY CLOSED, Mrs. Song floundered, wondering what to do with herself. She was still a good Communist with a natural dislike of anything that reeked of capitalism. Her beloved marshal, Kim Il-sung, had warned repeatedly that socialists

must "guard against the poisonous ideas of capitalism and revisionism." She liked to quote that particular saying.

Then again, nobody in the family had gotten paid since the Great Leader's death—not even her husband, with his party membership and prestigious job at the radio station. Chang-bo wasn't even getting the free wine and tobacco that were the customary perks of a journalist. Mrs. Song knew it was time to put aside her scruples and make money. But how?

She was about as unlikely an entrepreneur as one could imagine. She was fifty years old and had no business skills other than the ability to tally numbers on the abacus. When she mulled this predicament with her family, however, they reminded her of her talents in the kitchen. Back in the days when you could get ingredients, Mrs. Song enjoyed cooking, and Chang-bo liked to eat. Her repertoire was naturally limited in that North Koreans had no exposure to foreign cuisines, but their own was surprisingly sophisticated for a country whose name is now synonymous with famine. (In fact, many restaurateurs in South Korea come from north of the border.) North Korean cooks are creative, using natural ingredients such as pine mushrooms and seaweed. Whatever happens to be fresh and seasonal is mixed with rice, barley, or corn, and seasoned with red bean paste or chilies. The signature dish is Pyongyang *naengmyon*, cold buckwheat noodles served in a vinegary broth with myriad regional variations, adding hard-boiled eggs, cucumbers, or pears. If she was busy, Mrs. Song bought noodles from a shop; if not, she made them from scratch. Using the limited range of ingredients from the public distribution system, she could make *twigmim*, battered fried vegetables that were light and crisp. For her husband's birthday, she turned rice into a sweet glutinous cake called *deok*. She knew how to make her own corn liquor. Her daughters boasted that her kimchi was the best in the neighborhood.

Her family urged her to make her first stab at business in the kitchen and that the best product would be tofu, a good source of protein in difficult times. Tofu is widely used in Korean cooking, in soups or stews, fried crispy or fermented. Mrs. Song would use it in place of fish, sautéing it with oil and red pepper. In order to raise the

money to buy soybeans, the family started selling their possessions. The first to go was their prized television—the Japanese model they'd gotten thanks to Chang-bo's father's intelligence service during the Korean War.

Making tofu is relatively easy, if labor-intensive. Soybeans are ground, then boiled, and a coagulating agent is added. Then, like cheese, it is squeezed through a cloth. Afterward, you are left with a watery milk and the husks of the soybeans. Mrs. Song thought it might be a good idea to complement her tofu business by raising pigs, which she could feed with the residue from the tofu. Behind their apartment building was a row of sheds used for storage. Mrs. Song bought a litter of piglets at the market and installed them in one of the sheds, securing the door with a big padlock.

For a few months, the business plan was a success. Mrs. Song converted her tiny kitchen into a tofu factory, boiling big vats of soybeans on the *ondol* stove in the apartment. Chang-bo tasted her recipes and approved. The piglets grew fatter on the bean husks and soy milk and whatever grass Mrs. Song could clip for them each morning, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to get wood and coal to fuel the stove. The electricity was working only a few hours a week, and even then its use was restricted to a single 60-watt lightbulb, a television, or a radio.

Without fuel to cook the soybeans, Mrs. Song couldn't make tofu. Without the tofu, she had nothing to feed the hungry pigs. It took hours for her to pick enough grass to satisfy them.

"Listen, we might as well eat the grass ourselves," she told Chang-bo, mostly in jest. Then she thought about it a bit and added, "If it doesn't poison the pigs, it won't poison us."

So they began their grim new regimen, quite a fall from grace for a couple who had fancied themselves gourmets. Mrs. Song would hike north and west from the city center to where the landscape hadn't yet been paved, carrying a kitchen knife and a basket to collect edible weeds and grass. If you got out to the mountains, you could maybe find dandelion or other weeds so tasty that people ate them even in good times. Occasionally, Mrs. Song would find rotten cabbage leaves that had been discarded by a farmer. She would take

the day's pickings home and mix it with whatever food she had enough money to buy. Usually, it was ground cornmeal—the cheap kind made from the husks and cobs. If she couldn't afford that, she would buy a still cheaper powder made out of the ground inner bark of the pine, sometimes extended with a little sawdust.

No talent in the kitchen could disguise the god-awful taste. She had to pound away and chop endlessly to get the grasses and the banks into a soft-enough pulp to be digestible. They didn't have enough substance to be molded into a recognizable shape like a noodle or cake that might fool a person into thinking he was eating real food. All she could make was a porridge that was flavorless and textureless. The only seasoning she had was salt. A little garlic or red pepper might have disguised the terrible taste of the food, but they were too expensive. Oils were unavailable at any price and their complete absence made cooking difficult. Once while visiting her sister's sister-in-law for lunch, Mrs. Song was served a porridge made out of bean and corn stalks. Hungry as she was, she couldn't swallow it. The stalks were bitter and dry, and stuck in her throat like the twigs of a bird's nest. She gagged, turned beet red, and spat it out. She was mortified.

In the year after Kim Il-sung's death the only animal product she consumed was frog. Her brothers had caught some in the countryside. Mrs. Song's sister-in-law stir-fried the frogs in soy sauce, chopped them into small pieces, and served them over noodles. Mrs. Song pronounced it delicious. Frog wasn't typically part of Korean cuisine; Mrs. Song had never tried it before. Unfortunately, it would be her last opportunity. North Korea's frog population would soon be wiped out by overhunting.

By the middle of 1995, Mrs. Song and her husband had sold most of their valuable possessions for food. After the television went the used Japanese bicycle that was their main means of transportation, and then the sewing machine with which Mrs. Song had made their clothes. Chang-bo's watch was gone, as was an Oriental painting given to them as a wedding present. They sold most of their clothes and then the wooden wardrobe in which they stored them. The two-room apartment that had always seemed too small to contain

the family and its clutter was now empty, the walls entirely bare except for the portraits of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. The only thing left to sell was the apartment itself.

This was an odd concept. In North Korea, you don't own your own home; you are merely awarded the right to live there. But an illegal real estate market had cropped up as people quietly swapped homes, paying off bureaucrats to look the other way. Mrs. Song was introduced to a woman whose husband was one of a number of North Korean workers who had been sent to work in the lumberyards in Russia and who therefore had some disposable income to spend on a better apartment.

Mrs. Song's apartment was in an excellent location in the heart of the city, which was ever more important now that the trolleys weren't working. Mrs. Song and Chang-bo had lived there for twenty years and had many friends—it was indeed a tribute to Mrs. Song's good nature that she had run the *imniban* for so many years without making enemies. She and Chang-bo agreed they didn't need so much space anymore. It was just the two of them and Chang-bo's mother. The girls were all married. Their son had moved in with his girlfriend, the older woman of whom Mrs. Song disapproved. It was a disgrace, she thought, but at least it was one less mouth to feed.

The apartment fetched 10,000 won—the equivalent of about \$3,000. They moved to a single room. Mrs. Song decided she would use the money for another business venture: trading rice.

Rice is the staple of the Korean diet—in fact, the same word, *bap*, means rice or a meal. After 1995, Chongjin residents could get rice only if they had cash to buy it on the black market. North Hamgyong province was too cold and mountainous for rice paddies. With the exception of a small marshy inlet near Naman, all the rice consumed in the city had to be transported in by train or truck, which jacked up the price since the road and rail lines were in such bad shape. Mrs. Song figured she could buy rice down the coast where it was cheaper, and carry it up by train. Trading rice—or any staple grain, for that matter—was highly illegal (sales of vegetables and meat were more tolerable to the government), but since everybody was doing it, Mrs. Song decided it would be okay to join in. She'd

make a small profit and keep some rice for herself and Chang-bo. Her mouth watered at the thought. They hadn't had a proper bowl of rice since 1994. Corn was half the price.

Mrs. Song set out with 10,000 won stashed in her underwear, layers of winter clothing disguising the bulges. She took the train to South Pyongan province and bought 200 kilos of rice. On the morning of November 25, 1995, she was on her way home, less than a day's journey away, with the sacks of rice stuffed under her seat. Chang-bo's connections as a journalist had allowed her to get a choice sleeping berth in the third car of the train—the first two being for Workers' Party officials and military officers. It was at times like these that she appreciated the privileges of her rank. The train was long, and each time it rounded a curve, the back cars would come into view just long enough for her to see that the people without connections were all standing. They were packed in so tightly that they appeared to be one dark mass of humanity. Still more people clung to the roof. She had just climbed down from her berth at about 8:30 A.M. and was chatting with the other passengers in her sleeper—a soldier, a young woman, and a grandmother—about the poor condition of the tracks. The train had stopped and started throughout the night and was lurching so violently that they couldn't eat their breakfast. Their words came out in short bursts of staccato, each new jolt punctuating the conversation, until there was one bounce that lifted Mrs. Song right out of her seat and dumped her rudely on what seemed to be the floor. She was lying on her side, her left cheek pressed against something cold that turned out to be the metal frame of the window. The carriage was on its side.

She heard screams from behind. The train was a cage of twisted metal. The crowded back carriages had been almost entirely destroyed and most passengers killed. The elite front cars somehow were spared. The final death toll from the accident, which took place near Simpo, 150 miles down the coast from Chongjin, was rumored to be about 700, although like most North Korean disasters, it was not reported.

Mrs. Song emerged from the wreckage with a gash in her cheek, the skin ripped off her leg, and a sprained back. The contents of

the sleeper had fallen on top of her, but the fact that it was a closed compartment probably saved her life. She returned to Chongjin four days after the accident. She had always thought of herself as a lucky person—for being born under the loving care of Kim Il-sung, for her wonderful family—and now felt especially so, for having survived the train wreck. She was so clenched in pain that she had to be carried off the train upon her return to Chongjin, but when she glimpsed her husband and even her son, with whom she hadn't spoken for months, on the platform, she again counted her blessings. No matter that a lot of her rice had been lost.

Mrs. Song's injuries proved more debilitating than she had thought. Once the euphoria wore off, she realized that she was badly hurt. She saw a doctor who gave her painkillers and warned her not to get out of bed for three months. She ignored the advice. Somebody needed to gather food for the family.

IN A FAMINE, people don't necessarily starve to death. Often some other ailment gets them first. Chronic malnutrition impairs the body's ability to battle infection and the hungry become increasingly susceptible to tuberculosis and typhoid. The starved body is too weak to metabolize antibiotics, even if they are available, and normally curable illnesses suddenly become fatal. Wild fluctuations of body chemistry can trigger strokes and heart attacks. People die from eating substitute foods that their bodies can't digest. Starvation can be a sneaky killer that disguises itself under bland statistics of increased child mortality or decreased life expectancy. It leaves behind only circumstantial evidence of "excess mortality"—statistics that show higher than normal deaths during a certain period.

The killer has a natural progression. It goes first for the most vulnerable—children under five. They come down with a cold and it turns into pneumonia; diarrhea turns into dysentery. Before the parents even think about getting help, the child is dead. Next the killer turns to the aged, starting with those over seventy, then working its way down the decades to people in their sixties and fifties. These people might have died anyway, but so soon? Then starvation makes its way through people in the prime of their lives. Men, because

they have less body fat, usually perish before women. The strong and athletic are especially vulnerable because their metabolisms burn more calories.

Yet another, gratuitous cruelty: the killer targets the most innocent, the people who would never steal food, lie, cheat, break the law, or betray a friend. It was a phenomenon that the Italian writer Primo Levi identified after emerging from Auschwitz, when he wrote that he and his fellow survivors never wanted to see one another again after the war because they had all done something of which they were ashamed.

As Mrs. Song would observe a decade later, when she thought back on all the people she knew who died during those years in Chongjin, it was the "simple and kindhearted people who did what they were told—they were the first to die."

In her own family, Mrs. Song's mother-in-law was the first to go. Chang-bo's mother had come to live with them shortly after their marriage in keeping with a tradition that confers on the oldest son responsibility for his parents. It is of course the daughter-in-law who carries the burden, so the relationship between a Korean wife and her mother-in-law is often fraught with resentment. Mrs. Song's mother-in-law had been a merciless critic in the early years of the marriage, especially after the birth of the three girls. She mellowed only a little after her grandson was born, but Mrs. Song took her filial duties seriously and worked hard to please.

Spring is always the leanest season in Korea because the autumn harvest is running out and the fields are being tilled for the next crop. This year, it was especially hard for Mrs. Song, who was recuperating from her train accident six months earlier. Her mother-in-law was seventy-three years old, a very ripe old age given North Korean life expectancy, and it would have been easy enough to dismiss her death as "her time to go," but Mrs. Song had no doubt that the tough old lady would have lived many more years if fed properly. Unable to work or hike into the mountains, she threw whatever weeds and grass she could find near her home into the soup. Her mother-in-law turned into a brittle sack of bones, with the telltale signs of pellagra around her eyes. In May 1996, she took ill with violent stomach cramps and dysentery. She was dead in a few days.

Mrs. Song had failed in the worst possible way a Korean woman could fail her family. Her despair at the death of her mother-in-law was heightened by the propaganda campaign that autumn that urged all citizens to work harder through the hard times. Posters showed a man with a bullhorn exhorting people to "charge forward into the new century in the spirit of victory in the Arduous March," followed by a helmeted soldier, a miner with a pickax, an intellectual wearing eyeglasses and carrying a blueprint, a farmer with a kerchief, and a general carrying a red flag. Even Kim Jong-il was reported by the official news service to be eating simple meals made of potatoes.

Now that it was just the two of them, Mrs. Song and Chang-bo decided to move again, to an even smaller place. This one was little more than a shack, its floor bare concrete and its walls crumbling plaster so fragile that Mrs. Song couldn't even hang the obligatory father-and-son portraits. She wrapped them carefully and left them in a corner. They had few possessions left. She had sold all of Chang-bo's books, except for the works by Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, which one was not permitted to sell. She had sold her beloved kimchi urns. All they needed now were two pairs of chopsticks, two spoons, a few bowls and pans.

Chang-bo had quit the provincial radio station and took a new job with a broadcasting operation run by the railroad. The railroad had no money to pay him—just a promise that he would have a higher priority for the next distribution of food. But the food never arrived. After a few months, Mrs. Song and her husband had run through all the money they'd made selling the last apartment. Their oldest daughter, Oak-hee, would occasionally sneak a sack of corn from her own home, but she had to be careful not to be caught by her ill-tempered husband, who would beat her for "stealing food." His family had money, but didn't care to share with the in-laws.

Mrs. Song still couldn't hike into the mountains, so she got up ever earlier, at 6:00 A.M., then 5:00, in the hope of getting the overnight growth of sprouted weeds, which might be more tender and easier to digest. She would cook her weeds and bark until they were soft, adding salt to make a porridge and then mixing in a few spoons of cornmeal.

Mrs. Song didn't feel hungry so much as depleted. After she finished eating, the spoon would drop from her hand with a clang into the metal dish. She would collapse into a heap on the floor without bothering to change clothes, falling into a deep sleep until somehow her instinct for survival told her that, although it was still dark, she had to resume the search for food. She had lost her will to do anything else. She stopped combing the curly hair of which she used to be so proud; she didn't bother washing her clothes. Her weight dropped so much she couldn't get the single pair of trousers she owned to stay up over her hips. She had the sensation that she was already dead, floating above the empty receptacle of what once had been her body.

It was Chang-bo, though, whose health suffered the most. He had been an uncommonly large North Korean, weighing nearly 200 pounds in his prime. He was so heavy that his doctor some years back advised him to take up smoking as a way to lose weight. Now the pronuberant belly of which he had been so proud—fat being something of a status symbol in North Korea—had turned into a hollow pouch. His skin became flaky, as though he was suffering from a bad case of eczema. His jowls sagged and his speech slurred. Mrs. Song took him to a doctor at the Railroad Management Bureau Hospital who diagnosed a mild stroke. After that episode, Chang-bo found it difficult to work. He couldn't focus. He complained of blurry eyesight. He couldn't lift the fountain pen he used for writing.

Chang-bo took to his bed, or rather to the quilts on the floor that was all they had left. His legs swelled up like balloons with what Mrs. Song had come to recognize as edema—fluid retention brought on by starvation. He talked incessantly about food. He spoke of the tofu soups his mother made him as a child and an unusually delicious meal of steamed crab with ginger that Mrs. Song had cooked for him when they were newlyweds. He had an uncanny ability to remember details of dishes she had cooked decades earlier. He was sweetly sentimental, even romantic, when he spoke about their meals together. He would take her hand in his own, his eyes wet and cloudy with the mist of his memories.

"Come, darling. Let's go to a good restaurant and order a nice bottle of rice wine," he told his wife one morning when they were

stirring on the blankets. They hadn't eaten in three days. Mrs. Song looked at her husband with alarm, worried that he was hallucinating.

She ran out the door to the market, moving fast and forgetting all about the pain in her back. She was determined to steal, beg—whatever it took—to get some food for her husband. She spotted her older sister selling noodles. Her sister wasn't faring well—her skin was flaked just like Chang-bo's from malnutrition—so Mrs. Song had resisted asking her for help, but now she was desperate, and of course, her sister couldn't refuse.

"I'll pay you back," Mrs. Song promised as she ran back home, the adrenaline pumping her legs.

Chang-bo was curled up on his side under the blanket. Mrs. Song called his name. When he didn't respond, she went to turn him over—it wasn't difficult now that he had lost so much weight, but his legs and arms were stiff and got in the way.

Mrs. Song pounded and pounded on his chest, screaming for help even as she knew it was too late.

AFTER CHANG-BO'S DEATH, their son, Nam-oak, came to live with Mrs. Song. They had been estranged ever since he'd taken up with his older girlfriend. In truth, Mrs. Song's relationship with her only son had been uneasy since he was a teenager. It was not that he was outwardly rebellious, it was that she had a hard time breaking through his silence. Now, in the face of so much tragedy, the fact that he was living out of wedlock with an older woman seemed trivial. And the truth of the matter was that they needed each other. Mrs. Song was alone. Nam-oak's girlfriend's family was even worse off than his own and they had nothing at all to eat in the house.

Nam-oak had spent his entire youth training to be a boxer, but conditions were so bad at the athletic school that he came home one winter with his ear damaged from frostbite. He returned to Chongjin and got a job at the railroad station through family connections that dated to the Korean War, when Mrs. Song's father had been killed in the U.S. bombing. Just as they did with his father, the Railroad Management Bureau couldn't pay Nam-oak a salary, but there

was the expectation that he would get priority for food when the distribution system resumed.

Mrs. Song's son was a strong, fit young man, the spitting image of his father but more athletic, more muscular, and at five foot nine, taller. He needed a lot of fuel to survive. When at first his body fat disappeared, he looked as lean and taut as a marathon runner, but eventually the muscle, too, was consumed, turning him into a cadaver. In the cold winter of 1997-98 when the temperatures dropped below freezing, he caught a bad cold that turned into pneumonia. Even with his weight loss, Nam-oak was too heavy for Mrs. Song to carry to the hospital—there were no ambulances working by now—so she went herself and explained his condition. A doctor wrote her a prescription for penicillin, but when she got to the market she found it cost 50 won—the same price as a kilo of corn.

She chose the corn.

Nam-oak died in March 1998, alone in the shack. Mrs. Song was at the market again scrounging for food. He was buried on a hill above town, next to his father's grave, close enough that it was visible from her home. The Railroad Management Bureau was able to provide a coffin, as it had for Chang-bo.

BY 1998, AN ESTIMATED 600,000 to 2 million North Koreans had died as a result of the famine, as much as 10 percent of the population. In Chongjin, where food supplies were cut off earlier than the rest of North Korea, the toll might have been as high as 20 percent. Exact figures would be nearly impossible to tally since North Korean hospitals could not report starvation as a cause of death.

Between 1996 and 2005, North Korea would receive \$2.4 billion worth of food aid, much of it from the United States. But as much as the North Korean regime was willing to accept foreign food, it rejected the foreigners who came along with it. Aid agencies trying to help were initially restricted to Pyongyang and other carefully groomed locations. When they were allowed out of their offices and hotels, shabbily dressed people were ordered off the streets; during visits to schools and orphanages, only the best-dressed and best-fed could be seen. The government was asking for more aid and at the

same time concealing those most in need. Aid agency staff living in Pyongyang weren't even permitted to study the Korean language.

In 1997 a few aid officials were allowed entry to Chongjin, with even greater restrictions than in Pyongyang. An aid worker for the French agency Action Contre la Faim (Action Against Hunger) wrote in a journal that she was not allowed to leave the Chonmason Hotel, located near the Chongjin port, on the grounds that she might be hit by a car. The agency pulled out soon afterward, reporting that it could not verify that aid was getting to the intended recipients. Doctors Without Borders also withdrew from the country. While big ships laden with donated grains from the U.N. World Food Programme started docking at Chongjin's port in 1998, the relief was off-loaded into trucks by the military and driven away. Some food reached orphanages and kindergartens, but much of it ended up in military stockpiles or sold on the black market. It took nearly a decade working inside North Korea before the U.N. agency was able to set up a satisfactory monitoring system. By the end of 1998, the worst of the famine was over, not necessarily because anything had improved but, as Mrs. Song later surmised, because there were fewer mouths to feed.

"Everybody who was going to die was already dead."

CHAPTER 10

MOTHERS OF INVENTION



A makeshift restaurant in Chongjin.

MRS. SONG DID NOT ATTEND HER SON'S FUNERAL. GRIEF, hunger, and the accumulated stress of the past few years had taken hold of her mind and body. She couldn't bring herself to return to the shack where her son had died. "I left him to die alone, I left him," she moaned repeatedly. She refused to eat. She wandered the streets until she collapsed.

Her daughters went out to look for her and found her lying in the weeds near their house, delirious with hunger and hypothermia. It was late March, but the temperatures at night were low enough to kill a seriously malnourished person. The daughters were shocked at their mother's appearance. Mrs. Song had been vain about her thick, curly hair; now it was matted and filthy. Her clothes were