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FROM THE MAGAZINE MARCH 2015

Understanding Kim Jong Un, The World's Most Enigmatic and Unpredictable Dictator

Kim Jong Un, the third family member to rule North Korea, with military personnel during a tactical-rocket firing drill, 2014.
From Xinhua/Polaris.

Everyone knows that North Korea's leader is a bloodthirsty madman and buffoon—or is he really? Mark Bowden digs into the hard facts for an unusual portrait.

BY MARK BOWDEN

Does anyone make an easier target than Kim Jong Un? He's Fatboy Kim the Third, the North Korean tyrant with a Fred Flintstone haircut—the grinning, chain-smoking owner of his own small nuclear arsenal, brutal warden to about 120,000 political prisoners, and effectively one of the last pure hereditary absolute monarchs on the planet. He is the Marshal of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Great Successor, and the Sun of the 21st Century. At age 32 the Supreme Leader owns the longest list of excessive honorifics anywhere, every one of them unearned. He is the youngest head of state in the world and probably the most spoiled. On the great grade-school playground of foreign affairs, he might as well be wearing across his broad bottom a big KICK ME sign. Kim is so easy to kick that the United Nations, which famously agrees on nothing, voted overwhelmingly in November to recommend that he and the rest of North Korea's leadership be hauled before the International Criminal Court,

in The Hague, and tried for crimes against humanity. He has been in power for a little more than three years.

In the world press, Kim is a bloodthirsty madman and buffoon. He is said to be a drunk, to have become so obese gorging on Swiss cheese that he can no longer see his genitals, and to have resorted to bizarre remedies for impotence, such as a distillation from snake venom. He is said to have had his uncle, Jang Song Thaek, and the entire Jang family mowed down by heavy machine guns (or possibly exterminated with mortar rounds, rocket-propelled grenades, or flamethrowers), or to have had them fed live to ravenous dogs. He is reported to have a yen for bondage porn and to have ordered all young men in his country to adopt his peculiar hairstyle. It is said that he has had former girlfriends executed.

All of the above is untrue—or, perhaps safer to say, unfounded. The Jang-fed-to-dogs story was actually invented by a Chinese satirical newspaper, as a joke, before it began racing around the world as a viral version of truth. (And to be sure, he did send Uncle Jang to his death.) It says something about Kim that people will believe almost anything, the more outrageous the better. In light of this, is it worth considering that the conventional take on Kim Jong Un does not come close to providing an accurate picture?

What if, despite the well-documented horrors of the Stalinist regime he inherited in 2011, while still in his 20s, Kim has ambitions at home that one might be tempted to describe—within carefully defined limits—as well intentioned? What if, against terrific odds, he hopes to improve the lives of his subjects and alter North Korea's relationship with the rest of the world?

There is no shortage of evidence to the contrary—evidence, namely, that Kim is little more than a bad, and erratic, approximation of his canny father. Kim has continued his father's military-first policies: the same saber rattling and shrill denunciations come screaming out of Pyongyang, the same emphasis on building nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, the same unabashed political oppression. For years, North Korea has engaged in what experts in Washington have called "a provocation cycle"—ramping up provocative behavior, such as launching missiles or conducting nuclear tests, followed by charm offensives and offers to begin a

dialogue. Under Kim Jong Un, the provocation cycle continues to spin dangerously. When Sony Pictures suffered a damaging and embarrassing breach of its internal computer network weeks before the scheduled December release of the comedy *The Interview,* little prompting was needed before fingers started pointing at Pyongyang. In the movie, Seth Rogen and James Franco play Americans who land an interview with Kim and then are enlisted by the C.I.A. to try to assassinate him. Earlier, in June, North Korea had promised to unleash a "merciless countermeasure" should the film be shown.

Whatever his true character, Kim faces a problem peculiar to dictators. His power in North Korea is so great that not only does no one dare criticize him, no one dares advise him. If you are too closely associated with the king, your head might someday share the same chopping block. Safer to adopt a "Yes, Marshal" approach. That way, if the king stumbles, you are simply among the countless legion who were obliged to obey his orders. One way to read the confusing signals from Pyongyang in recent years is that they show Kim, isolated and inexperienced, clumsily pulling at the levers of state.

Kim is, in fact, playing a deadly game, says Andrei Lankov, a Russian expert on Korea who attended Kim Il Sung University, in Pyongyang, in 1984 and 1985, and now teaches at Kookmin University, in Seoul. "He has had a spoiled, privileged childhood, not that different than the children of some Western billionaires, for whom the worst thing that can happen is that you will be arrested while driving under the influence. For Kim, the worst that can actually happen is to be tortured to death by a lynch mob. Easily. But he doesn't understand. His parents understood it. They knew it was a deadly game. I'm not sure whether Kim fully understands it."

RUNNING WITH THE BULLS

We're not even sure how old he is. Kim was born on January 8 in 1982, 1983, or 1984. To tidy up their historical narrative, Pyongyang's propagandists have placed his birthday in 1982. The original Kim, the current leader's grandfather and national founder, Kim Il Sung, for whom universal reverence is mandatory, was born in 1912. As the story goes, in 1942 his son and heir, Kim Jong Il, came along; for this second Kim, a slightly lesser wattage of reverence is mandatory. In truth, Kim II was born in 1941, but in North Korea myth trumps fact

to an even greater extent than elsewhere, and numeric symmetry hints at destiny, like a divine wink. That is why 1982 was seen to be an auspicious year for the birth of Kim III. For reasons of their own, South Korean intelligence agencies, which have a long history of being wrong about their northern cousins, have placed his birthday in the Orwellian year 1984. Kim himself, who occasionally shows magisterial disdain for the slavish adulation of his underlings, has said that he was born in 1983—this according to the American statesman, rebounder, and cross-dresser Dennis Rodman, who had been drinking heavily when he met Kim, in 2014 (and who shortly afterward went into rehab). Whichever date is correct, the Sun of the 21st Century has walked among us for three decades.

What do we know for sure about those years? About enough to fill one long paragraph. We know that Kim is the third and youngest son of his father, and the second-born son of Kim Il's second mistress, Ko Young Hee. In the last half of the 1990s, he was sent to two different schools in Switzerland, where his

mother was secretly being treated for breast cancer, ultimately to no avail. The first of these was the International School of Berne, in Gümligen, and the second was the Liebefeld Steinhölzli school, near Bern. At the latter, he was introduced to his teenage classmates as "Un Pak," the son of a North Korean diplomat. His classmates remember him on his first day of upper school, a skinny boy dressed in jeans, Nike trainers, and a Chicago Bulls sweatshirt. He understandably struggled in classes taught in German and English. He was undistinguished academically, and apparently unbothered by it. He is remembered as having been fond of video games, soccer, skiing, basketball (in which he was able to hold his own on the court), and those Bulls, who were in the process of winning the last three of their six N.B.A. championships behind Michael Jordan, one of Kim's heroes. In 2000, he returned to Pyongyang, where he attended the military academy that bears his grandfather's name. At some point, around 2009, Kim II decided that Kim Jong Un's older brothers were unsuited for leadership, and he selected the youngest son as his heir. At about this time, Kim III began putting on weight—literally and figuratively. Some believe that in order to more closely resemble his revered grandfather, whom he resembles anyway, he was "encouraged," or ordered, to do so. He assumed power when Kim II died, in December 2011, and at around the same time he was wed, in an arranged marriage, to Ri Sol Ju, a former cheerleader and singer about five years his junior. He is said to be genuinely in love with his wife. The Kims have a daughter, whose birth is believed to have been induced so that she would be born in 2012 rather than 2013. Mrs. Kim is often seen with her husband in public, a clear departure from his father's practice. Kim II's women were usually kept offstage. (A notorious womanizer, he was known to be officially married once and kept at least four known mistresses.) Kim stands five feet nine inches, taller than most North Koreans, and his bulk is now estimated to be upwards of 210 pounds. He already shows signs of the heart problems that killed his father, and also possibly of diabetes, and seems to regard modern notions of healthy living as Western nonsense. He openly chain-smokes North Korean cigarettes (unlike his father, who smoked Marlboros), drinks a lot of beer and hard liquor, and evidently approaches mealtimes with gusto. There is no picture of him jogging.

HIS MAJESTY THE CHILD

Nothing better defines Kim than how little we actually know about him. When asked, even the most respected outside experts on North Korea in the United States and in South Korea—not to mention inside the White House—invariably provide details that turn out to be traceable to Dennis Rodman or to a Japanese sushi chef named Kenji Fujimoto, who was employed by the ruling family from 1988 to 2001, and who now peddles trivial details about them (such as how Kim II once sent him to Beijing to pick up some food at McDonald's).

With so little to go on, it is hard to imagine what Kim is really like. But here's one way to think about it. At age five, we are all the center of the universe. Everything—our parents, family, home, neighborhood, school, country—revolves around us. For most people, what follows is a long process of dethronement, as His Majesty the Child confronts the ever more obvious and humbling truth. Not so for Kim. His world at age 5 has turned out to be his world at age 30, or very nearly so. Everyone *does* exist to serve him. The known world really is configured with him at its center. The most senior men in his kingdom have power because he wills it, and they smile and bow and scribble notes en masse in little notepads whenever he deigns to speak. Not only is he the one and only Kim Jong Un, he's officially the only person who can carry the given name "Jong Un"; all other North Koreans with that name have had to change it. Multitudes stand and cheer at the merest glimpse of him. Men and women and children weep for joy when he smiles and waves.

"People need to understand that the system cannot help but produce a person like Kim Jong Un," says Sydney Seiler, a former member of the National Security Council and now the U.S. special envoy to the so-called Six Party Talks, which seek to restrain North Korea's nuclear ambitions. "I think the first thing that we have to remember, as with any leader in any country, is that he is going to reflect the culture and values and worldview of North Koreans themselves."

NOTHING BETTER DEFINES KIM THAN HOW

And what is that worldview? It is certainly alien to our own. Kim is part—the key part—of a system that is brutal and archaic. His role demands complete allegiance to that system, which, despite its cruelty and well-documented

LITTLE WE ACTUALLY KNOW ABOUT HIM.

failings, happens to function acceptably for a sizable portion of North Korea's population. These are people whom the widespread famine of the late 1990s barely touched. In Pyongyang, where the most educated, most able, most attractive, most *deserving* North Koreans reside, some people are actually making money these days. Brian Myers, a professor at Dongseo University, in South Korea, says that he routinely invites defectors from the North to his graduate-school classes, and that in recent years his South Korean students, expecting familiar tales of starvation and woe, have been surprised to hear from some who describe North Korea as a "cool place," one in which they wish they could have remained. "My students are always disappointed to find this out," he says.

BATTLE-HARDENED (YET PUDGY)

Kim Jong Un has led an extraordinarily sheltered life—so much so that "sheltered" doesn't do it justice. "Imprisoned" is more like it. Even in his Swiss years, his school was just a short distance from the North Korean Embassy. Outside those walls, he was always accompanied by a bodyguard. Imagine a small Asian boy attending a European school where it's unlikely that anyone speaks his language, and who is surrounded by adults who sternly eyeball anyone who gets close, and you can guess at how normal his social interactions were. Western influences came through the mediated world of pop culture—movies, television, video games, anything Disney. Kim's tastes are said to remain rooted in the mid-80s and 90s—thus his fascination with the Bulls and, reportedly, with the music of Michael Jackson and Madonna. Back in North Korea, he lived behind the walls of the ruling family's vast estates, in dwellings so opulent that they impress even visiting dignitaries from the United Arab Emirates—this according to Michael Madden, who runs the well-respected clearinghouse North Korea Leadership Watch. Kim's father once issued an edict that no one was allowed to approach any member of his family without his written permission. Playmates were imported for Kim and his siblings. That said, Kim is likely to have paid surreptitious visits to China, Japan,

and possibly locations in Europe besides Switzerland. His German and French are thought to be decent. (Rodman reported that Kim made several remarks to him in English.)

Madden said that he heard that Kim speaks some Chinese. The Kim he conjures—based on information from defectors, South Korean publications, official North Korean pronouncements, and his own sources inside the country—is something of a physical wreck. He has bad knees and bad ankles, both problems aggravated by his obesity, and is perhaps still suffering from the aftereffects of one or more rumored automobile accidents, including a particularly bad one in 2007 or 2008. Kim is not out dodging traffic in Pyongyang, but he is, or was, avid about racing expensive sports cars. He is a man who enjoys taking risks, a troubling quality in someone with nuclear weapons.

More than his reticent father, Kim seems to enjoy meet-and-greets and photo ops with regular folks. In this he appears to be more like his mother, who in old videos can be seen avidly shaking hands and smiling and chatting in public, while her royal companion, Kim II, tended to hang back and exude an aura of menace. Kim III is crazy about sports, particularly soccer, and also takes a keen interest in military studies. The military is something his father would have left to his generals, but young Kim is a student of strategy and tactics. His interest in such matters is the sort of trait that may have made him an appealing choice for the succession.

JANG'S EXECUTION SENT A MESSAGE TO THE REST OF NORTH KOREA'S LEADERSHIP.

Kim's elder half-brother, Kim Jong Nam, reportedly fell out of favor in 2001 after an ill-fated effort to enter Japan on a fake passport to visit Tokyo Disneyland. Madden says there was no problem with the visit itself or the destination. "He basically blew the cover off of the fake passports that the Kim family used when they traveled abroad," he says. His elder full brother, Kim Jong Chul, is said to have exhibited too many feminine characteristics to be considered for the leadership. Gender itself disqualified his older half-sister, Kim Sul Song, who

reportedly works for the propaganda department, and a younger sister, Kim Yo Jong, who was recently appointed to a high position in the regime.

The unveiling of Kim Jong Un began as far back as 2008, when party cadres throughout the country began praising him as "the young four-star general," according to Myers, who has made North Korean propaganda a primary academic interest. Myers wrote a book called *The Cleanest Race,* debunking the conventional notion that the country's guiding philosophy was Communism, and tracing the origins of its ruling mythology to a long-standing belief in Korean racial superiority. The Kim family story has been liberally retouched and grafted onto the old legends of Korea's founding. Kim Il Sung, born into a line of Protestant ministers, is said instead to be descended from the nation's mythical founder, Tangun. His son, Kim II, is generally believed to have been born in Russia, where his parents had gone to flee the Japanese occupation, but in the official story he was secretly born on Mount Paektu, a volcano on the border with China and the place where Tangun's father descended from heaven 5,000 years ago. For Kim III, the mythic backgrounds of his father and grandfather are hard acts to follow, but Pyongyang's propagandists have put their shoulders to the task. The younger Kim is said to have absorbed the mysteries of modern Western technology by studying abroad and to have demonstrated a genius for combat and military maneuver, commanding a "shock brigade" in the harsh mountains of the far northeast. Battle-hardened, albeit still soft around the edges, Kim began to make appearances as a minor but intriguing character in the standard-issue novels and poems praising his father. Young Kim was portrayed as a precocious military genius who piloted helicopters, drove tanks, and manned the most sophisticated weapons systems.

At his official coming-out, in 2010, Kim III was presented as a four-star general and vice-chairman of the nation's Central Military Commission, a relatively modest post. "The domestic public probably knew how to interpret" the announcement, wrote Myers in a recent study of Kim's rise: "That he was demonstrating his humility by going through a kind of on-the-job training of which, being brilliant, he had no need." He began to be seen at his father's side in the state-controlled media. By late 2011, just months before his father's death, Kim

was appearing on TV news “not as just another member of his father’s entourage,” Myers wrote, “but as an object of affection and respect in his own right.”

LIKE GRANDFATHER, LIKE GRANDSON

Adescriptor often applied to North Korea is “Stalinist,” and with its old-style Communist imagery and propaganda, not to mention its political purges and frightening gulags, the state has much in common with Stalin’s Soviet Union. But North Korea has never known anything other than absolute rule. Before Korea’s annexation by Japan, in 1910, Koreans were living under a monarchy. After that came rule by imperial Japan: Koreans bowed to the emperor. When the Soviet Union liberated North Korea, in 1945, Kim Il Sung stepped into the monarch’s role. The vague nationalist ideology the regime calls “Juche” is nothing more than an effort to rationalize in pseudo-Marxist terms what Brian Myers calls “radical ethno-nationalism.” The myth of the Kims and of Korean racial superiority is not some strange invention being forced down the people’s throats. It is who they are.

If semi-divine status is carried in a bloodline, then physical similarity counts for a great deal. Many believe that a big factor—perhaps the biggest—in Kim’s ascendancy may well have been how much he looks like his grandfather. In 2010, when pictures of Kim III were first made public, everyone on the Korean peninsula was struck by the resemblance. “He had the face of Kim Il Sung when he was young,” says Cheong Seong-chang, of the Sejong Institute, a think tank near Seoul with links to South Korean intelligence. “Naming him as the heir captured the nostalgia of the North Korean people.”

That nostalgia is deeply rooted. It is worth remembering that it was only after Kim’s death, in 1994, and the elevation of Kim II that years of inept centralized planning caught up with North Korea. The state was managed into catastrophic ruin. Industry collapsed. More than half a million starved. People boiled grass and stripped the bark off trees in a desperate search for sustenance. Many Koreans saw a direct connection between the first Kim’s death and the continuing disaster that followed—presided over by his son. Since anger against the Supreme Leader cannot be expressed directly, it is registered in mounting reverence for the good old days, and the good old ruler.

Cheong believes that Kim Jong Un's resemblance to his grandfather is at least partly deliberate. There is a popular belief in Korea, *gyeok se yu jeon,* which holds that inherited traits skip a generation: A boy tends to be more like his father's father than like his own father. This predisposed North Koreans to see the designated heir as a reincarnation of the beloved founder. And where nature falls short, artifice sometimes steps in. Whether or not he was ordered to bulk up, there's no doubt that Kim's expansion has given him the patriarch's rotundity. It seems more likely that Kim simply looks like his grandfather, but there is little doubt that Kim works at cementing the visual connection. You see it in his odd haircut, his clothing, and the way he walks and moves like a much older man in public appearances. In publicity stills, he adopts the stances, gestures, and facial expressions of his grandfather—or, rather, of the painted images of Kim Il Sung in generations of party propaganda.

What's Kim III really like? Former New Mexico governor Bill Richardson has served as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and has negotiated with North Korean leaders in Pyongyang during visits there on several occasions. He has retained high-level contacts in North Korea and remains deeply interested in the country. "So let me first give you what others in North Korea have told me about him," Richardson said in a phone interview. He was kind enough to jot down some of his impressions before we spoke.

Number one: He frequently jokes with other officials about not knowing anything, that he is new, and young, and he has no experience. He actually thinks that is funny. So that is one. Number two: he seems to be insecure. However, he hears no one, and he does not like to be briefed about issues. That does not mean he is not street smart or that he is not skillful. Surmising the way he has replaced the people, especially in the military, that he felt were not his people, he has actually done that quite effectively. And brought his own people in or people that he thinks are more loyal to him. But it strikes me that he feels, by his actions, by his bluster, and by his missile launchings, that he is trying to consolidate his power.

THE FIRST RULE: CLAP

Jean H. Lee, a Korean-American who established the Associated Press bureau in Pyongyang in 2012, has spent a lot

more time in North Korea than most Western journalists. The only outside reporters allowed to actually live in Pyongyang are Russian and Chinese. After setting up the bureau, Lee began to "visit" the capital for three-to-five-week stints. She would fly out for a week back in the States or in Seoul, escaping the strain of constant surveillance, and then return to North Korea for another stay. Unlike most Western reporters, who see the country only on tightly orchestrated media junkets, Lee has had a chance to see North Koreans in their daily lives, offstage—"those in-between moments," she says. What she observed was not the slavish devotion required in public, but something close. She saw a very proud people determined to put their best foot forward for foreigners—a sturdy, complex, hardworking population, largely ignorant of the world outside and resigned to the difficulties on the inside. Humor ran deep. Many North Koreans employed wisecracks and facial expressions to convey their real feelings, a far richer world than the official line. But Kim was the exception. No one joked about the Supreme Leader.

"It's highly illegal to criticize or deface anything related to the leader," she says. "I'm not talking about how people feel. I'm talking about how they're required to behave. There are a lot of times when you can see those kinds of flickers in people's faces where they want you to know that they have to say certain things, but very few North Koreans would be unwise enough to say anything openly critical about the leadership."

This may be the hardest thing for us to understand about Kim Jong Un's world. In the West, kings have become more like national mascots. In North Korea, Kim effectively rules in the same way a 16th- or 17th-century European monarch did, by divine right. We have lost our feel for the Royal State. It requires public belief more than private belief. Human beings have always formed their own opinions about things, but in the Royal State, pretending in public is essential.

In 2012, Lee received a rare invitation to attend a conclave of party leaders in Pyongyang. Kim had been in power for less than a year, and after seeing many propaganda images of him exuding youth and vitality she was struck by the way he entered the hall. "He would walk like an old man, so it was really odd," she says. "It wasn't like he was walking like he had difficulty walking. It was more like he had adopted a certain gait that was kind of a self-conscious gait of authority."

She was struck by another thing at that meeting, where she was given a chance to observe the country's leadership more intimately than almost any other outsider had before. At Kim's entrance, all those present leapt to their feet and began clapping vigorously—everyone except his uncle Jang Song Thaek. Jang was initially considered by many to be the real power in North Korea when his brother-in-law, the elder Kim, died.

IN PYONGYANG, SOME PEOPLE ARE ACTUALLY MAKING MONEY THESE DAYS.

"His uncle kind of sat in his seat and didn't really get up," she says. "He was very slow to get up until the very last minute. And then, he didn't do the full clapping." This refusal to enthusiastically perform was interpreted by Lee, and by others, as a sign of Jang's special status, the assumption being that he alone among the ranks of faithful could get away with it. Jang's attitude turned out to be a fatal error. In December 2013, during a politburo meeting, Jang was dismissed from his posts and arrested. The humiliation was total: the event was broadcast on state television. Days later, the regime announced that Jang had been tried by a special tribunal and then promptly executed.

SHARECROPPERS, NOT SLAVES

Talk-show comedians and the tabloid press may delight in mocking Kim, but many of those who watch him closely are actually impressed. What are the things a dictator needs to be good at? You need to manage the system—the party structure, the military, the economy, and the security forces—in such a way that your people remain loyal. This is done by adopting policies that bring prosperity, if not to everyone, then to at least enough people; by artfully elevating those most loyal and able; and by demoting the able but disloyal. Threats to your power must be eliminated ruthlessly.

A dictator needs to know how to present himself in public, and at this, Kim III already excels. He has a deep voice and is a capable public speaker. "I have noticed in my viewing of him that he moves well as a politician," says Bill Richardson. "He is a lot better than his father. He smiles. Goes and shakes

people's hands." Daniel Pinkston, a deputy project director for the International Crisis Group, who studies North Korea closely, says, "I do not like dictatorships, but as far as being a dictator—given that system, and what type of person is needed to manage it, maintain it, and sustain it—he is a great dictator."

A great dictator must offer more than an impressive voice and posture. He must be decisive and instill fear. In his first three years, Kim has removed the two men who posed the most serious risk to his rule. The first to go was Vice Marshal Ri Yong Ho, chief of the general staff of the Korean People's Army and a member of the Presidium of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party. Ri had been close to Kim II and had direct responsibility for protecting Pyongyang and, perhaps more important, the Kim family. He had been one of the stars of his generation. In July 2012, Kim III called a rare Sunday meeting of the Workers' Party Central Committee politburo and abruptly stripped Ri of his duties. It was the first sure sign that Kim planned to run the show himself. After Kim's purging, Ri vanished. His ultimate fate is unknown, but no one is expecting him back.

The second threat was Uncle Jang, who, being a family member and a far more powerful figure than even Ri, was far more emphatically dumped. Kim made a public show this time, demonstrating a more impulsive flair in such matters than his father, who was content to shoot errant generals quietly, to imprison them, or retire them to rural estates. The fall of Jang harked back to the old Soviet show trials and the flamboyant excesses of Saddam Hussein, who liked to get up onstage with a fat cigar before his assembled leadership and personally point out those who were to be taken from the hall and shot.

What exactly was Kim up to? It was crucial to clean house in the military, replacing older leaders loyal to his father with those primarily loyal to him, many of them younger men. This not only ensured that the military's commanders were beholden to him but also infused the old Cold War-era ranks with more modern thinking and less resistance to change.

He has also initiated sweeping economic reforms. His father was leaning toward some of these in his later years, but the changes have been so aggressive that the prime mover behind

them must be Kim himself. Most are designed to build North Korea's economy on money, which seems an almost silly thing to say, since economies are by definition about money. Not in North Korea. In the nation's past, the only path to prosperity was ideological purity. If you lived in a better apartment, drove a nicer car, and were permitted to live in the relatively affluent districts of Pyongyang, it meant you had the approval of the regime. Increasingly, North Koreans can better their lot by earning more money, as is the case throughout the world. Managers of factories and shops have been given financial incentives to do better. Success means they can pay their workers and themselves more. Kim has pushed for the development of special economic zones in every province of the country, with the aim of setting up internal competition and rewards, so that the fruits of success in one area no longer must be fully returned to the state. It is part of a general effort to kick-start productivity.

In the agricultural sector, Kim has also implemented reforms that have proved surprisingly effective. "He decided to do what his father was deadly afraid of doing," says Andrei Lankov, the Russian Korea expert. "He allowed farmers to keep part of the harvest. Farmers are not working now as, essentially, slaves on a plantation. Technically, the field is still state property, but as a farming family you can register yourself as a 'production team.' And you will be working on the same field for a few years in a row. You keep 30 percent of the harvest for yourself. And this year, according to the first unconfirmed reports, it will be between 40 and 60 percent that will go to the farmers. So they are not slaves anymore, they are sharecroppers."

There was no dramatic announcement of the change in policy, and few have noticed the turnaround. Chronic malnutrition remains a problem. But in 2013, according to Lankov, for the first time in about 25 years North Korea harvested almost enough food to feed its population.

"DESPICABLE HUMAN SCUM"

With more of its people having fuller bellies and money to spend, Kim has done little to interfere with North Korea's black markets, all of them technically illegal. His father acquiesced in the existence of this underground economy when the population was starving, in the 1990s, but oscillated as the famine eased, sometimes treating illicit merchants as

criminals and sometimes tolerating them. For the most part, Kim has turned a blind eye to the black markets even in these years of relative prosperity. At this point, the markets represent a substantial part of the nation's economy, which has seen a boom in consumer goods, mostly imported from China. Visitors to Pyongyang report large numbers of cell phones in use, more cars and trucks moving on its streets, more colorful fashions worn by women. Kim's wife has become something of a style leader, appearing in public wearing high heels and sleek dresses that reflect current tastes in booming China. These are changes that just a few years ago would have been unthinkable, so it is reasonable to assume that they have not been universally welcomed among the country's elite.

In this respect, the remarkably colorful and detailed 2,700-word statement on the execution of Jang Song Thaek, calling him "despicable human scum," was revealing. It began theatrically: "Upon hearing the report on the enlarged meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, the service personnel and people throughout the country broke into angry shouts that a stern judgment of the revolution should be meted out to the anti-party, counter-revolutionary factional elements." It proceeded in the same vein, referring to Jang's "thrice-cursed acts of treachery" and calling him a "traitor to the nation for all ages" and listing his sins against the regime and mankind. Jang had been plotting to overthrow "the peerlessly great men of Mt. Paektu"—the Kims—and neglecting to play his assigned role in the national pageant by "projecting himself internally and externally as a special being." He was accused of gambling, distributing pornography to his "confidants," and otherwise leading a "dissolute, depraved life." This was a bad person.

More significantly, as noted in the politburo-meeting report, Jang was accused of obstructing "the nation's economic affairs and the improvement of the standard of people's living." This was the broader implication of Jang's fate. His execution sent a message to the rest of North Korea's leadership: internal debate over economic reform was at an end.

"The crude economic indicators that we get are of steady growth," says John Delury, a North Korea expert who teaches at Yonsei University, in Seoul. "It's anemic relative to East Asia and relative to its huge development potential. North

Korea should be in the 10-plus percent G.D.P. growth range. It's like 2—it's kind of trudging forward as opposed to getting worse and worse." Delury estimates that trade with China is up more than threefold in the past decade. On his most recent trip to Pyongyang, in 2013, he was struck by the number of people he saw with cell phones. On past visits, he could readily count the number of cars he saw. Now he no longer can.

"You can see the emergence of a public-consumer culture," he says. "You can call it a middle class, using a very loose definition of what a 'middle class' is. Probably the best is that it's a consumer class. That's clearly an important sort of constituency for Kim Jong Un. A lot of when he's appearing in public, he's doing stuff for those people. He's giving them stuff. He's feeding that."

At the same time, though, Kim has been cranking up the state's repressive machinery. Under Kim II, the long border between North Korea and China was almost open. Today it has become much more difficult to cross. In the three years since Kim took power, the number of defectors to South Korea (most of whom arrive by way of China) has nearly halved—from almost 3,000 annually to about 1,500. Those caught trying to cross illegally face imprisonment and possibly being beaten, tortured, or even killed. Kim means to do well by those who accept the regime. He has, if anything, grown harsher toward those who do not.

"The regime continues to enjoy mainstream support, which derives largely from the appeal of official myth," writes Brian Myers. Part of the national myth is that North Korea is in constant danger. The U.S., Japan, and other world powers are poised to attack. The outside world inadvertently plays into the narrative. Virtually no information comes from the North Korean state, which has created an air of mystery and menace around Kim that the world's media find irresistible. Hardly a week goes by without some speculation or invention about him, generating headlines globally. North Koreans with access to international media (and there aren't many of them) cannot fail to appreciate that their leader is widely talked about. The fact that Kim is reviled and lampooned just confirms North Korea's belief that the world is out to get it.

"BOTTOMS UP!"

The most hopeful reading of Kim's rule so far is that maybe—maybe—he is on the path to becoming a relatively benevolent dictator, at least by the grim standards of his father and grandfather. When North Korea-watchers talk about a best-case scenario, it looks like this: Kim slowly pulls the country out of its Dark Age and lives a long life, overseeing decades of moderate prosperity and perhaps cracking open the door to more domestic freedom and better relations with the West.

The problem with best-case scenarios is that reality usually intrudes. One of the most unsettling things about Kim Jong Un is his tendency to act unpredictably, even bizarrely. It may be, as Pinkston maintains, that Kim is "totally on top of it" and that "people underestimate him at their peril." But it's also true that he inhabits a kind of never-never land.

Consider the ski resort. Under his direction, the regime has constructed a first-class facility on the slopes of Masik Pass, in the southeast, billed as "the most exotic ski destination on earth." Built at enormous cost in a country where most people are concerned more about their next meal than about the depth of the powder, the Masik Pass project can only be called a hopeful gesture. The idea is to attract not only foreign tourists (which seems unlikely) but also newly prosperous North Koreans. What it most clearly reflects is Kim's wishful thinking. Skiing was reportedly one of his pastimes in Switzerland as a teenager. There is a spectacular but ultimately sad official photo taken in December 2013, showing Kim in a heavy black coat and a big black fur hat sitting on an ascending ski lift. The landscape is stunning, but Kim is all by himself on the lift. The lift behind him is empty. The Sun of the 21st Century is alone in his multi-million-dollar playground.

Some see the resort simply as a woefully bad investment, a sign of Kim's impulsiveness. "Very often he is driven by his emotions," says Lankov, who calls the resort one of his "absolutely crazy business schemes." Kim wants to be popular, Lankov explains, but he also wants success. He is said to have ordered subordinates to attract one million tourists to the resort annually. "They have no chance of getting a million people. They don't have the resources; they don't have the infrastructure; they don't have the climate."

The strangest of Kim's recent overtures was the Dennis

Rodman episode. The meeting is certainly the most significant contact any group of Americans has had with North Korea since Kim assumed power. It was conceived as a stunt by Shane Smith, the bearded, tattooed co-founder and C.E.O. of Vice Media, the highly successful and offbeat news-and-entertainment company. A few years ago, Smith proposed to his staff that they figure out a way to get back to North Korea. Various approaches were kicked around before it was decided to try to exploit Kim's fascination with Michael Jordan and the Bulls. Vice contacted Jordan's representatives, proposing to fly him to Pyongyang with their crew, and were met with a combination of disbelief and silence.

"We had thrown out the idea of Dennis Rodman as [laughter here] a gay, very crazy idea," says Jason Mojica, at the time a Vice producer and now editor in chief of Vice News. "And then someone who kind of overheard here just literally got in touch with his agent." The agent conveyed that his client was generally keen on anything to make a buck—he had recently appeared at a dental convention—and so Rodman was enlisted. They had a Chicago Bull.

"He did great," says Mojica.

With his colored hair, his piercings, and his tattoos, and with his flamboyantly ill-defined sexuality (he wore a wedding dress to promote his 1996 autobiography) and his reputation for substance abuse, Rodman might be considered a poster child for capitalist libertine decadence. A less likely ambassador to North Korea cannot be imagined. But his name opened doors magically. Vice proposed that Rodman lead a basketball camp for kids, if possible with the help of other pro basketball players. These turned out to be three of the Harlem Globetrotters, adding to the surreal character of the event. The highlight of the visit would be an exhibition basketball game between two mixed teams made up of the Americans and the North Koreans. "We kind of expected that it would be held in some run-down gymnasium with like 80 to 100 little kids, and that the game would just be this little thing that we really did just for the cameras," says Mojica. As part of their overture, the group from Vice did mention that they would love to meet with Kim Jong Un: "Waves, hello, maybe we can shake his hand before he disappears. But we never expected it to actually happen."

Certainly not the way it did. The proposal was accepted, and Rodman flew to Pyongyang in February 2013 with the Globetrotters and the Vice crew. Along for the ride (and for his language skills) was Mark Barthelemy, an old friend of Mojica's—they both attended college in Chicago in the 1990s and played in bands. Barthelemy developed a lifelong interest in Korea—he calls it an "obsession"—learning the language and living in Seoul for six years, working mostly as a stock-market analyst. Mojica wanted someone along whom he trusted and who understood the language.

The visiting Americans were given the full Potemkin—touring a new shopping mall, a fitness center, a dolphin show, the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun. The group was shocked when, on the day of the exhibition game, instead of being led into a run-down gymnasium, they were escorted into an arena more like Madison Square Garden, packed to the rafters with North Koreans.

"We were quickly setting up, and all of a sudden that roar happened, and that was our first indication that Kim Jong Un was there," says Mojica. "And it was incredibly shocking—I could not believe it."

The moment was captured in the episode Vice filmed of the trip for HBO. The crowd of uniformly dressed spectators rises as one and begins thunderous cheering and clapping. Then the camera turns to view Mr. and Mrs. Kim.

"I was just walking around the sideline of the court shooting pictures and then suddenly I see people just stand up and start screaming," Barthelemy recalls. "He walked in and sat down, and then Rodman went over to sit next to him, and the atmosphere in the place was electric for a moment and then just very aware … You could feel everyone watching." As translators hovered, Rodman sat and chatted with the Supreme Leader during the event.

After the game, the Americans were invited to a reception. There was an open bar, at which Mojica ordered a scotch. "There is kind of a receiving line, kind of like a wedding reception," Mojica recalls. "So then I turned and immediately the very first person in the line is Kim Jong Un. Like right to my right, and I am like, *Oh shit!* So I put this glass of scotch down, and I go over, and suddenly the cameras are flashing,

and I have my Saddam-Rumsfeld moment. So it was kind of like: here is my handshake photo with the evil dictator that will come back to haunt me years later."

When Mojica took his seat at the assigned table, a waiter brought his discarded drink back and then set down a full bottle of scotch. The meal was lubricated with toasts, and at one point Mojica was pulled forward by Rodman, who held out the mike to him. Mojica had prepared brief remarks in advance, so they could be screened by one of the North Korean minders. So he stood with a microphone in one hand and a full tumbler of scotch in the other. He told the room that the most difficult part of the trip had been trying to get Rodman, the N.B.A.'s onetime bad boy, to get along with the Globetrotters, who were like Boy Scouts. "And I think that we have done that," Mojica said, "and therefore it proves that anything is possible, even world peace!"

There was laughter and cheering, first from the Americans, and then, moments later, from the North Koreans, as his words were translated. Mojica lifted his glass to Kim, took a sip of the scotch, and went to put the microphone down. Then he heard a voice yelling at him from across the head table. He looked up and realized that it was Kim, sitting on the edge of his chair, shouting and gesticulating with a raised left hand. Mojica was confused. Then Kim's translator shouted the Supreme Leader's words in English: "Bottoms up! You have to finish your drink!"

Mojica looked down at the giant glass of brown fluid. This was clearly a command performance. "I am a guest, so I am going to do it," he says. "So I finished—kind of guzzled this drink—and when I finish, my head is kind of spinning." He reached back for the microphone and spoke again, amazing himself as the words came out of his mouth: "If we keep it up at this rate, I will be naked by the end of the evening."

Some of the women in the audience looked aghast. There was silence as the remarks were relayed to Kim in translation. "He is sitting there kind of like on the edge of his seat with his mouth open and eyes wide," Mojica recalls. "And he is like, listening, listening, and nodding and nodding, and then he is like, *Oooh!,* slapping the table, and everyone laughs with a great relief."

Mojica says his memory grows foggy from that point on. He remembers a North Korean all-girl rock band revving up the theme music from *Dallas,* and then *Rocky*. One of the American group's translators got up onstage and played the saxophone. Things got a little out of hand. There was crazy dancing. A friend of Rodman's got into a drunken fight with someone in the Globetrotters' entourage. One of the North Korean hosts went over to Mojica with a message from Rodman. "He suggested that we may want to chill out a little bit," he says. It was alarming. Things had apparently drifted further out of hand than the producer had thought. How many people can say that they were told by Dennis Rodman at a party to tone things down?

At one point in the evening, before things got too hazy, Mojica remembered, he stared at Kim for a long time because "he was *right there*." Sitting just 12 feet away, Mojica tried to take in every detail, knowing how rare it was for an American to get such a close look at Kim Jong Un. The Supreme Leader seemed perfectly relaxed. Not at all drunk. Friendly. Smiling. Fat. Interacting with his guests, though in a very formal way. It was hard for Mojica to believe that this young man was, in this place, completely, utterly, in a way most Americans cannot fully comprehend, in charge.

Correction: An earlier version of the story misattributed a quote to John Delury, a professor at Yonsei University. The quote was from Brian Myers, a professor at Dongseo University.

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