



ROMEO & JULIET
IN THE LAND OF THE MORNING CALM

Romeo was born in a working class family in North Korea. In the 90's, he witnessed the devastating famine that hit his country. He decided to flee to China, then to South Korea. He had a hard life, and he even thought about committing suicide. He will marry his Juliet, a south korean woman soon. In this very conservative society, many South Koreans consider their northern neighbors as second-class citizens. But Romeo is someone really special: he is the first north korean defector who has an entrepreneurial vocation in South Korea. He runs two Cafés with North Koreans employees and has so many projects...



Chui was born in a working class family in North Korea. After reading "Robinson Crusoe" and "The Count of Monte Christo" in his youth, he dreamt of traveling the world. But he quickly realized that the North Korean society would never allow him to escape from his social class...

He left North Korea with only two family pictures that he keeps in his mobile phone. He was a perfect pupil, proudly wearing the red scarf of the Pioneers and genuinely sobbing out when, at the age of 14, he learned of the death of the "Sun of the 20th century", the dictator Kim Il Sung.



In the 90's, Chui witnessed the devastating famine that hit his country and took the lives of over 2 million people. The memory of skeletal bodies on the roadside would haunt his memory for a long time. To survive, Chui sold food on the black market, he quickly realized that his future was abroad.

Like all North Korean defectors, Chui had to go through the Hanawon filter to be reeducated to the south Korean way of life. This was a painful time in which he had to write down everything he remembered from his birth. He also underwent numerous head to head interrogations.

After being initiated to capitalism, Chui was given housing in the neighborhood of Yangcheong in Seoul, which hosts 1000 Korean defectors.





He had not returned in Yangcheong since 2009. On the passageway that connects the buildings, he discovers naive drawings made by North Korean children to promote peace and reunification.



Yangcheong is made of large impersonal buildings divided by parking lots and small gardens for the children. No graffiti on the walls, no garbage overflowing, door codes securing the access, guards on watch and elevators working. A quiet suburb, but in which Joseph had lived in hell.



Joseph finds his former apartment. He looks out the window. The view of the metro repair workshops and the rails is breathtaking. *"My life was like hell here. Day and night I had to endure the metallic sounds. Impossible to sleep. I thought more than once jumping to kill myself."*



Many old defectors end their lives in Yangcheong : "I left North Korea, *The Twilight*, two years ago as I became a burden for my children. I lied to them by telling that I was going to live in China. I was too ashamed to tell them that I fled to South Korea to end my life: my children would have felt betrayed."



Through Chinese networks, defectors send letters and even phone their relatives in North Korea. They also secretly transfer money, for a prohibitive 30% commission to the smugglers. Most of the times to help their relatives to flee North Korea or to buy food.



The stay for Chui in the district was traumatic, ranging from depression and fear of the future. Ironically, the majority of defectors living in South Korea never feel safe, fearing every day the dreadful consequences of desertion.

The language gap does not facilitate integration in daily life: 3000 words are different between the North and the South, making defectors easily identifiable while many try to hide their origin.

Racism is latent: many South Koreans consider their northern neighbors as second-class citizens and do not hide their negative feelings.



Chui shared his apartment in Yangcheong with an american roommate who taught him english and introduced him to the Bible. Like many other North Koreans, he converted to Christianity and started to regularly attend the rich array of South Korean churches.

Chui became Joseph.

A choice that owes nothing to chance: "In the book of Genesis, Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers but he ends up becoming the most powerful man in Egypt, and when famine strikes, he saves his own family. Obviously, I made the connection with my experiences in North Korea."



In North Korea, you follow to the letter the instructions of the Party. In South Korea, you're the master of your own destiny, which makes life arduous for re-settlers. *"North Koreans are treated like slaves in their country, so when they come in the South, I would like them to not become slaves of capitalism, with under-wage jobs or low status."*



YeoMyung school where Joseph studied provides an alternative education adapted to the teens defectors. The students, all from North Korea, look like any Southern teen: bleached blond hair for many girls, basketball jerseys and baseball caps for the boys. The mood is cheerful but for security reasons, some girls must hide their face.



Defectors who arrive in Seoul have often spent years in transit between China, Laos, Burma, and Thailand to flee North Korea, thus accumulating delays in their education. Once in South Korea, the knowledge gap is irretrievable in public schools. Many end up dropping out and go in search of odd jobs to refund the debts accumulated with the border smugglers.

On the desk of a young North Korean newcomer, a beauty product for skin whitening betrays the need to erase her duskiness, which denounces her to South Koreans who treasures pale skins.



Joseph with Huaryeong, one his north korean employee in Yovel coffee, inside IBK bank in Seoul. Nowadays, Yovel has 7 North Korean defector shareholders who hold the majority. This entrepreneurial spirit is rare among South Koreans who mostly dream of working for big companies. Security of employment is a prerequisite to build a family. This entrepreneurial desire is unknown among North Korean refugees.



Huanyeong fled Chongjin in the northeast of North Korea, one of the cities that suffered most from the famine. She will soon realize the dream of any Korean: visit Hawaii and attend an English course. If she had remained in the North, she would currently be married and would work in the fields to survive, she thinks.



I show her a few pictures I took during my stay in Chongjin 2011. The ubiquitous misery quickly drove my North Korean guides in Chongjin to confiscate my camera during the visit. *"I do not understand that a foreigner shows any interest to visit North Korea, I only thought about escaping the country!"*, she whispers to Joseph.



Joseph met his South Korean fiancée in the bank, he will marry Juyeon in a few months..

"When I met Juyeon's gaze in the corridors of the bank, I thought God put her on my way. »

It took him two months to overcome his inferiority complex and finally ask Juyeon her mobile phone number: *"I never imagined i might interest a South Korean girl... It was already difficult with the North Korean girls!"*



It is acceptable for South Korean men to marry a North Korean women but a South Korean girl who flirts with a North Korean defector, that's a whole other story in this conservative society. Juyeon's friends tried to change her mind: *"There are so many interesting South Korean men, why date a North Korean one?"* they said. Juyeon answered that she loved him, she wanted to build a family with him. She did not give up.



The lovers will pose for their engagement photos in the Imjingak Peace Park, on the border. At 9 am, they go to a beauty salon for makeup. Joseph is not very comfortable while Juyeon on the other side savored the moment as her dream comes true: she is dressed and dolled up like a princess.



Joseph: « I could not believe my eyes when I saw all these consumer goods. There was pork meat in every restaurant! In North Korea, it was exclusively a festive dish." Consequence: diabetes wreaks havoc among the defectors. Since most of them suffered from anemia in the North, their diet is completely upset when they arrive in the South.



전방 1.5km 부터
민통선 지역임
(미승인차량 회차)

남북출입사무소
Office of South-North Transit

개성.평양
Gaeseong . Pyeongyang

1 판문점
(板門店)
Panmunjeom
400m

1 문산(文山)
Munsan
임진각
臨津閣 Imjingak 400m

굴곡도로 속도를
줄이시오

자전거전용도로
종점
Motorway End
500m
국도77호선 종점

The road to the famous DMZ is dotted with watchtowers and cameras. A sign reads "Pyongyang 70 km." Within missile range.

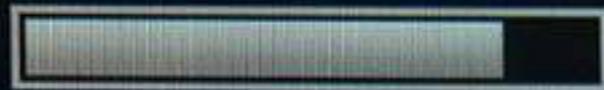


Juyeon finally sees, for the first time in her life, North Korea on the other side of the fields. She is impressed and can't find the words to express her feelings. Joseph knows the place by heart from coming here on many occasions to appease his melancholy. Machine-gun fire can be heard not too far away.

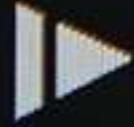
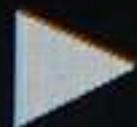


Joseph archives his daily life on his computer. He hopes that one day he will be able to show his photos and videos of his South Korean life to his mother, who stayed in Kim Jung Un's country. He has not heard from her for seventeen years.

05'09"



MENU ↶



♪ ON

Today, Joseph will record a video for virtually presenting his bride to his mother. Symbolically he wanted to do it on the border. "I know she will see the video when the two Koreas will be reunified. She will never leave the North, as my father is buried in her village. » Joseph speaks to the camera with Juyeon on his side. Quickly, he collapses in tears.



ROOF
전망대 이룸이루
Observatory
Sky Lounge
展望台 | 展望台
空中走廊 | スカイラウンジ

Joseph says that if his mother was there, she would probably tease him: "*Finally you get married!!!!*". Past 26 years old, if you're still single in North Korea, you are seen as a disabled person he says.



Joseph wants to believe in Reunification, especially after visiting Berlin two years ago. He saw a united Germany and met former inhabitants of DDR. He believes in miracles.



Joseph condemns the stereotypes that poison his life: *"Don't forget that only 1% of the population do politics in North Korea. 99% lead normal lives, work, have a family, a proper culture... North Korea isn't just a nuclear threat and a political leader, the country hosts 25 million human beings!"*



Joseph wants also to buy farmlands and give them to North Korean re-settlers for organic farming. 99% of adult defectors were farmers in North Korea. This would be a way to assimilate them without going thru the education system that leaves so many behind. He planted a garden on the IBK terraces to show investors that the project is all but utopian.



The hardest part of his mission consists of creating solidarity links among the defectors. In the most connected city in the world, most of them endure reclusive lives. Joseph likes to quote this african proverb: « *to raise a child, it takes a village.* » He wants to make his union with Juyeon and his business success an example to follow, not an exception. Even though Romeo and Juliet's families still haven't made peace...

Eric Lafforgue
lafforgue@mac.com
www.ericlafforgue.com