

*The Tallest Building in North Korea*

“I want to go to North Korea.”

“No you don’t.”

“No I do,” my brother said, smiling slightly, “they have these guided tours. Can you imagine what they show you?”

“No. You don’t,” I said. “They wouldn’t show you anything horrible. They would show you palaces and gardens and happy workers.”

“That’s what’s so amazing about it,” he said.

He was right, at least according to the photographs he sent me. Flowers the size of dump trucks loomed over manicured paths through manmade jungles. He sent me a photo of the Ryugyong Hotel, the colossal, triangular monument of glass towering over the city. A note on the back said that the tour guide spoke about the luxurious, lush, bustling interior, about visits from presidents and kings from around the world. But the building was only finished three years ago, and the inside is still bare concrete; not a bellboy in site.

He called once. His face appearing on the small screen of my cell phone, pixelated and slow to react.

“How is it?” I asked. His lips were open for a second, and then they were closed.

“How is it?” I asked, “I can’t hear you.”

He answered again and again I couldn’t hear him. “The internet’s no good,” he said finally, “I’ll call you later.”

When he came home he didn't talk much about it. "You saw the pictures I sent you," he would say. "It was just like those, but real." Once he mentioned a constant humming that filled the air. Not a natural humming from birds or ceiling fans, but a deeper one that seemed to come from everything.

He got a job at a horse barn and spent his days there cleaning the floors, moving feed from one place to another. He didn't have many chances to ride, and when he was only allowed to use the horse that was allocated to him. He said he liked the sounds in the barn: the snorting and nickering of the horses, the tapping of hooves on cement floors. "It's real," he said, "so much more real than words."

"Don't give me that shit about horses and spirituality and being smarter than people or having their own language or something," I said.

"No, not like that. It's just the noise. The sound waves I guess. They were around before us and after us and they don't mean anything, they're just real."

"Sure."

I didn't know much what he meant then. Now it makes a little more sense. He never went back to Korea and I never went to see what it was all about. I moved to Texas to be closer to the desert and he stayed at the barn. He told me when I left that he was moving from his apartment to the estate where the horse farm was. He'd live in the small house on the property so that he could watch the stables when the owners were away. He didn't have to pay rent, and they fed him some of his meals. I told him to send me photographs but he hasn't yet. I'm not sure he has my address.