

Dear Leader Dreams of Sushi

The sushi chef was leaving his apartment when he noticed the stranger outside. He could tell by the man's suit—black and badly made—that he was North Korean. Right away, the chef was nervous. Even in his midsixties, the chef is a formidable man: He has thick shoulders, a broad chest; the rings on his strong hands would one day have to be cut off. But he'd long since quit wearing his bulletproof vest, and the last time a North Korean made the journey to visit him in Japan, a decade ago, he was there to kill him.

The chef's name, an alias, is Kenji Fujimoto, and for eleven years he was Kim Jong-il's personal chef, court jester, and sidekick. He had seen the palaces, ridden the white stallions, smoked the Cuban cigars, and watched as, one by one, the people around him disappeared. It was part of Fujimoto's job to fly North Korean jets around the world to procure dinner-party ingredients—to Iran for caviar, Tokyo for fish, or Denmark for beer. It was Fujimoto who flew to France to supply the Dear Leader's yearly \$700,000 cognac habit. And when the Dear Leader craved McDonald's, it was Fujimoto who was dispatched to Beijing for an order of Big Macs to go.

When he finally escaped, Fujimoto became, according to a high-level cable released by WikiLeaks, the Japanese intelligence community's single greatest asset on the Kim family, rulers of a nation about which stubbornly little is known. We don't know how many people live there. (Best guess: around 23 million.) It's uncertain how many people starved to death during the famine of the late '90s. (Maybe 2 million.) Also mysterious is the number of citizens currently toiling their way toward death in labor camps, places people are sent without trial or sentence or appeal. (Perhaps 200,000.) We didn't even know the age of the current leader, Kim Jong-un, until Kenji Fujimoto revealed his birth date. (January 8, 1983.)

What we know of North Korea comes from satellite photos and the stories of defectors, which, like Fujimoto's, are almost impossible to confirm. Though North Korea is a nuclear power, it has yet to build its first stoplight. The phone book hasn't been invented. It is a nation where old Soviet factories limp along to produce brand-new refrigerators from 1963. When people do escape, they tend to flee from the countryside, where life is more dangerous. Because people rarely defect from the capital, their stories don't make it out, which leaves a great mystery in the center of an already obscure nation. Which is why Fujimoto's is the rarest of stories.

This winter, I flew to Saku for a series of interviews with Fujimoto. I had spent six years researching North Korea for a novel, and in that time I had spoken with experts, aid workers, defectors—everyone with a story to tell about life there. Yet I hadn't spoken to Fujimoto. It was December when I arrived, and a dusting of snow blew through the town's car lots and bare-limbed apple orchards. Here, Fujimoto's friend owns a battered five-stool karaoke bar, and this is where we met. Inside, it was cold enough to see your breath. The toilet was a hole in the floor where urine, billowing steam, disappeared into darkness before freezing.

Fujimoto made us coffee, which helped, and through an interpreter I asked him what he knew about North Korea when, in 1982, he signed a one-year contract to teach sushi-making skills to young chefs in Pyongyang.

"I didn't know much about it," he said. "I knew that Kim Il-sung was the leader of the country. I knew about the thirty-eighth parallel. That's about it."

He couldn't recount ever having met a Korean. Still, he was restless at home, and the pay was good. So packing only his knives and clothes, he left his wife and daughters in Japan and flew to Pyongyang.

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It was August when he arrived, a time when the capital city is especially alive. The summer days are long, yet the hard work of fall harvest—which requires the forced labor of all Pyongyang's inhabitants—had yet to arrive. Families were picnicking on Mansu Hill, while young couples strolled along the Taedong River. By day Fujimoto labored for ten-hour stretches at the cooking school, showing eager trainees the art of sushi. At night he retreated to the Pyongyang hotel where he lived with other guest workers—mostly Chinese technicians and engineers—and strummed old Japanese ballads on a guitar he bought at Pyongyang's Number One department store.

With the arrival of fall, he began training chefs on the east coast, in the seaside city of Wonsan. One day, several black Mercedeses arrived at the cooking school. The first car bore the license plate 2-16, Kim Jong-il's birthday. The second contained five women kidnapped from Thailand to be used as sex slaves. Fujimoto was asked to get into a third car.

At a lavish Wonsan guesthouse, Fujimoto prepared sushi for a group of executives

who would be arriving on a yacht. *Executive* is Fujimoto's euphemism for generals, party officials, or high-level bureaucrats. In other words, Kim Jong-il's personal entourage. *Andguesthouse* is code for a series of palaces decorated with cold marble, silver-braided bedspreads, ice purple paintings of kimilsungia blossoms, and ceilings airbrushed with the cran-apple mist of sunset, as if Liberace's jet had crashed into Lenin's tomb.

At two in the morning, the boat finally docked. Fujimoto began serving sushi for men who obviously had been through a long party already. He would come to realize these parties tended to be stacked one atop another, sometimes four in a row, spreading out over days.

All the men wore military uniforms except for one imperious fellow in a casual sports tracksuit. This man was curious about the fish. He asked Fujimoto about the marbled, fleshy cuts he was preparing.

"That's toro," Fujimoto told him.

For the rest of the night, this man kept calling out, "Toro, one more!"

The next day, Fujimoto was talking to the mamasan of his hotel. She was holding a newspaper, the official *Rodong Sinmun*, and on the front page was a photo of the man in the tracksuit. Fujimoto told her this was the man he'd just served dinner.

"She started trembling," Fujimoto said of the moment he realized the man's true identity. "Then I started trembling."

The man in the tracksuit invited Fujimoto back to make more sushi. Fujimoto didn't speak Korean, so he had a government-appointed interpreter with him at all times. At the end of the evening, a valet handed the interpreter an envelope.

"From Jang-gun-nim," the valet said.

Perhaps the reason Fujimoto hadn't known he'd been serving Kim Jong-il was because "no one ever called him by his real name," Fujimoto said. "Never."

In Korean, *Jang-gun-nim* translates roughly as "honored general," and Fujimoto tried to approximate this in Japanese with *Shogun-sama*, or "super shogun, meaning great master."

Fujimoto would never call him anything else. People disappeared for less.

When Fujimoto opened the envelope, he discovered five U.S. hundred-dollar bills.

Soon there was another sushi party, with many shouts of "Toro, one more!" At its conclusion, Shogun-sama tossed Fujimoto an envelope, which landed at his feet. Whether Kim Jong-il meant the envelope to land on the table in front of Fujimoto or whether Shogun-sama wanted to see Fujimoto stoop to retrieve it is unknown.

"I was pissed," Fujimoto said. "I refused to pick it up."

Kim Jong-il stared at Fujimoto, his large glasses and jowls projecting his trademark Pekingese demeanor.

Fujimoto's interpreter whispered in Japanese that they could be shot for this offense.

But Fujimoto can be a stubborn man. His temper, he says, is "in my DNA."

Finally the interpreter retrieved the envelope and handed it to Fujimoto.

In it was a thousand dollars.

Over the next week, Fujimoto contemplated how close he'd come to death.

At the next sushi party, Fujimoto had an apology prepared, but it was Kim Jong-il who spoke first, saying, "I'm sorry for my behavior last time."

Over the years to follow, Fujimoto would never see him apologize again.



Kim Jong-il invited him to play *yut nori*, a traditional Korean board game. Through an interpreter, Shogun-sama had a long conversation with Fujimoto while they moved their pieces around the board. Kim Jong-il was curious about life in Japan; he particularly wanted to talk about movies and food. He wanted Fujimoto's opinion on whether a person's diet could produce longevity. Did Fujimoto believe shark-fin soup warded off cancer? Did Fujimoto eat shark genitals to increase his potency? Did Fujimoto also eat puppy soup on Sundays?

These *yut nori* sessions became regular, with a black Mercedes arriving to transport Fujimoto to lavish guesthouses. Fujimoto attributes his friendship with Kim Jong-il to his refusal to retrieve the envelope. "Shogun-sama thought I was different from other men, who were always trying to be nice and polite to him. He was surrounded by men who praised him."

This is true, but it's certainly more complicated. Though the Japanese are considered an enemy in North Korea—for their brutal invasion, occupation, and subjugation of Korea from 1910 to 1945—Fujimoto's outsider status had advantages: He didn't speak Korean and therefore couldn't betray Kim's confidences. Fujimoto was also a stranger to the complex allegiances and shifting tides of Pyongyang politics. And because he

knew so little about North Korea, he tended to accept Shogun-sama's version of reality—that the Kims were benevolent leaders beset by jealous enemies.

These were good times for Fujimoto. During the day he trained his students, and at night the shouts of "Toro, one more!" kept coming. Beautiful women were always nearby, and interesting executives kept coming and going. When he spent leisure time with Kim Jong-il, they drank Bordeaux wines and discussed Shogun-sama's favorite Schwarzenegger movies.

Fujimoto had much to learn. He didn't yet know that the money for these luxuries came from gulag labor or that the men he served were in charge of Kim's special divisions: counterfeiting, weapons sales, and drug production. He had no idea that those beautiful girls were taken from their families in faraway lands and that now their sole purpose was to fulfill Kim's every pleasure. He couldn't have known that when people disappeared, they went to communal labor farms, re-education camps, or *kwan-li-so* gulags, which were total-control zones from which no one returned.

The true nature of Kim Jong-il wouldn't come clear until Fujimoto's next trip to North Korea, five years later. Thinking he'd had a good adventure, the chef packed up his knives and flew home to Japan—not knowing he'd give up everything to make his way back again.

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The karaoke club was frigid on the morning of the third of our six interviews, and when Fujimoto fired up the space heater, the fumes ignited a headache behind my eyes. I looked around the club, a sad place the size of a single-wide. It was a far cry from the pleasure palaces of North Korea.

Fujimoto addressed the topic of money. He hasn't worked since he escaped a dozen years ago. He survives on the fees he charges for interviews, a common practice in Japan. Since this magazine won't pay such fees, Fujimoto demanded that we meet at an exclusive club where we would have privacy. The club, I'd been told, charged 15,000 yen (\$150) an hour.

Now I was in Japan. And this was the club. I turned on the recorder.

Four years after Fujimoto went home to Japan, he received an invitation from Kim Jong-il to return to Pyongyang, this time to be Shogun-sama's personal chef, putting

Fujimoto at the Dear Leader's disposal night and day. Kim had recently suffered the loss of another confidante, a South Korean actress named Choi Eun-hee, whom he had kidnapped from Hong Kong. Like Fujimoto, Choi was an outsider, with no ties to Kim's rivals, and thus he could confide in her. Unlike Fujimoto, Choi was held against her will. In her memoir of these years, Choi reveals that she decided her best course of survival was to treat the entire experience as if it weren't real, as if it were just a movie part; she had played the role of the elusive seductress many times, and for the Dear Leader she would give her best performance. She'd smile in his company, then, back in her guesthouse, run the water in the bathroom so the guards couldn't hear her weeping. After eight years in captivity, she made a life-or-death escape from her guards after being sent to Vienna to promote Kim's latest film. Only then would Kim realize that she had been playing him for a fool.

If the Dear Leader had a great fear, it was this: abandonment. As a 4-year-old, Kim was deeply wounded by the death of his brother, who accidentally drowned, an event Kim likely witnessed. Two years later, his young mother died of an unknown ailment, and after his father, Kim Il-sung, remarried, his new wife rejected young Kim and his sister in favor of her own children.

The betrayal of Choi truly stung. And to fill the void, Kim now offered Fujimoto a three-year contract that came with a high salary, a Pyongyang apartment, and a black Mercedes.

I asked Fujimoto if, in the intervening years in Japan, he'd read any books or articles about North Korea that would give him a fuller portrait of the harsh realities there—the gulags, the repression, the deprivations.

"No," he said.

And who would want to kill the buzz of the life Kim Jong-il offered? Fujimoto signed the contract and returned in 1988 to discover that Kim had taken it up a notch. Innocent games of *yut nori* had been replaced by high-stakes baccarat. Young women were no longer kidnapped from other countries to be used as sex slaves. Instead, Kim Jong-il had developed his *kippumjo*, or "Joy Division" brigade, in which teams of beautiful North Korean girls, most forcibly recruited under the age of 16, were maintained to provide entertainment, massages, and sexual gratification. A constant presence at guesthouses, *kippumjo* girls were overseen by Kim Jong-il's personal bodyguards, many of whom were orphans, according to Lee Young-kuk, a former guard who es-

caped after being thrown in Yodok, or Camp 15.

"Such beautiful girls, so many girls," Fujimoto recalled. "They belonged to Kim Jong-il."

Depending on his mood, the Dear Leader might order them to sing sentimental songs, disco dance, strip naked, or hold spontaneous boxing matches. They'd been trained for years to be the country's best singers and dancers. They were sent to Taiwan and Hong Kong for massage training. Yet no matter how wild the parties became—head shaving, drunken pranks, gunplay—no one ever laid a hand on the girls. "I never saw anyone try," Fujimoto said.

Kim had also established an institute dedicated to his longevity. Its staff of 200 approved every element of Kim's diet. Each grain of Kim's rice was hand-inspected for chips and cracks—only perfectly shaped rice, grown in North Korea, was approved. According to Fujimoto, the rice had to be cooked over wood harvested from Mount Paektu, the sacred mountain where, North Korean propaganda claimed, Kim was born under a double rainbow and a newly born star. All were impressed when Fujimoto served the freshest meal of all: still-living fish he'd fillet alive by cutting around the organs—a skill he'd learned while working at Japan's Tsukiji fish market.

For special occasions, Fujimoto traveled great distances to procure ingredients for elaborate banquets. He would take a North Korean Air Koryo plane to Beijing, then a commercial airliner to either Moscow or Prague, places Kim stored a private jet. From there, it was off to France for wine or Denmark for ham. Mostly he flew to Japan to buy fish, where the first stop was always a ramen stand at Tsukiji run by Fujimoto's old friend Inoue. Fujimoto brought many officials to eat Inoue's noodles, including Kim Jong-un's brother Kim Jong-chul.

Fujimoto became part of Kim's entourage, joining him for pheasant hunts and tours on Kim's bulletproof train. The two went horseback riding, bowling, roller-skating, and swimming. In Wonsan, Kim had an underground bombproof Olympic swimming pool constructed with his image emblazoned in gold tiles on the bottom. North Korean engineers had even built him a motorized boogie board.

Kim Jong-il was a fan of cooking shows. *Iron Chef* was his favorite. When Fujimoto's culinary travels took him to Japan, he stocked up on VHS tapes of the latest episodes so he and Shogun-sama could have long discussions about foie gras, truffles, and

Kobe beef.

During the day, Fujimoto prepped for evening meals, and after dinner, he joined the party in progress. He would make toasts and tell jokes. He was famous for a routine in which he pretended a napkin was a saxophone. "Everybody laughed at me," he said. "Seventy people at parties, and everybody laughed. 'Encore, encore,' they called." Fujimoto had no trouble balancing work and pleasure. At first, he claims, "I was very afraid of failing, because I knew I would be shot, but I learned if I didn't make any mistakes, I would be okay."

Fujimoto was the perfect party companion—he was charismatic, expressed his opinions more freely than others, and was always game for another drink. One afternoon, only a few months after he'd returned, he was playing baccarat with Kim Jong-il, who leaned close to him and asked, "Fujimoto, will you stay with me for ten years?"



Dear Leader Kim Jong-il (sitting left) poses with his party leaders and chef Kenji Fujimoto (standing, right) in 1991

Kim offered Fujimoto his own sushi restaurant, along with all the proceeds, to be located in Pyongyang's exclusive Koryo Hotel. Later the same day, Fujimoto flew to Japan to ask his wife for a decade-long separation so he could move to North Korea, a prospect most people would consider a cruel and nightmarish prison sentence.

According to Fujimoto, she said, "What are you talking about? Are you crazy? You could go for three years—the children can bear your absence. But ten years? You're going to forget about Japan. You're going to forget about us."

The karaoke club was freezing. I rubbed my hands together for warmth, but also out of anxiety at the notion of a man hitting up his family for a ten-year pass.

I asked Fujimoto, "Why not take your family with you to North Korea?"

He nearly laughed up his coffee.

I would soon discover that Kim Jong-il had offered Fujimoto something else for his ten years, in addition to the restaurant, something Fujimoto had conveniently neglected to mention.

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That night, fat, sweet snowflakes swept down from the mountains. As I walked the iced-over streets, missing my wife and kids, I wondered what kind of man would be more comfortable in the company of a capricious and violent dictator than his own family. Who could be so at home with risk and uncertainty and danger? I decided to direct the next morning's interview toward Fujimoto's past—and quickly got some answers.

Fujimoto was born the son of the most dangerous man in town. His father had just returned from being stationed on the island of Rabaul, site of a bloody confrontation with the Allied forces. The father who went to war had been devoted enough to carry the umbilical cords of his first three children into combat. He'd fashioned a container from a coconut shell, which he kept in his rucksack so that his children never left his side.

By the time he returned, his father had become an aggressive and combative man whose signature move was punching out people's front teeth, including Fujimoto's mother's. Mentions of the war caused him to attack people. Criticisms could set him off. When his father was drinking, Fujimoto could be beaten for anything, like eating candy or misreading the clock. Questions, also, could lead to physical violence. Fujimoto hewed to these unspoken guidelines: He cannot remember ever asking his father a single question. His father's favorite pastime was taking his son on long drunken bike tours of surrounding villages—with young Fujimoto bracing himself as the bicycle veered one direction, then another, every moment seeming like the moment they would crash. "These were the scariest times of my life," he recalled.

Fujimoto's transformative moment came from a fleeting gesture of kindness. An older boy, with whom he worked to round up recycling from behind businesses, decided that for one day they should live like the people who dined at restaurants rather than as the bottle collectors who scrounged behind them. Come payday, he treated Fujimoto to sushi.

"It was an eye-opening experience," Fujimoto recalled, reciting every delicacy he encountered on that day in 1962—"*botan ebi, maguro, ika, kohada, tamago, futomaki.*"

Here, Fujimoto-san started weeping at the memory.

"This was absolutely a moment of destiny," he said.

He told his mother that he had decided to become a sushi chef, and at the age of 16 she apprenticed him to master sushi chef Senjiro Shibayama, owner of Sushi Sen in Tokyo's posh Ginza district. *Apprentice* is a kind word. For the next five years, Fujimoto would live as a slave, toiling to satisfy Japan's most exclusive clientele. Diplomats dined at Sushi Sen, as did moguls and CEOs.

Fujimoto's father had taught him to never question or criticize. He also gave his son the gift of a high tolerance for uncertainty, erratic behavior, simmering danger, and sudden violence. The sushi master was to complete Fujimoto's résumé as a dictator's sidekick by teaching him how to cater to the powerful elite, a realm where relationships were maintained through favors, discretion, loyalty, and extreme supplication.

Fujimoto's last task each day was to rub Shibayama's old, naked body.

"I was living upstairs, above the restaurant," Fujimoto said. "One room was for Shibayama, a spacious room, and there were bunk beds in the next room, where the chefs slept. I slept beside Shibayama. I don't know why, but I slept in the same room with him. Next to him, there was another futon, and I slept there. He wanted me to sleep next to him because he wanted me to do massage. Every night, massage. When I was massaging him, I would ask him, *Master, Master*. I would whisper *Master, Master*, and when he didn't respond, I realized he was asleep and it was time to stop."

But Fujimoto's temper would get the best of him. After five years at Sushi Sen, he thought he was qualified to perform some of the intricate tasks reserved for the senior chefs, like slicing the head of a red snapper for presentation. Shibayama refused to let him cut the fish. Furious, Fujimoto quit. He got a job as a sushi chef south of Tokyo, in the resort town of Yugawara, and proposed to a beautiful young woman he called Fu-chan. She had bobbed hair with sharp bangs, after the style of Fujimoto's favorite Japanese singer, Midori Sasa. Fujimoto had a thing for women with bobbed hair. But soon after he and Fu-chan were married, Fujimoto became angry with her, and he punched out her front teeth.

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Twenty years later, Fujimoto was back in Japan, asking Fu-chan for a ten-year reprieve so he could continue his relationship with Kim Jong-il. He pointed out that

their daughters, Tomako and Yuriko, were grown. He described the sushi restaurant he would own in the Koryo Hotel. He promised to send money.

Fu-chan demanded a divorce, an expensive proposition in Japan.

Before Fujimoto returned to Pyongyang, where Kim Jong-il would provide the divorce money, Fujimoto signed his apartment over to Fu-chan's possession, a testament to either his commitment to her or his guilt at abandoning her; either way, it was an admission that, whether he was contracting himself to North Korea for three years or ten years, he understood that he was really signing on forever, that there'd be no coming back.

In Shogun-sama's guesthouses, Fujimoto picked up where he'd left off—spending long hours preparing ostentatious banquets, then drinking late into the night. But things were different. Now that Fujimoto had signed on for a decade of servitude, he couldn't just pack his knives and leave. So Kim could be blasé about delivering the news that Fujimoto's new restaurant would have to wait. In fact, it would never happen. And there was Fujimoto's new bachelorhood to deal with—the two had discussed a certain famous young singer with bobbed hair, something Fujimoto was embarrassed to admit to me was in the works before he asked Fu-chan for ten years of freedom.

But the first order of business was a loyalty test. Kim Jong-il was famous for these. When circumstances changed for the people around him—through promotion, setback, controversy, or travel—Kim needed fresh proof of their dedication to him. Kim and Fujimoto were riding Jet Skis on a lake near the Chinese border when it happened.

"Shogun-sama approached me. *Fujimoto*, he said. *Let's race*. We could see a small island, with pine trees. *Let's race to there*, he said."

Kim Jong-il, Fujimoto could tell, was serious. *You have to do your best*, he said. And when Kim Jong-il called out, *Let's start*, they gunned their engines. "I looked on my right side. I knew that Shogun-sama was a little bit behind me, and I thought I was going to be in trouble, and I knew I should go slower, but I remembered that he'd said, *You need to do your best*, and I went on at high speed. We had similar Jet Skis, and I arrived first. Shogun-sama approached me and said, *You won*. But he didn't say, I lost."

Back on the shore, Fujimoto received a different reception from a group of executives gathered there. "They scolded me and said, *You're such a fool. You'll die. You should die.*"

It's true that a North Korean citizen would likely have been executed for embarrassing the Dear Leader. But Fujimoto had passed his test—he'd shown he was different, that he could still be counted on to express the kind of independent advice that Shogun-sama occasionally entertained.

With tests come rewards. Kim Jong-il invited the singer with the bobbed hair to perform for Fujimoto. Her name was Om Jong-yo. In the bunker beneath his main Pyongyang residence, Kim Jong-il had a 10,000-bottle wine cellar with a built-in karaoke bar. Here, Jong-yo sang "The Bride of Seto." Fujimoto had seen her perform many times on state-run KCNA television. He'd only had to mention her to Shogun-sama, and here she was, singing for his pleasure. Such were the perks of rolling with dictators.

"I couldn't help watching her," Fujimoto said. "Shogun-sama noticed my gaze and said, *Oh, you do like her.*"

When the two next met, at a guesthouse in Wonsan, Kim seated them together. Seeing their happiness, Kim declared they would be married on February 16, the Dear Leader's birth date. Fujimoto claims he protested, saying that Jong-yo was far too young—twenty years his junior—and arguing that 2-16 was far too sacred a date for their marriage. Kim Jong-il compromised and set a date of February 26. Soon they were singing a duet of "The Bride of Seto" on their wedding day, an event at which Kim Jong-il enforced heavy drinking, causing Fujimoto to black out. As a wedding prank, Kim Jong-il had the unconscious Fujimoto's pubic hair shaved off.

A month after the wedding, Fujimoto and Jong-yo snuck off to meet her family. Her relative success as a singer had not bettered their circumstances. Fujimoto discovered her family of six living in a single room. Four of them would later die of asphyxiation



Fujimoto (right), on his return to North Korea in 2012, embraces Kim Jong-un

when, on a cold night without heat, they brought a bucket of hot coals into their room for warmth.

The marriage must have been emotionally difficult for Jong-yo. She spoke no Japanese; he spoke no Korean. Though Fujimoto said he learned a lesson from knocking out his first wife's teeth and vowed never to beat a woman again, he's not exactly a sensitive man. When speaking of Jong-yo, Fujimoto constantly praises her youth, beauty, and beautiful hair. He likes that she doesn't criticize him, that she obeys him, and that "when I shouted at her, she would apologize immediately, saying, *I'm sorry, Papa, I will never do this again, please don't shout.*"

The wedding also had consequences for Fujimoto. Members of Kim Jong-il's entourage had tolerated Fujimoto when they saw him as a temporary, if entertaining, curiosity who served awesome sushi and would probably get himself killed. But once he was married to a famous Korean singer and had the ear of the Dear Leader, he became a threatening figure.

"Many people envied me because I was a favorite of Kim Jong-il. At the parties, I poured sake for Shogun-sama, but Shogun-sama also poured sake for me, which was very rare. Every time Shogun-sama said to me, *Do you like me?* I answered, *Of course, I like you so much.* I was thinking about making a joke—*I don't like you, I despise you.* I wanted to say that as a joke, but I had no courage. Shogun-sama said, *If you like me, why don't you kiss me on the cheek?* I don't remember how many times I kissed him. A hundred times? A hundred kisses. We would go to the sauna together, naked. Shogun-sama said, *Oh, you have a good body, a masculine body.* I said, *I'm good at sports.* It's not too much to say I was a good playmate for Kim Jong-il. And every time he asked me to kiss his face, he always said to me, *If you betray me, you will...* Then he would go silent and make a gesture of a knife going into my stomach."

Fujimoto and Jong-yo were given a new apartment in Pyongyang. Soon after the two moved in, a family of six disappeared from their building. Though they lacked a common language, Fujimoto claims he and Jong-yo have always been good at understanding each other. She was the first person to explain the gulags to Fujimoto, telling him "when one person disappears, it is to a re-education farm. He will return someday. When the whole family disappears, it is to a labor camp. None of them will be seen again."

Attempts on Kim Jong-il's life—if, how many, when, by whom—are a subject of much

debate, but they were certainly a concern for Kim, and Fujimoto was a man Kim trusted with his life at every meal. Before the year was out, Fujimoto was introduced to Kim's sons, the older and more frail Jong-chul along with the younger and more aggressive Jong-un. The children had largely been kept apart from the entourage. Fujimoto remembers the intense gaze of Jong-un, who even at 7 years of age had already been taught that the Japanese were the enemy.

"The kids were playing with a kite," Fujimoto recalled. "It was a Japanese kite with a Kabuki picture. But the kite did not have a tail. So I immediately asked for paper, glue, and scissors and made one. I handed the kite to Kim Jong-un, who stared at me. I said, *Hold this and let go when I send you a sign.*"

No members of Kim's entourage had helped the boys with their failed project. Assisting was simply too dangerous—would aid be construed as a commentary on the boys' ineptitude or the Dear Leader's poor parenting? Would a helpful executive then be blamed if the kite didn't fly? What if the boys rejected the help? Survival necessitated such considerations, and Fujimoto was special because he never made them.

As a nervous cadre of executives looked on, the tail righted the kite, which rose into the sky. A week later, Shogun-sama called Fujimoto and informed him that the nannies had been fired: Fujimoto would be the boys' new playmate, a position he would hold until Kim Jong-un was 18. Fujimoto introduced them to video games, remote-control cars, and most important, basketball. Fujimoto's sister in Japan sent him VHS tapes of Bulls playoff games, so Kim Jong-un's first taste of Western hoops came from watching Jordan, Pippen, and Rodman—men who became his heroes.

During these years, Fujimoto and Jong-yo had their own children—a daughter, Jong-mi, and a son, Jong-un. Fujimoto said it was only a coincidence that his son has the same name as Kim Jong-il's son.

He remained on Kim's good side, with the occasional lapse. He once failed to clean his room at a guesthouse, and Kim decided to make an example of him by taking away his kitchen. For six months, Fujimoto was forced to prepare sushi in a gymnasium.

But this was a small issue. On July 8, 1994, the Dear Leader Kim Jong-il lost his father, the Great Leader Kim Il-sung, who likely suffered a heart attack at the Hyangsan mountain guesthouse. Kim Jong-il was now in command of the entire nation but had to fend off plots and challenges from political rivals and the military leadership.

Kim, often dismissed as a ne'er-do-well and a playboy, proved himself a cunning politician, outmaneuvering all who would overthrow him and staying one step ahead of his enemies as he consolidated power. Fujimoto was ignorant of the intricacies of these struggles. What he knew of Kim's life came from dinners, parties, and movies. So it was from a film that he understood the degree to which his boss's life was in danger. One evening they were screening *In the Line of Fire*, a Clint Eastwood movie from 1993. (Kim had a private library of 30,000 DVDs.) Eleven-year-old Kim Jong-un was watching the movie, as were Kim Chang-son, Kim's personal secretary, and a detail of security guards.

In the movie, Eastwood plays Frank Horrigan, a Secret Service agent haunted by what he perceives to be his failure to save President Kennedy from assassination. But Clint Eastwood's not going to let the current president die! There's a scene in which Eastwood's Secret Service team is running alongside the president's motorcade. Eight agents in suits move with a pair of black limos, each of them with a hand on a chassis to protect the president from an evil assassin, played by John Malkovich. Here Shogun-sama suddenly stood. "This is the best scene in the movie!" he announced. He turned to his secretary and pointed at him. "This is how you protect me," he said. Then he shouted at his security team, "You have to protect me as the Secret Police in the movie do!"

While Kim fretted about appearing like a powerful leader, his ignorance and hubris soon led his nation into famine and economic ruin. When he had taken power, the nation's food production had been considered a minor success. Rice blossomed white in the fields in the south; and across thousands of hectares, corn stalks broke upward through the soil. In recognition, the agricultural minister had been designated a hero when he died and was buried in the Patriots' Cemetery. But Kim Jong-il wanted more. He ordered the new agricultural minister to improve crop production by cutting down trees on hillsides to make room for terrace farming. Come the next rainy season, that deforestation would cause the flash floods that would destroy the crops that would cause the famine that would slowly kill 2 million people.

As the famine unfolded, according to Bradley K. Martin, a preeminent North Korea expert, Kim Jong-il had his new agricultural minister executed by firing squad.

As the famine became devastating, Kim Jong-il had the former agricultural minister's body exhumed from the Patriots' Cemetery and subjected to a posthumous execution by firing squad.



Fujimoto in his trademark sunglasses and do-rag

Fujimoto, however, would miss the famine. In 1996, while on a trip to Japan to buy fish at the Tsukiji market, he was arrested at Tokyo's Narita Airport.

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At the time of his arrest, Fujimoto was traveling with Kim Jong-il's Chinese interpreter, a man whose Dominican passport raised suspicions. This made customs authorities look more closely at Fujimoto's passport, and they soon realized they were in possession of the world's most knowledgeable person on the inner workings of the Kim regime. They would spend the next eighteen months questioning him.

A team was assigned to debrief the chef. A cabinet minister took notice. When Kim Jong-il personally called Fujimoto and ordered him to leave Japan immediately, the authorities understood that Fujimoto was important enough for Kim Jong-il to assassinate. They moved him to the southern island of Okinawa, where Fujimoto got a job at a resort hotel's sushi restaurant.

During questioning, the Japanese authorities gave Fujimoto books to read about North Korean gulags, re-education farms, and human-rights abuses. One book was about torture in North Korea; it claimed the North Koreans liked to damage their victims to the core, wounding them so deeply "they'd vomit up their mother's milk."

One night, a Korean man came to see Fujimoto at the sushi bar. By his accent, Fujimoto could tell he was from the North. He said, "Someone sent me here, and after you finish your work, we're going to talk about something."

Fujimoto knew a killer when he saw one. But after work, the man didn't return. In fact, Fujimoto never saw him again. For the first time during all his escapades in North Korea, Fujimoto became afraid. He was also depressed. He couldn't get the torture books out of his head. He was drinking a lot. He was lonely and wanted to return to Pyongyang, to his wife and children. On July 9, 1998, the Japanese agreed to release

him. But first they extracted a promise: If he ever left North Korea again, he was to call them and report in.

Here, Fujimoto began describing a happy return to his family in Pyongyang, but I stopped him. "What about your Japanese daughters?" I asked. "During your eighteen months in Japan, didn't you contact them?"

"No," he said.

I brought up Fujimoto's father, who'd once been devoted enough to carry his children's umbilical cords into combat.

Fujimoto stood. He was visibly upset. "Time's up," he said, and went to take a piss in the frozen bathroom.

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in questioning his devotion to his family, I had offended Fujimoto. So as a peace offering, I invited him to lunch. We kept talking, and it didn't take long for his good cheer to return. He chose a restaurant called Don, which is the Japanese equivalent of Sizzler. It seemed to cater to coupon clippers and chain-smokers. When the food came, Fujimoto produced a tube of garlic paste from his jacket pocket. This he smeared across his steak as he told me how things took a turn for the worse soon after he got back to Pyongyang.

Kim Jong-il soon summoned him. Yes, Shogun-sama admitted, he'd sent an assassin to Okinawa, but he urged Fujimoto to forget about it. He was still alive, wasn't he? It was Kim's wife, Ko Young-hee, who'd reminded him of how funny and lovable his Japanese friend had been. Thus the killer was recalled.

Shogun-sama told Fujimoto that an important mission awaited: He was to travel with Kim's secretary, Kim Chang-son, to Beijing to stock up on canned food.

Of course, canned food could not have been a priority, and there was no urgency to send Fujimoto on a mission. It was a loyalty test, one Fujimoto would fail.

"I should have realized at that moment," Fujimoto said. "I should have suspected."

Kim Chang-son took Fujimoto to a hotel that had been bugged. "I made a phone call from the hotel room to the Japanese police. *Hi, this is Fujimoto*, I told them. *There's*

nothing to worry about. I'm on a business trip in China. There is nothing to worry about."

It seemed like a foolish move, but this was Fujimoto: unquestioningly obedient.

He'd promised to call the Japanese authorities, so he did.

Upon his return to Pyongyang, a group of executives pulled Fujimoto aside and played him a tape of his phone call to Japan. He was put under house arrest. He also had to write letters of apology to Kim Jong-il, promising to disown Japan.

House arrest was a relatively light sentence, but for Fujimoto it was a difficult time. "For eighteen months, I wasn't allowed to go out. That was a traumatic experience for me. When I was sleeping, I heard the sound of the wind. My eyes popped open. I went to the curtain. I checked to see if the jeeps had come to my house to take me to the camps. Because I read the books the police had given me in Japan, I was so scared. I almost got crazy."

Trapped in his house, waiting for the day he would be transported to the camps, he began studying a photograph he'd been given as a party souvenir. "I saw this group picture and realized that three or four people were missing. I knew a doctor, the top doctor at an exclusive hospital. He was missing. They had all disappeared because of political issues."

Fujimoto became certain he'd be the next person to disappear from the photograph.

He decided to escape.

Freed from house arrest, Fujimoto returned to his role as cook and nanny. He spent the next year re-ingratiating himself with Kim Jong-il before setting his plan in motion. In March 2001, Fujimoto casually mentioned to Kim Jong-il that he had a new *Iron Chef* video, an episode Kim had never seen. When they watched it together, Kim discovered the episode's "mystery ingredient" was one he'd never tasted before: sea-urchin roe, or uni. When Kim asked about uni, Fujimoto described it as the most exquisite delicacy in the world, one whose creamy texture was both oceanic and sweet. It could only come from Rishiri Island, off Hokkaido, and only an experienced sushi chef could discriminate good uni from bad.

Though Kim had banned Fujimoto from travel after his Tokyo arrest, the idea of a new delicacy proved too much. Just this once, Shogun-sama said, then made Fujimoto

utter a personal promise to return. That's all it took. Shogun-sama told him to fly right away.

That afternoon, as Fujimoto was crossing the guesthouse compound to pack, he came across Kim Jong-un, who was 18 now and had his own entourage. They had just finished playing basketball and, still sweating in the sun, were drinking shots of vodka. Kim Jong-un made Fujimoto down several shots and then eyed him suspiciously. "You must promise to return from your trip to Japan," Fujimoto remembers him saying.

Fujimoto said good-bye to his wife, Jong-yo, in the parking garage of the Koryo Hotel, drove to Sunan airport, abandoned his coveted Mercedes in the lot, and flew to Tokyo on the pretext of buying uni at the Tsukiji fish market. There, after spotting a team of minders loyal to North Korea, he ate Inoue ramen and then disappeared into the crowd.

"This is a difficult question," I said. "What did you think would happen to your wife after you escaped?"

Fujimoto told me he wouldn't have escaped if he'd thought she would be shot.

"Remember that my wife was Kim Jong-il's favorite singer," Fujimoto said. "And I believed Kim Jong-il never killed girls."

I said, "But they were sent to the coal mine, your wife and children, to be re-educated."

Fujimoto seemed untroubled by this. He said he'd done all that he could. Right away, he started writing letters of apology to Kim Jong-il.

"And it worked," he said. "After six years, they were freed."

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Ten years later, in December 2011, Fujimoto watched with the rest of the world as Kim Jong-il's funeral procession moved slowly down an icy boulevard in Pyongyang. Speculation was rampant about who was now holding power in North Korea, but Fujimoto knew right away: Eight men in suits, one of them a full-grown Kim Jong-un, moved with the limousine, each walking with a hand on its chassis, just like the

agents in the Clint Eastwood movie. Kim Jong-il had made a wish, to be treated like an American president in the movies, and his son had made it come true.

In July 2012, Fujimoto answered the red invitation and flew to Pyongyang.

Cynics say Fujimoto returned to North Korea because the Japanese media had grown tired of his decade-old stories; by risking his life with a return, he'd be able to once again command large interview fees. Fujimoto says he simply wanted to make good on his word.

During his two-week stay, he met with Kim Jong-un once, on the twenty-second, over lunch with Kim Jong-un's entourage and his new wife, Ri Sol-ju, herself a former pop singer.

Fujimoto greeted Kim Jong-un with "The betrayer has returned." Sobbing, Fujimoto dropped to his knees. Kim beckoned him to rise, and the cover image of Fujimoto's book about the trip shows him weeping, locked in a bear hug with North Korea's new leader.

Fujimoto was assigned an interpreter and a valet for the event—a lavish banquet that Fujimoto cannot quite remember. As the party progressed, Kim Jong-un, taking a cue from his father, challenged Fujimoto to a drinking contest. The sushi chef, now 65, drank until he blacked out. He woke later to discover that he was in a guesthouse, in bed, with his clothes removed. He called to his valet, who was sitting in a chair in the dark.

"Did I embarrass myself?" Fujimoto asked him.

"No," the valet assured him.

Fujimoto's real reunion came with his wife, Jong-yo, the next day. She's free now and lives in the capital. "I expected that she would punch me and shout at me, but she didn't... My wife, Jong-yo, and my daughter, Jong-mi, arrived with a small suitcase. We cried and embraced. Jong-un is my son's name, and I asked, *What happened to Jong-un?* I remembered that he went into the military, so I asked if he was busy serving in the army. *No*, Jong-yo said. *He died.*"

Here Fujimoto started weeping.

"I heard from Jong-yo that at two or three in the morning, they were sleeping together in the same room. He started shouting, once, twice. On the third shout, he fell dead. A heart attack. She was with him. She witnessed him dying. Jong-un was healthy. But recently he was fond of eating meat, and he was getting bigger and bigger, which might have caused pressure on his heart. I'm sure there was pressure. He was slim before, but since he started eating a lot of meat, he started getting bigger. He was 22."

I asked if there was a doctor's report or an autopsy. "Didn't the death seem suspicious?"

"I am convinced," Fujimoto answered. "My wife was witness to his sudden death. If the North Korean people wanted to kill someone, that would be me, not my son. No murder, just an accident."

Fujimoto began speaking about how beautiful Pyongyang was, how much it had improved over the past ten years, to the point that he sounded a bit like a propaganda reel. It was here that he revealed a grand and baffling new plan: to leave his aging Japanese girlfriend for his young Korean wife, to live out his days in Pyongyang in luxury, to become Kim Jong-un's confidant, to get his Mercedes back, and to finally open a restaurant in the Koryo Hotel, this one serving noodles instead of sushi.

"I want to bring ramen to Pyongyang," he said. "I already have a recipe for Inoue ramen. I know there are a lot of people who are against me in North Korea, so it will be difficult to have a Fujimoto restaurant. I don't think I can use the Fujimoto name."

Fujimoto has it all planned out. He's going to sign over all future book royalties to his Japanese girlfriend, to support her in her old age. Then he'll leave Japan for good, thus easing his conscience over the betrayal he feels he's committed. Like a Clint Eastwood character haunted by an unforgivable mistake, Fujimoto is searching for a means of redemption. "If Kim Jong-il were here right now," Fujimoto said, "I would kneel down and apologize. I'd admit that I left North Korea and I disclosed secrets about North Korea. I am a traitor, an absolute traitor."

I reminded Fujimoto that Shogun-sama wouldn't be there to protect him, that Kim Jong-un has his own entourage now. I reminded him that in North Korea there are no human rights, civil liberties, or rules of law.

Fujimoto waved this off. His only worry was obtaining a visa from Pyongyang so he

could get his new life started. "I don't think I am ever coming back from North Korea," he said.

I remind him that his luck can't last forever, that in North Korea a dictator need only snap his fingers to make a man disappear. I ask him if he understands he's trading actual freedom for an imaginary paradise.

"I have no fear," Fujimoto says.

"You cannot know what's ahead," I tell him. "The peril is very real."

But care and caution are not his way.

His face is both sternly resolute and innocently optimistic.

"I have no fear," he repeats.

Adam Johnson is the author of The Orphan Master's Son, winner of the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for fiction.