Renowned documentary photographer Tomas van Houtryve entered North Korea by posing as a businessman looking to open a chocolate factory. Despite 24-hour surveillance by North Korean minders, he took arresting photographs of Pyongyang and its people—images rarely captured and even more rarely distributed in the West. They show stark glimmers of everyday life in the world’s last gulag.
UNEASY STREET  Van Houtryve arrived in Pyongyang, the North Korean capital, during a normal work week in February. He found its main thoroughfare entirely empty. "Nobody's out. No couples with babies, nobody taking a walk," van Houtryve says. "You could wait 10 minutes before you ever saw a car." Only a few old Mercedes—the exclusive privilege of top bureaucrats—cruise Pyongyang's streets. North Korea has just a few hundred thousand cars for more than 20 million people. The country has only 1,000 miles of paved road.

CANARY UNDERGROUND (previous spread) No one knows how many people live in Pyongyang; estimates place the population at up to 3 million. Two subway lines and 17 stops serve the city. Built by the Army in the 1980s with cars bought from Berlin, the metro has stops named for revolutionary concepts, like Jonu (comrade), Puhung (rehabilitation), and Rakwon (paradise).
SHOP GIRL This is shopping in North Korea. The clerk sits in the dark, unheated special store, waiting to turn on the lights for foreigners, the only permitted customers. “She’s wearing a ski jacket or parka; the rest of this time they’re sitting there with the lights off, freezing,” van Houtryve says. The goods—toys, televisions, and the like—are imported from China. The store only accepts euros.
When van Houtryve approached North Koreans, they walked off or averted their eyes. He never once photographed a smile. Even children ran away from him. "They'd turn and notice me and immediately bolt off—as if a wolf had come up to them." Pyongyang's somber trams are old East German models, giving the city a Soviet feel two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall.
Two women work on an assembly line, packaging shirts by the American brand K-Swiss.

"I imagine it's illegal," van Houtryve says. In Kaesong, the special economic zone on the southern border, South Korean companies hire North Korean workers at wages of $50 a month. The North Korean government allowed the zone's creation after its near economic collapse and failure to prevent mass famine in the 1990s.
BILLBOARD HIT  Along the main road back into Pyongyang, van Houtryve captured these concrete and tile mosaic murals of leader Kim Jong II. Only a few North Koreans are allowed to depict the “Dear Leader” and his father, who are considered too sacred to be portrayed except by the finest artists.
CULT OF PERSONALITY In van Houtryve's hotel room, propaganda played in an endless loop on the three TV channels. North Korean biographers, striving to make Kim his more revered father's equal, insist a swallow foretold his birth and attribute a spate of superhuman characteristics to him—the ability to manipulate time among them. Defectors have described him as arthritic and illiterate.  

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