

Review by Stephanie Talbot

"...to illuminate the darkness which shrouds North Korea, just like a beautiful firefly..."

Bandi is Korean for firefly, the author of *The Accusation* understandably wrote this book under a pseudonym as the work is a collection of short stories that are very critical of the government of North Korea, the place our author still calls home at the time of writing.

The stories take place between the years of 1989 and 1995, five of which were under the reign of Kim Il-sung. These short stories were not smuggled out until 2014, and only recently translated into English. The seven stories all have in common the threat and fear of being seen as not loyal to what North Korea and its party stands for, both the poor and the wealthy are under constant threat of this looming shadow. These ordinary people are watched not only by government-appointed individuals but by their neighbours and even family members.

One story is about a young mother who must deal with her child being terrified of the giant propaganda posters of Karl Marx and Kim Il-sung outside her window, her child screaming and crying till he is red, however drawing the curtains only leads to an inspection and her family's deportation from the city, as clearly their child's fear and distaste for these two great men must come from his parents.

My personal favourite is the story of an old man, who planted an elm tree after the Japanese were defeated, this tree represented a better, and greater future, now nearly 50 years later, there is a mass famine, there is no fuel to heat homes let alone cook what little food is available. But he loves this tree, the elm is meant to represent the great Democratic North Korea and all the good that was promised, I will not spoil the ending for that one.

These stories are not happy ones, these people, often from events beyond their control, run afoul of those minding them, and the law. They smuggle themselves onto trains in an attempt to see their dying relative after being denied again and again a travel permit. Trains are delayed and roads are closed because The Great Leader is in the area for a visit or event.

People are jailed for trying to see their loved ones, or killed from mudslides in the mountains in search of flowers to leave on alters after Kim Il-Sung's death, as they fear that if they do not leave flowers often during the period of mourning they will be seen as not loyal citizens and possibly charged with anti-revolutionary crimes. And while there are a few stories that have hope, you are never told what the final outcome is for them. While we are only four months into the year, this book has been my favourite so far.

The stories are compelling, and the characters are captivating, and while some situations seem absurd, such as the family being deported from the city because of their child's fear of images of Karl Marx and Kim Il-sung, all of the stories have truth in them. This could very well be a true account, or I think at least a realistic outcome for the situation presented in this book. I would encourage everyone to pick up *The Accusation*. It is a truly unique perspective and collection of stories that for years were hidden, and we owe Bandi a chance to read their work, not only because of the circumstances of the book but also because of Bandi's amazing story telling.