AND WHAT'S THIS?

IT'S A NOVEL... AN OLD ONE... FROM THE 1950s. A KIND OF CLASSIC... IT'S FICTION.

THAT?

A CD PLAYER?

A MUSIC PLAYER?

DO YOU HAVE A RADIO?

NO.

WHAT KIND OF MUSIC IS THIS?

UH... LET'S SEE... IT'S HARD TO DESCRIBE... IT'S BASICALLY "JUNGLE" BUT WITH ARRANGEMENTS THAT ARE ALMOST CLASSICAL... AND SOUNDS THAT...

I'M MR. KYU, YOUR GUIDE.

A PLEASURE.

I'M HERE FOR THE SEK?

IF THAT'S THE NAME OF THE ANIMATION STUDIO, YES...

OH! WELL, EVERYTHING IS ALL RIGHT THEN.

OUR APOLOGIES!

MISTER GUY?

THE DRIVER IS OUTSIDE.

I CAN BARELY MAKE OUT HIS FACE BECAUSE THERE'S NO LIGHT IN THE AIRPORT.
The driver hands me flowers that I know aren't really meant for me.

To help me prepare for this trip, I was given a booklet of travel tips.

Thanks.

How nice.

**Hygiene**
- Bring your own medication.
- Do not drink the tap water.

**Travel**
All travel must be by studio vehicle, in the company of an interpreter and/or guide.
No vehicles on Sundays.
Only NGOs have unrestricted access to vehicles and travel.
No lights at night.

**Allowed**
- Audio cassettes
- CD player and CDs
- Portable computer and printer
- Cameras and film, except for non-commercial photography.
- Food, mustard, ketchup, etc.
- Books to give to interpreter at the end of the trip.

**Prohibited**
- Mobile phone (confiscated at airport and returned on departure)
- Pornography

Incredible! He's smoking in an air-conditioned car with closed windows!

Great.

I can't breathe and I'm cold.
My guide suggests we visit the highest point in the city to admire the view before going to the hotel.

An elegant way of taking me on a stop that's obligatory for newcomers without being obvious.

Kim Il-Sung, 22 meters of bronze.

For visitors, it's a disproportionately one-on-one with the gigantic figure of the father of the nation.

Who, despite his death (1912-1994), is still president.
WHOA! HOLY COW... THAT'S HUGE!

UH... WHAT'S THE PROTOCOL? I'M NOT SURE WHAT HAPPENS NEXT.

BACK IN THE PARKING LOT, I COME ACROSS ALL THE FOREIGNERS WHO WERE ON THE FLIGHT, ALONG WITH THEIR RESPECTIVE GUIDES.

DURING MY STAY, I MET EVERY ONE OF THEM AGAIN.

MY HOTEL IS ON A SMALL ISLAND, NOT FAR FROM DOWNTOWN.

MISCELLANEOUS
Do not do anything on your own, refer to your guide or interpreter for advice in all circumstances.

THOU FORBIDDEN.

NEVER MAKE JOKES ABOUT THE GREAT LEADER OR THE DEAR LEADER. SHOW RESPECT.

CHRIST! THE THINGS AN ANIMATOR HAS TO DO GET A BIG.

IT'S GOT THOSE GOOD OLD STANDARD ROOMS—COLD AND IMPERSONAL, JUST LIKE THEY LIKE THEM IN ASIA.
NORTH KOREA IS THE WORLD'S MOST ISOLATED COUNTRY. FOREIGNERS TRICKLE IN.
THERE'S NO INTERNET. THERE ARE NO CAFÉS. IN FACT, THERE'S NO ENTERTAINMENT.
IT'S HARD TO EVEN LEAVE THE HOTEL AND MEETING KOREANS IS NEXT TO IMPOSSIBLE.

LUCKILY I'VE HAD PRACTICE BEING ALONE BECAUSE THIS WON'T BE A FUNHOUSE.

WELL, THAT'S WHAT I THOUGHT, BUT I WAS WRONG—WHICH JUST GOES TO SHOW THAT
YOU'VE GOT TO BE READY FOR ANYTHING WHEN YOU TRAVEL.

MISTER GUY?
READY TO GO TO THE STUDIO?

YOU KNOW MARX? VERY GOOD.
A BIT... DOESN'T EVERYBODY?

OH NO, NOT MANY CAPITALISTS DO.
REALLY.

THE STUDIO MIGHT HAVE BEEN INTENDED TO EDUCATE THE MASSES, BUT THESE DAYS IT'S
USED TO ATTRACT FOREIGN CURRENCY, MOST OF IT FRENCH.
I find the person I've come to replace: Sandrine, someone I often cross paths with in the small world of animation.

So, first Saigon and now Pyongyang, ha ha ha ha!

There you are!

See this shot? It's fine the way it is, so I move on.

Oh, ok.

The last time we met was in Vietnam. Before that was Paris and over ten years ago, the South of France.

Ok, let's get started.

I'm doing corrections on episode one.

Huh? What's wrong? Is there a problem? Do you think we should redo it?

I didn't say a thing... I'm just trying to get a sense of the quality we want here.

Oh, hey, sorry... I forgot.

I've come here to work.

Actually, it's a bit weak when he jumps. I'll ask for a retake.

Oh, ok.
Wanna have a drink?

Richard, who works two floors up for Ellipse (another French studio), suggests we take a break.

A drink! Where?

I hope things go better here...

Our friend has come to work on Corto Maltese.

But since we've run out of cash...

Seoul was a huge waste of time...

In fact, they had to leave with the shots and redo everything in Paris.

...they're wrapping up production in Pyongyang.

We wind up nearby, in what looks like a hotel.

Except for a few soldiers, the place is deserted.

We sit down next to the window to have some light.

Shit, we forgot to tell the guards...

Who cares? We're right next door.

All we're doing here are the tweens...

This is Richard's second week.

After 3 months in North Korea, Sandrine has developed certain reflexes.

Mini Gossari!


Tweens: to be drawn by assistants in North Korea.

Quiz: Which of these are key frames?
Hence the tried and true formula.

Great, that way kids don't have to bother reading the books. They'll just think everything started on TV, like Tintin.

Richard's guide turns up. He looks relieved to see us.

Sandra and I decide that we want to walk back to the hotel.

Our guides don't actually object, but they're not happy, either.

Are they following? No, I don't see them. Well, cool... they're not such a pain after all.

A moment later, we figured out their system: they were waiting for us down the road, and when we caught up they advanced again, all the way to the hotel.
PYONGYANG HAS THREE HOTELS FOR FOREIGNERS.

EACH HAS ITS ADVANTAGES.

THE POTONGGAN, WITH ITS CABLE TV (CNN).

THE KORYO, IN THE HEART OF TOWN.

THE YANGGAKDO, WHERE SHAKINE AND I ARE STAYING.

IT'S A MASSIVE 50-STOREY TOWER WITH A REVOLVING RESTAURANT, BUILT IN THE 1980s BY A FRENCH FIRM. THAT'S WHAT EXPLAINS THE FRENCH DESIGNER TOILETS.

AAAH! FRENCH QUALITY!

ALL FOREIGNERS ARE ON THE 15TH FLOOR, THE ONLY ONE THAT'S LIT.

THIS IS MY FAVORITE...

IS IT THE ONLY ONE IN THE HOTEL?

AT LEAST IT'S BRIGHT HERE.

HOW IS IT?

OK.

NO... WE CAN TRY ANOTHER IF YOU LIKE.

ARE THERE ANY MORE LIKE THIS?

THE NO. 3... IT'S BEING RENOVATED.
I DON'T MEAN TO COMPLAIN, BUT THIS IS THE FILTHIEST TABLECLOTH I'VE EVER SEEN...

ARGH! AND IT'S WET, TOO! MY ELBOWS ARE SOAKING!

UGH! THIS STUFF IS SWIMMING IN OIL!

YOU'LL GET USED TO IT.

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, I WATCH A PERSON WHO'S WALKING BACKWARDS. I DON'T KNOW IF IT'S THE JET LAG OR THE FACT THAT I'M BRACED FOR ANYTHING HERE, BUT THE SIGHT DOESN'T SEEM ABNORMAL OR EVEN SURPRISING.

OHHH, LOOK. A GUY WALKING BACKWARDS.

THERE'S A CAFE IN THE LOBBY. WE GO THERE FOR DESSERT. IT'S DRIER ON THE ELBOWS.

WE MEET TWO TELECOM ENGINEERS FROM FRANCE.

WHAT? THEY CALL THIS ICE CREAM?

THEY'RE HERE FOR A WEEK, LONG ENOUGH TO INSTALL A HIGH-DEFINITION TRANSMITTER...

FOREIGN ADMIRERS OF THE KIM REGIME WILL SOON BE ABLE TO WATCH THE DEAR LEADER'S HEROIC EXPLOITS IN HIGH-DEFINITION SPLENDOR WITH DOLBY SURROUND SOUND.

BEFORE (HERTZIAN)

AN OBIVIOUS PRIORITY FOR A COUNTRY GETTING THE MOST AID IN THE WORLD!

AFTER (DIGITAL)

THE BEST THING ABOUT LIVING IN HOTELS IS LYING DOWN ON THE BEDSPREAD WITH YOUR SHOES ON.

HERE I AM, BREAKING A MAJOR FAMILY TABOO BEFORE YOUR EYES.

IT'S BLISS.
Damn, there's not a single bulb here that's brighter than 90 watts.

I'll probably go blind, but I guess Orwell is worth it.

The morning fog over Taedong stretches to infinity in the distance. Municipal loudspeakers intone their litany.

"How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time. But at any rate they could plug in your wire whenever they wanted to. You had to live -- did live, from habit that became "instinct."

Hey! I know, I'll talk in rhyme all day... what a great idea...

There's a poem in the air.
AH, SCREW THAT. WHY DRIVE MYSELF NUTS ALL DAY MAKING UP RHYMES.

I JOIN SANDRINE AT THE FAR TABLE.

FORGET IT.

DID YOU SEE? THERE'S MELON TODAY.

OH RIGHT.

LOOK, THERE'S A BUNCH OF CHINESE DOING THE "REVERSE".

THE WHAT?

THEM WALKING BACKWARDS. DIDN'T YOU KNOW? IT'S A TRADITIONAL FORM OF EXERCISE.

OH, SO THAT'S IT.

AS USUAL, THE VAN, DRIVER, GUIDE AND TRANSLATOR ARE WAITING TO TAKE US TO THE STUDIO.

PYONGYANG: PHANTOM CITY IN A HERMIT NATION.

THE FEW DISMAL PICTURES YOU SEE IN THE WEST HAD ACTUALLY LED ME TO EXPECT WORSE.

TRAMWAYS, CARS, BUSES, TRUCKS... IT TURNS OUT THE STREETS Aren'T DESERTED AFTER ALL.

EVERYTHING IS VERY CLEAN. TOO CLEAN, IN FACT.

NO ONE LINGERS IN THE STREETS. EVERYONE HAS SOMEWHERE TO BE, SOMETHING TO DO.
DURING THE KOREAN WAR, BOMBS RAINED ON THE CITY FOR 3 YEARS, FLATTENING IT.

1950 - 1953

AFTERWARD, THE PARTY OBLITERATED ANYTHING RESEMBLING AN OPPORTUNITY...

AND SEALED OFF THE COUNTRY TO ALL SIDES.

THE CITY WAS ENTIRELY REBUILT ACCORDING TO THE GREAT LEADER'S PLANS.

AND THIS, AND...

WHOA! MORE THAN 90% OF THE SHOTS HAVE TO BE REDONE.

I KNOW. WE HAD A LOUSY TEAM ON EPISODE 2.

OK, MARK UP THE REST AND I'LL GO CHECK THE RETAKES.

SURE.

TO CHECK THE ANIMATION, I WORK ON A COMPUTER THAT'S USED FOR PRODUCTION THE REST OF THE TIME.

WITH IT, I'VE INHERITED A TECHNICIAN WHO HELPS OUT WITH GREAT ZEAL INSTEAD OF TAKING A BREAK WHILE I DO MY STUFF.

WHENEVER I HESITATE...

SHE POINTS AT THE SPOT I'VE GOT TO CLICK.
It gets to be annoying.

After a while, she lets up and decides to give me a taste of her country's musical genius instead.

The tunes sound like a cross between a national anthem and the theme song of a children's show... like a Barney remix of 'God Save the Queen' or 'Oh Canada'.

My new friend is just singing right along, looking my way to get me going, too.

In every room, on every floor, in every building throughout North Korea, portraits of Papa Kim and his son hang side by side on one wall.

Except in the shitters, of course.

And since 'Kim Il Sung is Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-il is Kim Il Sung', they're made to look alike.

Kim senior's gray hair and deforming neck tumor are gone as are Kim junior's glasses and excess weight. Same size, same age, same suit.

That way nothing ever changes—it's always the same head at the helm.

The world's only communist dynasty.

My coffee breaks lead to a few more observations.
The portraits, which are hung high on the walls, have a wider edge above than below.

The angle cuts out any reflections that could prevent you from contemplating the sun of the 21st century and his venerable father. It also intensifies the gaze in this face-to-face encounter.

There's a detail Orwell would have liked.

Both wear one of the official badges that invariably depict Kim Junior or Kim Senior. You can't tell from the portraits, but it's tempting to think they're wearing each other's images, creating the kind of short circuit animators love...

Shot: When the character pulls on the ribbon, keep it tight as the bow unwraps.

Or else he looks like he's holding a snake and playing with it.

After asking two days ago, I'm being taken to visit one of the prides of the nation...

The Pyongyang subway.

Buried 90 meters underground, the Pyongyang subway can double as a bomb shelter in case of nuclear attack. What better way to cultivate a constant sense of threat?
MARBLE FLOORS, CHANDELIERS, SCULPTED COLUMNS. IT'S A SUBTERRANEAN PALACE TO THE GLORY OF PUBLIC TRANSIT.

EVERYWHERE, GARISH MURALS TRANSFIGURE A REALITY THAT JUST SEEMS DRAB TO ME.

IN A CITY WITHOUT ENOUGH ELECTRICITY TO POWER ITS TRAFFIC LIGHTS, THE SUBWAY TUNNELS ARE LIT UP LIKE LAS VEGAS!

THE TOUR ENDS AT THE NEXT STATION. OUR DRIVER PICKS US UP AT THE EXIT.

I'VE NEVER MET ANYONE WHO'S SEEN MORE THAN TWO STATIONS.

HMM... VERRY INTERESTING...