

the runaway korean bestseller



**i want  
to die  
but i  
want  
to eat  
tteokbokki**

**baek sehee**

translated by anton hur

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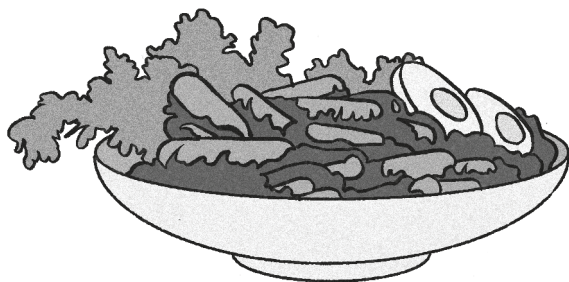
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B L O O M S B U R Y P U B L I S H I N G

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By Baek Sehee

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## TO THE READERS OF THE ENGLISH EDITION

Four years have passed since I published *I Want to Die but I Want to Eat Tteokbokki*. This very personal story, which I once wondered if anyone would ever bother reading, has been published in seven Asian languages and is now out in English. This is a fascinating turn of events, although a little intimidating. Because for all the positive feedback I had received, there were critical takes as well. My desire to speak freely of my mental suffering was matched by my desire to hide myself from it all. I doubt I could ever again be as candid in a book as I was in this one.

I hope you find points of connection between you and me on these pages. My desire to be of help and consolation is as powerful as ever.

Finally, I wish to leave you with some words that I find myself returning to whenever I feel myself growing weak. They are from an overseas reader of unknown gender, nationality, or appearance (I've never met them), and they are also words I wish to say to you, the people reading this book.

*I love and cherish your story. And I am your friend.*

Baek Sehee



## PROLOGUE

‘If you want to be happy, you mustn’t fear the following truths but confront them head-on: one, that we are always unhappy, and that our sadness, suffering and fear have good reasons for existing. Two, that there is no real way to separate these feelings completely from ourselves.’

– *Une Parfaite Journée Parfaite* by  
Martin Page

This epigraph is one of my favourite bits of writing, one I often go back to. Even in my most unbearably depressed moments I could be laughing at a friend’s joke but still feel an emptiness in my heart, and then feel an emptiness in my stomach, which would make me go out to eat some tteokbokki – what was wrong with me? I wasn’t deathly depressed, but I wasn’t happy either, floating instead in some feeling between the two. I suffered more because I had no idea that these contradictory feelings could and did coexist in many people.

Why are we so bad at being honest about our feelings? Is it because we’re so exhausted from living

that we don't have the time to share them? I had an urge to find others who felt the way I did. So I decided, instead of aimlessly wandering in search of these others, to be the person *they* could look for – to hold my hand up high and shout, *I'm right here*, hoping that someone would see me waving, recognise themselves in me and approach me, so we could find comfort in each other's existence.

This book is a record of the therapy I received for dysthymia, or persistent depressive disorder (a state of constant, light depression). It's also full of personal and sometimes pathetic details, but I've tried to make it more than just a venting of my dark emotions. I explore specific situations in my life, searching for the fundamental causes of my feelings so I can move in a healthier direction.

I wonder about others like me, who seem totally fine on the outside but are rotting on the inside, where the rot is this vague state of being not-fine and not-devastated at the same time. The world tends to focus too much on the very bright or the very dark; many of my own friends find my type of depression baffling. But what's an 'acceptable' form of depression? Is depression itself something that can *ever* be fully understood? In the end, my hope is for people to read this book and think, *I wasn't the only person who felt like this*; or, *I see now that people live with this*.

I've always thought that art is about moving hearts and minds. Art has given me faith: faith that today may

not have been perfect but was still a pretty good day, or faith that even after a long day of being depressed, I can still burst into laughter over something very small. I've also realised that revealing my darkness is just as natural a thing to do as revealing my light. Through my very personal practice of this art, I hope I can find my way into the hearts of others, just as this book has found its way into your hands.



# 1

## **SLIGHTLY DEPRESSED**

Classic signs such as hearing voices, intrusive thoughts and self-harming aren't the only signs of depression. Just as a light flu can make our whole body hurt, a light depression can make our minds ache all over.

Ever since I was a child I've been introverted and sensitive. The memories are vague now but according to my old diary entries I was clearly not a born optimist, and I would feel down from time to time. It was in high school when the depression really hit, which affected my studies, prevented me from going to college and compromised my future. Perhaps it was a given that I would end up depressed as an adult. But even when I changed all the parts of my life that I had wanted to change – my weight, education, partner, friends – I was still depressed. I didn't always feel that way, but I would go in and out of a funk that was as inevitable as bad weather. I might go to bed happy and wake up sad and sullen. I couldn't keep food down when I was stressed, and I would cry constantly when I was ill. I simply gave in to the fact that I was

someone who was depressed from birth, and let my world grow darker and darker.

My paranoia towards others grew worse, and my anxiety spiked around strangers, but I became expert at acting like all was well. And for the longest time, I kept pushing myself to be better, believing that I could get through my depression on my own. But it just got to be too much to bear at one point, and I finally decided to get help. I was nervous and afraid, but I tried to empty myself of expectations as I stepped into the consultation room.

**Psychiatrist:** So, how can I help you?

**Me:** Well, I think I'm slightly depressed. Should I go into more detail?

**Psychiatrist:** I'd appreciate that.

**Me:** (I take out my phone and read off the notes app.) I compare myself to others too much then scold myself accordingly, and I have low self-esteem.

**Psychiatrist:** Have you thought about what the cause of this behaviour and the low self-esteem might be?

**Me:** I think the self-esteem part comes from my upbringing. My mother would always bemoan how poor we were. We lived in a one-bedroom apartment that was too small for five people, and there was another apartment complex in our neighbourhood with the same name as ours that had bigger units. One time, a friend's mother asked me which complex we lived in, the smaller one or the bigger, and that made me ashamed of where we lived and nervous about revealing it to other people.

**Psychiatrist:** Is there anything else you remember?

**Me:** Oh, loads. It's such a cliché to put into words, but my father beat my mother. They

have this euphemism for it now, ‘marital disputes’, but it’s just violence, isn’t it? When I think back on my childhood, my memories are full of my father beating my mother and my sisters and me, smashing up the apartment and leaving the house in the middle of the night. We would cry ourselves to sleep, and in the morning leave the mess behind when we went to school.

**Psychiatrist:** How did that make you feel?

**Me:** Desperate? Sad? I felt like my family kept secrets I couldn’t tell anyone, secrets that kept growing bigger. I thought I had to hide it all. My older sister made sure I never spoke about what happened at home to people outside our family, and I made sure my younger sister kept silent about the whole thing. Everything that happened at home was detrimental to my self-esteem, but now I wonder if my older sister didn’t have something to do with that as well.

**Psychiatrist:** Do you mean your *relationship* with your older sister?

**Me:** I suppose so. My sister’s love was conditional. If I didn’t do well at school, gained weight or didn’t apply myself to whatever I did, she would mock and humiliate me.

She's a bit older than I am, which meant her word was law. There was a money aspect as well because she bought us clothes and shoes and backpacks. She manipulated us with these bribes, saying she would take back everything she bought for us if we didn't listen to her.

**Psychiatrist:** Did that make you want to run away?

**Me:** Of course. It seemed like such an abusive relationship. She was full of contradictions. For example, *she* could go on sleepovers, but I wasn't allowed. There were clothes she wouldn't let us wear. Loads of things like that. But everything was so love-hate with her; I hated her, but I was scared she would get mad at me and abandon me.

**Psychiatrist:** Have you ever tried distancing yourself from that relationship?

**Me:** Well, after I became an adult and started working part-time, I made a decision to become financially independent from her, at least. I did it little by little.

**Psychiatrist:** What about mental independence?

**Me:** That was hard. My sister's only friends were her boyfriend and me, because we were the only ones who would cater to her every whim.

She once told me that she hated spending time with other people and that I was the one she felt most comfortable with. That annoyed me so much that for the first time, I said something to her. I said: 'I'm not comfortable at all with you. In fact, you make me very *uncomfortable*.'

**Psychiatrist:** What was her reaction?

**Me:** She was shocked. Apparently, she spent the next few nights in tears. To this day if we mention it she cries.

**Psychiatrist:** How did seeing her react that way make you feel?

**Me:** Touched, I guess, but relieved as well. I felt liberated. A little.

**Psychiatrist:** So your self-esteem didn't improve after breaking away from your older sister?

**Me:** Sometimes I'd feel more confident about myself, but I think the general mood or depression continued. Like the thing I had depended on my sister for transferred to my partners.

**Psychiatrist:** And how are your romantic relationships? Do your partners approach you first or are you more proactive?

**Me:** I'm not proactive at all. If I like someone I just know they'll think I'm fair game and treat me horribly, which is why I don't even like to show them I like them. I've never told anyone I like them, or flirted with anyone. My relationships are always passive. If someone likes me, I go along with it for a while, and if that works out, we make it official. That's my pattern.

**Psychiatrist:** Does it ever *not* 'become official'?

**Me:** It almost always becomes official. When I go out with someone, it tends to be for the long term, and I end up depending heavily on them. My partners do take good care of me. But even when they understand me and make room for me, I feel frustrated. I don't want to be so dependent. I want to be self-sufficient and be fine when I'm alone, but I keep thinking that would be impossible.

**Psychiatrist:** What about your friendships?

**Me:** I was very serious about friendships when I was little, like most children. But after being bullied in elementary school and middle school, I think by the time I reached high school I'd developed a fear of straying from the herd, and was nervous about friendships in general. That fear was reflected in my romantic relationships,

and I decided not to expect too much from friends or friendships anymore.

**Psychiatrist:** I see. Do you find your work satisfying?

**Me:** Yes. I work in marketing for a publisher, running their social media accounts. I create content and monitor exposure, things like that. The work is fun and I'm a good fit for it.

**Psychiatrist:** So you get good results?

**Me:** I do. Which makes me want to work harder, and *that* sometimes makes me stress out about getting better results.

**Psychiatrist:** I see. Thank you for being so candid and going into so much detail. We'd have to do some more examinations, but you seem to have a tendency to be co-dependent. The extreme opposites of emotions tend to go hand in hand, which in this case means the more co-dependent you are, the more you don't want to be. For example, when you're co-dependent on your partner you resent them, but when you leave your partner, you feel anxious and bereft. Perhaps you're co-dependent on your work as well. When you get good results, your worth is realised and you relax, but that satisfaction doesn't