



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Rebel Anorexia

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The Rabbits in Submarines Collective

Abstract

This piece navigates the tangled web of food, guilt, and identity through the lens of my lifelong struggle with anorexia and disordered eating. Born into a patriarchal household in South Korea, I recount early experiences of forced eating, misophonia triggered by my father's unselfconscious table noises, and the simmering anger of a childhood shaped by unrelenting parental and societal expectations. These personal vignettes intertwine with reflections on contemporary food cultures, where guilt and anxiety now seem inseparable from the act of eating. During the inaugural Eating Disorders Awareness Week in 2023, audience members confessed their daily battles with food—orthorexic extremes, communal “guilty eating,” and the relentless pursuit of dietary perfection. Their stories revealed to me, long removed from mainstream food culture, the insidious ways in which communal and individual eating practices are shaped by a cycle of shame and compensation. Months later, at a Seoul International Food Film Festival panel for *The Table for Two*, I encountered a filmmaker's unsettling question: could anorexia be the “right” response to today's unhealthy food culture? Dumbfounded, I could feel the bone-deep hatred for our own bodies lingering in the air. Through these fragments, I examine the ambiguous territory of recovery—whether it is audacity, indifference, or something else entirely. Is anorexia merely pathology, or could it be rebellion against a world that demands too much? These reflections refuse easy answers, instead asking what it means to live with, and maybe beyond, the weight of such questions.

Keywords

Eating disorders; anorexia nervosa; misophonia; patriarchy and family dynamics; food culture and guilt; orthorexia and contemporary wellness; disordered eating in Korea; critical eating disorder studies

History

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I was born in January 1980, in a small, mountainous town in northeast South Korea, near the frontline military bases. I was the first child of a young, self-conscious, semi-alcoholic schoolteacher with thwarted political ambitions and his wife—exotically beautiful and bright, but forced to leave school early to support her family. Born premature, I spent my

earliest days in an incubator before my parents brought me to their cramped, filthy single-room teacher's residence.

Mom often reminded me, "You wouldn't eat well. I even bought that expensive Gerber baby food for you, but you refused to eat that too."

As a child, I never felt hungry, nor did food on the table appeal to me. Every mealtime was a trial. My mother, managing on a small budget, must have been frustrated by my struggles with eating. She would become hysterical and force me to swallow every bite. The atmosphere at the table was tense and oppressive. Inside, I felt a simmering anger, perhaps even a desire for revenge—though I didn't know against whom.

Sometimes, when I bit into something gritty or tasted an overly artificial chemical flavor, I silently wondered if my mother had poisoned my food.

I hated the slimy look of stir-fried eggplants and seasoned raw oysters (In Korea, oysters are not considered a luxury). One unforgettable day, my mother, exhausted and overwhelmed, scooped a spoonful of rice from my bowl, topped it with a slippery piece of seasoned oyster, and demanded I eat it. What could I do? To avoid her scolding, I tried, but I couldn't bring myself to swallow the oyster. The unbearable moment stretched on until my mother, enraged, ate the offending bite herself, threw down the spoon, and forced me to finish the rest of my meal alone, stiff with defiance, tasting nothing.

The only foods I tolerated were stir-fried anchovies and tofu. I once listed these as my favorites in a self-introduction assignment, only to discover my classmates had written "cookies," "ice cream," and "fruits." I was dumbstruck. To me, those weren't real food. My parents would never have considered them proper meals for their children. Proper meals were mandatory; enjoyable foods like snacks and fruits were indulgent luxuries.

My mother was acutely conscious of what we ate because we were thin, and people would comment, "You should eat more—you're all skin and bones!" She heard these remarks as critiques of her parenting: Was she feeding her daughters properly? My thin body reflected her perceived neglect, so she pushed me to eat heartily and gain weight.

Eating properly to satisfy my parents became my quiet preoccupation as their obedient eldest child. My mother sometimes bought "appetite boosters for kids" - probably just vitamins - from the pharmacy. I eagerly wanted to prove their effectiveness. One evening, after taking the pills, I sat at the dinner table, trying hard to enjoy my portion of seaweed soup. "I took the appetite booster, so it tastes good!" I announced, acting as if I were thrilled. My parents seemed pleased—or amused. But my younger sister, more assertive than I, muttered, "Not me. I still hate seaweed soup!" Her honesty made me feel ashamed of my ridiculous pretending.

One day, I came across a blog post by a sensitive college student, probably 20 years younger than me. Her writing stunned me. She described experiences that mirrored my own from high school, particularly her baffling anger and nausea at her father's behaviors during meals. How could this still happen? Hadn't the world changed enough in two decades?

Like me, she was tormented by the smacking and chopping noises her father made while eating. The unselfconscious sounds, so loud and invasive, overwhelmed her during meals. It reminded me of every breakfast in high school when my dad's eating noises made me want to scream. But I couldn't complain—it wasn't acceptable to criticize my father. I was just a high school student, bound to the unyielding demands of Korea's college entrance exam culture. My mother had no time for breakfast herself, busy preparing our lunchboxes, and my father—detached and authoritarian—was the silent ruler of our household, his mood dictating everything.

For a long time, I thought my reaction was purely Misophonia. Yet, strangely, I found comfort in ASMR videos of eating sounds on YouTube. The discrepancy made me realize my distress wasn't about the noises themselves but their context. It was tied to power dynamics, politics, and my sense of justice.

The blogger also described a familiar sense of shame tied to her father's lack of cultural legitimacy. She mentioned the music he played in the car; a mix of old pop songs that embarrassed her compared to the classical live performances her friend's father played. Reading her words, I was baffled. I found that taste in music entirely acceptable—perhaps even charming. My own father, in contrast, had always posed himself as a radical democrat and left-wing nationalist. He stood against his brutal, unapologetic dictator of a father, a man who had endured colonial oppression and civil war, and occasionally whipped his only son. My father also rejected the uneducated conservatism of his impoverished hometown. In our car, he proudly blasted raw protest anthems and satirical Pansori performances with titles like *Sea of Shit*, critiquing government corruption.

Despite the vast differences in our fathers, what connected me to the young blogger was the shared feeling of illegitimacy. For both of us, our fathers—patriarchal kings of their households—didn't possess the knowledge or cultural capital we thought necessary. Their bookshelves were too naive, too thin. My father couldn't prepare me for the intellectual challenges of university life or satisfy my yearning for "truth." All I knew was that the truth didn't exist in our home.

During this time, my Misophonia worsened. It once became so severe that I hallucinated during a harpsichord duet concert. We had received free tickets and attended on a whim, but I wanted to immerse myself in the music. Suddenly, a baby's hysterical cries cut through the performance, relentless and jarring. For a brief, terrifying moment, I imagined there was an axe beside me, ready to silence the noise. I felt nauseated and weak, appalled by my own intrusive thought.

These narcoleptic-like symptoms grew more intense as the college entrance exam loomed closer. I began fasting during the day, dumping my lunch into the trash before leaving the classroom at night. To deceive my mother, I smeared sticky rice onto my spoon and chopsticks, making it look like I'd eaten. Surviving on a few cups of vending machine coffee each day, I'd return home late and cook myself bizarre fried eggs, seasoned with excessive salt, black pepper, and red pepper powder. My mother didn't mind—she was just relieved to see me eating something, as I was visibly underweight and unwell.

This marked the beginning of my DSM-defined eating disorders. I sabotaged my entrance exam, earning a shockingly poor result that disappointed my teachers and school. Although

I entered an elite university, it was in a major I hadn't chosen or even considered. The following year, I attempted suicide but failed, spectacularly and painfully. Soon after, I developed bulimia.

In my 2021 memoir *Swallowing Practice*, I chronicled over 20 years of eating disorders. Though they no longer dominate my life, their shadows linger. For example, I am not familiar with, so to speak, culinary trends. This sometimes embarrasses me when I find myself at a trendy restaurant with colleagues, staring at a dish I have no idea how to eat. It feels like everyone else naturally knows the etiquette, while I'm left fumbling, unsure how to approach the unfamiliar food in front of me. I usually don't eat meat, but when someone asks if I'm vegan or vegetarian, I answer honestly: I just prefer vegetables. I have no strict principles about it.

Over time, I became averse to meat—and eventually to seafood, too—to all animal flesh, really. Yet, I still enjoy milk, dairy products, and occasionally eggs. Curiously, I also developed a new allergy to certain fruits, though I'm not entirely sure when or why it began. For the most part, I eat alone even now. When I visit my parents, I prepare my plate separately and take it to another room to eat by myself. Sometimes, I feel a pang of guilt, imagining how happy my elderly parents would be if I joined them at the table. But, sadly, I'm still not ready to make that kind of sacrifice—to suppress my own deeply ingrained discomfort for the sake of the people I love most in the world.

Food delivery apps have become my pharmacy, a quick fix for discomfort. When I feel anxious or nauseated from the laxatives that I take nightly, I open the app to order something hot and spicy. The act of ordering alone lifts my mood, even though I know the symptoms would pass on their own if I waited. Ironically, after placing the order and finally feeling ready to drift off to sleep, I often find myself wishing the food wouldn't arrive at all. By the time it does, I'm no longer hungry, and the untouched meal ends up sitting outside my door until morning. When I finally bring it inside, I feel both relieved and defeated—relieved that I avoided bingeing and purging again, but defeated because I must eat the neglected food eventually.

It's far more than just eating food. Layers of meaning cling to it, almost like cathexis. There's the cumulative, unpaid, and patriarchal labor of my mother. There's my father's persistent desire to control his vision of an ideal family. And there's my own reliance on digital capitalism to provide instant relief for my mood.

Take my current situation, for instance: living in Seoul means shouldering the high cost of rent alongside the expenses of daily bingeing and purging, all in an effort to alleviate the discomfort I feel inside. The places I can afford to live in are not serene residential neighborhoods but noisy commercial areas devoid of proper grocery stores, save for convenience stores. Living frugally, cooking every meal from fresh ingredients—these ideals feel out of reach. Practicing them would require a certain boldness, a willingness to cook pungent, lingering-smelling meals in a communal kitchen, completely unbothered by the presence of other tenants. That kind of audacity simply isn't me.

Sometimes, I wonder if this very indifference and boldness regarding cooking and eating is what people mean by "recovery." But is that truly what recovery looks like?

The fact is that, as of today, most people seem to feel guilty about their eating habits and food choices. During the sessions of our inaugural Eating Disorders Awareness Week, which I held in February 2023, I was genuinely surprised by how many people in the audience admitted to anxiously trying to control what and when they eat. Their efforts stemmed from the frustration and discomfort they feel every day, at every meal. Many shared that they believed they were eating far more than necessary and consuming the "wrong" types of food. One woman even confessed that her pursuit of healthy eating had driven her to the extremes of orthorexia.

Having been removed from contemporary food cultures for over two decades, I couldn't immediately grasp what people usually ate or why it provoked such guilt and anxiety. However, another young woman who attended the sessions later wrote an article about them and showed it to me. Through her writing, I was finally able to see how communal eating and popular menu choices have evolved—and how they now seem to foster this overwhelming sense of inescapable guilt. She described her wish to compensate for or undo the collective act of "guilty eating," even though it felt impossible.

Months later, I was invited as a guest panellist at the screening of *The Table for Two*, the latest work by director Boram Kim, during the Seoul International Food Film Festival. The film, which explored anorexia, featured my friend Chaeyoung and her mother. The host, a filmmaker herself, was clearly unfamiliar with eating disorders. During our rather awkward conversation, she asked me—seeking confirmation—whether anorexia might actually be a correct or even desirable way to escape today's unhealthy food culture. Dumbfounded, I sat in silence, acutely aware of the bone-deep hatred people seem to harbour for their own bodies and the palpable fear that filled the room.

At and about that time, when I was invited by the Feminist Counselling Research Group to speak about eating disorders at Keimyung University in Daegu, I shared the following anecdote as a subheading in my presentation:

“Even I feel bloated and uncomfortable after gaining weight during the holidays, but over time, it gets better.” “So, returning to a lifestyle of overeating and discomfort—this frustrating cycle of 'human greed is endless, and we keep repeating the same mistakes'—is that what recovery is? Is that what it means to be healthy?”

I confessed to the audience that this was an actual conversation between my nutrition therapist and me, and the room erupted in laughter. I continued, “But the answer to the question I posed might actually be, 'Yes.' It really might be. I've been reflecting on this a lot recently.” The expressions on the teachers' faces turned to unease, and no one laughed anymore.

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