

RUNAWAY JUNO'S PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

the world is waiting

JIYEON JUNO KIM

The World is Waiting

Jiyeon Juno Kim

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To those of you who feel like you don't belong anywhere.

And to my family, because you are everything.

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"Everyone deserves the chance to fly."
And if I'm flying solo, at least I'm flying free
To those who'd ground me, take a message back from me.
Tell them how I am defying gravity.
I'm flying high, defying gravity.

- Musical *Wicked*

Chapter 1

Happiness is Someone Else's Business

In Korea, it's pretty common to think that happiness is someone else's business, that only a select few can be happy in this harsh society. During my painful career change period, I got to know a lot about Koreans and how they think, maybe just about people in general.

Koreans don't think happiness is a given state or that it's a priority in life. It's something that only a select few can have. Their definition of happiness is different from the West. For them, happiness comes from the stability of life and level of success, more than how content you are. People actually strive to be one of the masses, to not stand out from the crowd.

If you were born with a family fortune (so you don't have to work), if you are married to a soul mate (which is not so common), if you are extremely handsome and beautiful, or supercalifragilisticexpialidociously talented so a job comes along no question, then you are one of the chosen ones. Otherwise, don't daydream about happiness. You can't have it.

Obviously, I'm not one of the chosen ones. But the thing is, people secretly don't want themselves or their children to be special. Of course they pray their kid has some kind of talent when they are young, but in the end being ordinary is the best thing. I think I'm special with all the gifts and talents I've developed through the years, but that bothers my parents. There's an expression in Korea, *you are cursed if you have wanderlust*.

My biggest and most frequent encounter with other people's views on happiness was when I decided to leave my career as an engineer, which everyone thought was the best job in the world, to do what I really wanted, which everyone thought was a fake job.

Photography has always been a big part of my life. I knew I was a creative person, and my office job wasn't supporting my creativity. I also wanted to see the world before it was too late. I wanted something more alive, more than just trying to survive each day.

Here's what happened. My first two years at the engineering job, I was extremely unhappy. Every day was agony. I wished the day would end the moment I woke up. I was living with my parents, and a Korean household is not so open to people showing emotion. It's everyone's duty to do okay and be okay. But I wasn't. Instead of showing everyone that I wasn't doing okay, I shut out everyone around me, just so I could get through each day without upsetting my family.

One day, I got a phone call from my mom. She said we needed to talk because we were not acting like a family anymore. And I heard my father's angry tone in the background. They were ready to blame me for everything. I was the miserable one who was ruining the whole family dynamic. In a Korean family, it's the youngest's duty to keep things light and happy. I needed to suck it up around everyone and make things smooth for their sake. But obviously, I wasn't really happy with that not-agreed-upon position while I was having my own problems. I wasn't going to let them blame me for their unhappiness on top of what I was going through. I knew now was the time. I needed to tell my parents that I was going to make some big changes in my life.

Now, one thing you should know about me, is I don't do well with loud noises, especially yelling. My heart immediately sinks down to my toes when I hear an angry voice. I don't do well with people who have a temper. Fast-moving cars freak me out, whether I'm in the car or it's driving by.

When I came home, they were already there. I unpacked my bag and sat down on the couch where my dad was. I initiated the conversation with, "I know you are not happy with me right now." His first reaction was, "Why is she talking to me now?" to my mother, ignoring me completely. *Okay, this is going to go smoothly*, I thought. But I went ahead anyway.

Without any smartass comments, I shared my honest feelings, problems, and what my plan was. I told them I had been extremely unhappy for the last two years, and it had led to bad health, made me an irresponsible person, and that my heart wasn't in the job. I said I wanted to do something I cared about much more, not just for the money, but because I was a young and passionate person. I had been thinking about it for a while but I wanted to tell them now before I handed my four weeks' notice to my company. I thought it was a pretty mature and sincere conversation.

The 'what I thought was a sincere conversation' exploded wildly in front of my eyes. There was a mixture of many bad words yelled at me that is still painful to think about.

I told them I was thinking of changing my career to a travel writer, and I was doing quite well with my blog, RunawayJuno.com, that had already been running for a year and a half. My dad was very angry, frustrated, and started pouring out these opinions of his that I couldn't really agree with.

"I should've broken your legs or locked you up when you went to travel, that way you wouldn't have known there's a world out there. You're not special. You're that way because you're hanging out with the wrong crowd of people [unmarried, traveling foreigners]. Your mom made you this way because she didn't say no to anything. You're cocky because you can speak English. You're not special. You're not special enough to be happy."

Just like that. That's just a brief summary of what I heard for the next two hours. My parents, specifically my father, really wanted me to know that I wasn't special in any way. That meant I wasn't special enough to do anything extraordinary. I wasn't one of the chosen ones. I was meant to live an ordinary Korean life, working for a paycheck, getting married and having a family, maintaining mediocre friendships, being nice to my parents. Doing something else other than what was on the main path was taboo. If I couldn't be number one at what I did in the world (like getting a gold medal at the travel blogging Olympics or something), it was useless to try at all.

Pursuing happiness is seen as a selfish thing to do in Korea. And it is the same in a lot of other conservative countries. I recently realized that. No one cares about finding their own happiness or that other people have a right to be happy. Even though my life is technically mine, I have to live it according to my elders' expectations, because they gave me this precious life. Several times that night my father said, "What about what I want from you?" when I told him what I wanted for my life. Leaving your home and family to build your own life is considered extremely selfish.

The last tear-filled yelling encounter we had ended with my father saying, "I don't understand you, and I'm not going to try to understand you, ever."

As devastated as I was by the conversation I also understood their point of view. I realized it a while ago, that they couldn't really accept the fact that their kids were grown-ups. Me moving out and building a separate life was a sign of separation to them. They were never good at the concept of individuality. Me saying, "I want to travel the world and become a writer," sounded like, "I'm sick of you and this country." It was hard for me to hear that they thought I was looking down on people who lived the normal life I was trying to escape from.

After several unpleasant but necessary encounters, I watched myself go through five major reactions. First, I was devastated. Even though I hadn't grown up with a lot of support and encouragement from my parents, harsh words were not an easy thing to hear from them, the people who were supposed to love me no matter what. I couldn't believe my dad had even said he wanted to physically hurt me so I couldn't go out and find out about the world. Maybe he was too upset to think straight, or was just making up things to say to make the situation worse, I couldn't tell which. But like another old saying in Korea, *Words are like water; you can't sweep them back into a bag*. I felt abandoned. After the painful argument, I packed a day bag and got out of the house. I remember sitting in a dark corner and crying under a streetlight.

Then I questioned myself. I thought back to the things I'd been accused of and asked myself, 'Am I really those things?' Am I really not

special? Am I really not smart enough to survive at what everyone does on a daily basis? Am I really looking down on people because they are living a normal life? I'm just weak and whiny. I dream things that I can't achieve. I dream, that's all I do. I never made any dreams come true. I saw myself slowly agreeing with all these statements and it crushed me even more.

Then I got angry. I got angry with my parents for making me feel this bad and doubt myself. All the questions I asked myself, I'd already gone through them when I was figuring out my life. I knew I wasn't giving up but moving on. I looked back on what I wanted in my life and what I told them. I wanted to be happy. I wanted to work at something I was passionate about. I wanted to spend my young days doing something more meaningful. Is there something wrong with that? I was angry at all the social conventions. Why couldn't we pursue happiness?

I tried to calm down. I was exhausted emotionally and physically. Most of all I didn't want to be angry. That's just not who I am. I was still mad and tired, but my mind was clearer than ever. I went to a café and sat down to analyze the whole conversation. It still hurt but the answers were more obvious this time. I looked at the facts and questioned myself about the circumstances and solutions instead of criticizing myself. Trying something new might be considered wrong, but it is only wrong if you let it be.

At last, I listened my soul. My ego was badly beaten up but my soul spoke loud and clear. I couldn't hear it before because I was too distracted with negative thoughts. Now I was all ears. The water was already spilled, everything was out, and it was time for me to move on and finish the game. *What did I really want? What was more important? Approval from other people, or my own happiness?*

It's funny how the moment of epiphany comes when you least expect it. It came after I spent that night at a 24-hour café in Seoul. The whole night I re-lived that conversation, the most discouraging conversation of my life. I headed down to the subway station at 7 o'clock in the morning with a heavy heart. I'd decided to take a day off from everything. It was morning rush hour. In the wave of black suits and

high-heels, I was the only one wearing a green sports jacket, carrying a yellow backpack, and walking in the other direction. Like Moses parting the Red Sea, I made a clear path through the waves coming at me. Every single person in the crowd looked miserable and I remembered, *I was one of them*. Walking in the middle of the gray wave of people, I started feeling sorry for them. That was the moment I thought, *I've had enough*. I felt free walking in the other direction, I felt alive wearing something different, and I felt responsible. I had decided to take my future into my own hands.

I remembered my theme song, *Defying Gravity*, the one from *Wicked* that I had quoted in my Master's thesis,

"Everyone deserves a chance to fly. Even if I'm flying solo, at least I'm flying free."

It was so right. I had been listening to that song for years and now it was time to *really* listen. If my parents were not on board with my plan because they cared more about social norms than their own daughter's happiness, I had to fly solo. Even if I had to fly solo, at least I'd be free. It broke my heart that I was going to disappoint them so deeply, and crush their dreams of having a normal daughter who married early and had kids, but it was also clear that they couldn't make me change my decision just because they wanted something different. I decided to quit my job because I wanted to be more responsible for my life.

That might sound like it doesn't make sense. How is quitting your job responsible? But living a life someone else wants me to wouldn't be responsible either. So what if my parents didn't think I was special, or that they wanted me to belong to the mainstream? They didn't want me to become an entrepreneur, but *I* did. Who knew if I really would make something out of this 'fake job' as they called it? But the question was, no one knew what was going to happen in the near future. For sure, working for a paycheck was less risky. A big company is less likely to fall apart in one day than a small business. But life is too precious to worry about what's going to happen tomorrow. Sometimes we just need to focus on what's going on today and how we can make it better. I'm not saying ditch tomorrow because today is more important.

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I'm saying if we can find how to make today better, we're more likely to be happy tomorrow. If you spend your time whining and mourning how miserable you are today, who'll make your tomorrow better? So I decided to be the one to make the change.

Even if I flew solo, at least I flew free.