

GU BYEONG-MO

TRANSLATED BY JAMIE CHANG



The Wizard's Bakery

워저드
베이커리

THE GENRE-DEFINING MAGICAL BESTSELLER

About the Author

Gu Byeong-mo was born in 1976 in Seoul. She studied Korean language and literature at Kyung-Hee University. She made her literary debut with the novel *The Wizard's Bakery* (2009). It became a bestseller in Korea and was translated into numerous languages. She has published more than twenty works of fiction and won notable literary prizes.

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Also by Gu Byeong-mo, and available in English:

THE OLD WOMAN WITH THE KNIFE

(Canongate, 2022)

YOUR NEIGHBOUR'S TABLE

(Wildfire, 2024)

THE WIZARD'S BAKERY

Gu Byeong-mo

Translated from the Korean
by Jamie Chang



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IMPORTANT NOTE

Please read with care. This book touches on dark topics and sensitive subject matter as follows: domestic violence, grief and loss, sexual assault, physical abuse, rape, suicide/attempted suicide, death of a parent, paedophilia, emotional manipulation, self-harm.

This is a work of magical realism depicting the harsh reality of the society we unfortunately live in, and the consequences of using magic to avoid taking responsibility for one's actions.

Prologue



I smell sugar caramelising over medium heat.

And with that, my senses turn keen: I feel the elasticity of dough freshly kneaded from high-gluten bread flour, hear a pat of yellow butter bubbling into a circle on a frying pan, see the ripples created by a dollop of whipped cream garnishing a cup of coffee. Whenever I stand in front of the bakery, I can feel the yeast at work in the resting dough and make out whether the subtle scent of the tart of the day was fig or apricot.

I am sick of bread.

The 24-hour bakery sat about a hundred yards away from my apartment complex, near the bus stop. I wondered if anyone actually craved a ham croissant or a bland-as-cardboard rosemary bagel at one in the morning, but the place was lit up twenty-four hours a day, ready for customers.

Through the window, I could see a girl around my age, maybe younger. She worked the register during the day. In the kitchen behind the counter, a man who looked somewhere between late twenties and early thirties baked things that smelled sweet and delicious. At night, the baker shuffled back and forth between the kitchen and the register. As with most small neighbourhood bakeries, the baker appeared to also be the owner.

For a small neighbourhood bakery, they sold an impressive range of baked goods. Each time I passed the place, flour hung in the air and tickled my nose, and I could taste sugar molecules melting on the tip of my tongue. A delivery van pulled up in front of the bakery, loaded a great number of boxes to be shipped out, and drove off.

But the late hours and absurdly large production relative to the size of the establishment were not the only things I found strange about the bakery. The true oddity of the place was the baker. I don't know if that was just my personal opinion or other customers found him strange, too, but I imagine

he would have gone out of business much sooner if word had got around the neighbourhood that he was objectively weird.

Provided he kept his mouth shut, the baker looked like any other artisan with a quiet focus on his work: man in a silly-looking paper hat with a ponytail peeking out below, face the colour of finely sifted baking powder. His movements meticulous, graceful and efficient, he looked the part of a skilled pastry chef capable of making a living from word-of-mouth alone, without having to join a franchise. I had always seen him that way as well, until one day when I pointed a pair of tongs at a pastry that sort of resembled a streusel-topped bun but with some questionable modifications, and asked what was in it.

The girl at the register started to say, 'Oats and rye and—'

'Liver. Dried,' a voice interrupted.

I raised my head to see the baker standing in the kitchen doorway, just past the girl's stiffening shoulders.

'Finely ground human infant liver powder. Three parts liver mixed with seven parts flour.'

The tongs slipped out of my hand and hit the floor with a clank. I didn't really believe he had put liver, dried or raw, in the bun. And even if it did contain liver, it would have to be from a pig, and not an infant. (Let's not imagine that unsettling taste.)

But why was he joking about ingredients? It would only be a matter of time before the rumour spread that the neighbourhood baker was a little cuckoo and the Condo Complex Women's Association, concerned about 'harmful establishments' affecting housing prices, would join forces to drive him out.

The girl swatted him on the stomach with the back of her hand and told him to stop joking around.

Of course he was joking. As I sighed and bent down to pick up the tongs, I spotted wafer cookies on the next shelf. He saw what I was looking at.

'Shit of the titi bird,' he said. 'Spread ever so thinly between two wafers. Glazed with a syrup made from marinated raven eyeballs. They strike a delicate balance between sweet, bitter and sour, rather like Ethiopian coffee ...'

'Are you trying to drive all of our customers away?' The girl jabbed him in the side.

Was he attempting to make a joke? Why? Just to see how far he would go, I pointed at something that looked like jelly sweets.

‘Three-pack of cat tongues. Persian, Siamese, Abyssinian.’

I slammed the tongs on the countertop. The girl took them in the back to wash them, while the baker adjusted his hat and laughed. ‘I’m not joking. I was telling you the truth because I thought a child like you would understand.’

Who are you calling a child? Besides, even children these days weren’t stupid enough to believe him. Most kids knew that Santa Claus was their parent, their social worker, or some college kid in a santa suit.

I looked around the bakery. The pink-and-yellow chequered wallpaper looked homey. Hanging crookedly on the wall was one of those crudely designed calendars they hand out for free at banks or churches every year. The display case, where the pastry lay in straight rows and columns, was so clean there wasn’t a single handprint in sight, and the handle gleamed gold in the light of the overhead lamps. Overall, there was nothing fancy about the place, but it wasn’t run-down – no cracks in the walls, and no streams of unidentifiable liquid trickling down the cracks, smelling up the place or giving it a creepy air. It was just your average clean and humble neighbourhood bakery. The baker *looked* normal, too. No matter how hard I searched, nothing about his appearance said he might be a creepy guy despite the things he said.

Stuttering, I asked him if there was anything he could recommend for a normal person to eat, and I grabbed a bag of plain rolls, no sausages or cheese, and set it on the counter. Surely there was nothing in them besides the basic ingredients, like flour, eggs and milk.

But then, as he passed the girl on his way into the kitchen, the baker offered, unsolicited, ‘I substituted Rapunzel’s dandruff for flour . . .’

I lifted my hand, stopping him before the girl could interject, and put 2,500 won in change on the counter. Assessment complete: the baker is nuts.

I opened the door and stepped outside. Suddenly, I felt as though the dingy neighbourhood bakery was in the middle of a dark forest, the kind that appeared in fairy tales: ‘Once upon a time, there was a wizard who lived in a deep, dark forest, and he made different pastries every day. Each time a breeze passed through the forest, the leaves would rustle against each

other, passing the scent of those pastries far, far out to the edge of the woods.'

The moment I got home, I would have to tell someone about the place and ask if someone shouldn't do something about the crazy man in the bakery located on the ground floor of the third building from the bus stop . . . but who on earth would I tell?

Returning home and opening the front door, I would confirm that no one was there to listen to me. Wasn't that why I bought the rolls on my way home in the first place? So I could take a bite of bread and a sip of milk, chew on the sentiments of a day that was neither too dry nor too soggy, then store them in an airtight container and pack them away somewhere deep within?

Enough about other people. Who was I to judge whether someone was sane or not? In the eyes of the world, I was probably the loony one, not the man who owns and manages a shop, however small.

My stuttering started four years ago. Reading something out loud, I didn't hesitate or mispronounce words. I could carefully draft my thoughts on paper and read them out loud without any difficulty, but I couldn't produce even a simple yes or no if I didn't have it written in front of me.

Some circuit in my body had to be damaged or infected. Without the medium of written words, my thoughts refused to come out through my mouth. To me, letters were neurotransmitters that stimulated my slow, bumbling synapses. Without putting it down on paper first, my thoughts were not only not my own, but something too trivial even to be called thought, an error message tossed in the recycling bin as soon as it came out of the printer.

If someone were to try to comfort me by saying that everyone finds it hard to think on their feet and string together a coherent sentence, I would agree. But for me, it was more than difficult. It was impossible. No matter how hard I tried, no matter how patiently the other person waited for the words to come, the result was always the same intermittent gasp of repeated consonants and vowels that formed no meaning at all.

The symptoms first appeared at the end of primary school. At first, I couldn't figure out what was going on. Father standing over me and yelling to speak up worsened my fear to the extent that I couldn't take a breath and figure out what was going on in my mouth or in my head. This was a time

when people did not understand that stuttering was a mechanical problem that could not be overcome through willpower alone, and they treated stuttering as a symptom of low intelligence.

Not long after I entered middle school, my form teacher said to me one day, 'Forget it. Just give me a yes or no.'

Despite the very simple options before me, I said yes, then no, then yes, and so on about nine times before he slapped me across the face.

'Yes or no, dammit!'

After a few kicks and a sound whipping, I instinctively curled up into a ball to minimise surface area and potential injury. I was in Teachers' Office 3, a small room occupied by only twelve teachers and no students around to record the brutality with their mobile phone cameras. To this day, I don't recall what the teacher's yes/no question was.

At the end of the year, when I was to be summoned once again by the same form teacher for the annual career counselling, I prepared a piece of paper and a pencil in hope of sparing myself at least one blow. The teacher read my thoughtful, eloquent, logical and, most importantly, scrupulous answer and said he was sorry he had misjudged me before but that I should really see a doctor before I started thinking about my future.

'What's going to happen to you once you go out into the world? You won't even get into university, let alone find a job. No one's going to accept you if you mumble through your interview like the cat's got your tongue. You're all grown up now. You have got to stop dwelling in the past.'

I nodded, while I scoffed to myself, *You think you're so smart, don't you? Putting the pieces together based on what my father told you at parents' evening?* I didn't have to be there to know what he must have said:

'He is my child, but I haven't been a good father to him. Poor thing. His mother abandoned him at Cheongnyangni Station when he was six. We found him a week later! I was so preoccupied with what happened to his mother that I didn't think to look after him, so he had no one . . . I had to enrol him in school early so someone could at least watch him during the day. But now he has a stepmother who provides him with a stable home environment, so if you could just be patient with him . . .'

If the teacher had half a brain, he would have noticed the suspicious time lapse between the abandonment and when my stuttering began, and concluded that the connection between the two was close to nil. (More on this later.)

From then on until I left primary school, none of my teachers ever called on me in class. Even in maths lessons when the answer was just a number, no one, except for a select minority of teachers – some sadistic, others not in the mood to teach – wanted to call on a child who was sure to make the entire class fall behind in the curriculum.

When you have a problem that makes you stick out, you'll be picked on for it. Being of average height with no experience of fighting, I defended myself using a technique I saw once in an illustrated self-defence manual. When someone's beating you, crouch as far down as you can so the attacker's arms are punching vertically. (Be careful not to get too close to the ground, for that's when the kicking starts.) Then grab the attacker's arm and pull straight down, then jump up, shoving their arm up hard. This will dislocate the attacker's shoulder. (Warning: run away as fast as you can while the attacker is screaming in pain, or your joints won't be safe either.)

Father paid for the kid's treatment, and I was suspended for a week. When I returned, the story had snowballed in the absence of the involved parties, and kids started to avoid me. After that, school life was relatively painless. When I got to secondary school, I could publicly announce that I did not speak and not be harassed for it.

The bakery guy and I had something in common – as long as we kept our mouths shut, no one knew that we both had a screw loose somewhere. That was why I was so curious about him and identified with him.

They were coming after me.

The spiral cleats on the bottoms of my sneakers clawed at the ground, rapidly, savagely. The smell of rubber burning from the friction rushed at me. The shrieks, the cries and the fury that clung so tenaciously to my heels, I shook off in the wind.

As I raced down the street, I realised I had nowhere to go. I could spend the night at an internet café or something, but it all happened so quickly that I ran out without grabbing anything. The mobile phone I almost never used (since I don't speak) was still in the bag next to my desk. Not that having the phone on me would have made any difference now. Did I have any 'friends' I could call for help? Would anyone invite me in with open arms and not be frustrated by my stuttering? There was my maternal aunt and grandmother, but I hadn't heard from them in six years. I didn't know if they were alive or dead, let alone where they lived. How long, and how far

could I run like this? I was just about out of ideas when the bakery caught my eye.

I gasped for air. Past the display window dirty with handprints, I could see the baker inside. I had become a regular at the bakery for reasons beyond my control, but if it wasn't for my speech impediment, I would have asked him: *Why is your bakery open twenty-four hours? Does anyone ever come looking for bread this late at night?*

He seemed busy all the time, but even he couldn't be safe from the feelings creeping up in the quiet moments. Wasn't he lonely working there day after day, all by himself? More importantly, when did he sleep?

But thanks to his 24-hour bakery, I now had a place to seek refuge.

I pushed the door open. The store was warm from the heat of the freshly baked goods. He looked at me with his bright, brown eyes. He didn't have his chef's hat on. He was wearing his regular clothes, not his usual white baker's uniform. Was the bakery closed for the day? Hurried and desperate, the words rushed out all at once.

'Hide me,' I said without a hint of a stutter. They would never look for me in a bakery just a few hundred metres from the apartment complex.

He didn't ask questions, or speak, or nod. He simply opened the door to the kitchen where the sweet smell of chocolate still hung in the air. He said nothing, but his wide shoulders seemed to usher me in.

The kitchen had the look of an ordinary bakery kitchen, not that I knew much about commercial kitchens. Inside were two enormous ovens. He opened the door to the slightly larger oven, pulled out the racks, and looked at me. Did he want me to hide in there? In that moment, I thought of the witch that was burned alive – the one who bided her time fattening Hansel up, but fell head first into the woodstove thanks to Gretel's cunning. Was I the witch or Gretel in that story?

But there was no time to think. I put one foot in the still-warm oven, wondering why he wasn't telling me to take off my shoes first. Was this sanitary?

As he gestured with his chin to get in, I stammered, 'Okay, b-but don't t-turn on the oven.'