

# **SURVIVING SAMSARA**

A MEMOIR OF  
BREAKDOWNS, BREAKTHROUGHS,  
AND MENTAL ILLNESS

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*Surviving Samsara* is a true story. Some of the names have been changed to protect people's identities; others remain unchanged.

It is about the trauma of mental illness. It deals with mania, psychosis, hallucinations, shame, guilt, hypersexuality, depression, attempted suicide, suicidal ideation, and the devastating aftermath of a diagnosis. This is difficult subject matter. It is also my lived experience.

But this memoir is also about my transformation. I came of age through mental illness. I grew because of, not despite, this difficult subject matter.

**Samsara:** “‘Round of rebirth,’ lit. ‘perpetual wandering,’ is a name by which is designated the sea of life ever restlessly heaving up and down, the symbol of this continuous process of ever again and again being born, growing old, suffering and dying. More precisely put, samsara is the unbroken chain of the fivefold khandha-combinations, which, constantly changing from moment to moment, follow continuously one upon the other through inconceivable periods of time. Of this samsara, a single lifetime constitutes only a tiny and fleeting fraction; hence to be able to comprehend the first noble truth of universal suffering, one must let one’s gaze rest upon the samsara, upon this frightful chain of rebirths, and not merely upon one single lifetime, which, of course, may be sometimes less painful.”

—*Buddhist Dictionary* by Nyanatiloka Mahathera

# SURVIVING SAMSARA

*December 26, 2000*

My mind is consumed by raging fire. I scream in excruciating pain. Leaning over the edge of the Burrard Street Bridge, I am tempted to jump into False Creek to extinguish the flames. I climb up onto the railing. I balance atop it, looking down. The water sparkles like a diamond tiara as I spin the roulette wheel of Samsara. I must extinguish my anguish. I turn back to see the world one last time. The bright sunny morning mocks me. It is annoyingly cheerful. The traffic flies past me, oblivious to my plight. I am one insignificant man, in an overpopulated planet of seven billion suffering souls, desiring death.

My head spins as I picture myself plummeting into the icy water. Into oblivion. I walk the tightrope in my head. One false step and I'm dead.

# JOY

*July 1, 1990*

I am at a house party in Ottawa when I meet a woman named Joy.

“It’s a joy to meet you, Joy,” I say.

She beams at me, then says, “I am manic-depressive.”

The conversation ends before it really began. Not knowing what to say, I make an excuse: “I have to call my girlfriend.”

A lie. I avoid her all night, staying upstairs while she waits below, lost in the party.

She reminds me of a dog I once had when I was eight years old. He was always happy to see me, jumping up and licking my face. Overwhelmed by his affection, I fled upstairs, afraid to come down.

Eventually my mother lost her patience. “Okay, we’ll give him away to the SPCA.”

She made me accompany her. I carried the dog in my arms. He looked at me and I saw tears in his eyes.

He spoke to me: *Don’t leave me.*

When we arrived at the SPCA, I said, “Mum, I’ve changed my mind. I want to keep him.”

“No,” she replied. “After all the trouble you’ve caused me, dragging me all the way here, you don’t deserve a dog.”

This is how I would come to feel every time I was led back to the psych ward: an obedient dog crying to God, *Don’t leave me.*

# MY FULL-TIME JOB

*January 2000*

I'm sick of feeling drowsy all the time. I'm tired of sleeping my life away. I go to the bathroom, stand before the cabinet mirror, and stare into my reflection. I open the cabinet and remove my pill containers. I lift the toilet lid and seat. One by one, I pop open the containers and drop the pills into the toilet bowl. Before the capsules can sink, I push the handle and the rush of water flushes my meds down the toilet.



A week later, I'm standing on the rooftop patio of my parents' house in the new millennium, staring across the skyline at the grey cityscape, lost in a haze of pollution, listening to the city drone *ooooooooo*. The cold winter sun is blindingly bright.

I've been awake for days. I'm thirty, but I feel like I'm a thousand years old. Now, I am dying to sleep. I have ricocheted myself to the opposite extreme: insomnia. I want to chloroform myself into oblivion, while the rest of the world is buzzing busy at work.

A new house is being erected nearby. I see it rise day by day, piece by piece, plank by plank, from the foundation up to the roof. The new model house for the twenty-first century. It dominates the smaller, older houses—reminding me that I will never own my own home, have my own family, a wife and kids, like normal people.

I see an escalator descending and ascending from heaven. The cogwheels turn and churn in a madness of productivity. And I am not riding on it. And I am not riding on it. The cast-iron heart of the city pounds *CACHUNK, CACHUNK, CACHUNK*, driving a million iron nails into my head as the day grinds away, oblivious to my existence.

All I hear is the noise of construction. Drilling, hammering, buzzing, sawing. Vultures circle, casting shadows over me, waiting for me to cave in.

I resist. I shut my ears, but the sound is coming from inside my head. The voices of the city, mocking me: *Get a job. Get a job. Get a job. Useless welfare bum. Leech. Freeloader. Get off your lazy ass and work.*

I want to shout back, *Being mentally ill is a full-time job!*

I stumble to the door of the rooftop patio, nearly fall down the stairs. I open the back door and stagger like a drunk down the back alley toward that house. I am not going to be beaten down. I won't be defeated.

God's thick finger whacks me, and whacks me, and whacks me, pushing me around like a helpless puppet. He is a merciless drill sergeant barking in my ear: "Idle hands are the work of the Devil!"

I march toward the construction site, looking for the foreman. Rolling up my sleeves, I am prepared to demand, "Give me a job, your hardest job. I'll slave and sweat harder than a thousand men. Give me a job. I won't take no for an answer. *Give me back my life!*"

I hear a meow. I look down and see Tarim. An iridescent shaft of light pierces my soul. She is in a panic, running to me. She rubs against me, hungry for affection.

*Come back, she says. It's all right.*

She rubs and rubs against me until gradually I feel the numbness give way and slowly, *shanti shanti shanti hush hush shhh shhh*, slowly, the droning stops. By small degrees, I begin to feel human again.

I pick her up and hug her fiercely. I am a balloon flapping in the wind. She is my anchor. I can feel her heart beating as I turn and walk back home. Her little black paws grip me and refuse to let me go.