

I'm Going to Die

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English Translation Sample

Work Information

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Short Synopsis

A telephone call announces a decision to leave for Switzerland to die. Against that frame, the novel enters the daily life of people whose bodies and choices have been transformed by illness. In the hospital, Hee and Si-eun encounter one another amid rehabilitation, dependence, and the effort to protect a sense of self. The story asks what it means to endure a day, to receive care, and to call a life one's own.

Before the Excerpt

After a sudden recurrence of illness leaves Hee paralyzed, rehabilitation begins. In the ward and treatment rooms, even ordinary acts are governed by other people. A girl in a neighboring bed enters Hee's field of vision.

Translation Sample

Golden Hour

“The last reprieve granted to life before death strikes. That is the golden hour.”

A day, two days, three days, a week, a month, then three months, up to six months—this time is called the ‘golden hour’ for critically ill patients. The last chance to revive the body before it loses its memory. But in most cases, this time becomes ‘a time of sentencing.’

“Hee, we’re going to start rehabilitation today.”

“Here... Go here at this time.”

What had been placed in my hands was not hope. It was a ‘timetable.’ On the sheet given to my caregiver, the day was laid out in closely packed lines. Physical therapy, occupational therapy, electrical stimulation. It wasn’t treatment. It was an ‘order.’

Live. Live through it again. In this body.

How was I supposed to live again in a body that could do nothing for itself? This felt like a curse, not treatment.

To be denied death, yet have no say over life either. That was the curse.

The illness that had suddenly returned two weeks earlier.

Neuromyelitis optica.

In an instant, my whole body was paralyzed, and I was lying in an unfamiliar hospital bed. Days with my whole body bound, when even my mind was hard to hold on to. What was hardest to bear was not ‘being unable to move,’ but the state of ‘not even being allowed the will to move.’

“Hee! Hee!”

Someone’s urgent voice.

Beyond my blurred vision, the silhouette of a white coat approaches. My mouth was full of something foreign. Oxygen pressed into my nose. A tube lodged deep in my throat. I couldn’t say a word. I wanted to move, to push it away, but I could feel nothing. Really, nothing at all. Not my hands, my arms, my legs. As though all that remained of me was a torso.

“Hee, can you see this?”

“Follow it with your eyes.”

I moved my eyes. Following the light, only my eyes moved. That was my first and only ‘will.’

Soon I fell asleep again.

The sensation of that moment became my long nightmare. The feeling of being trapped in my body. And that was only the beginning. A reality that would soon come to me as ‘a way of life.’

Rehabilitation. Life again.

A girl passing in a wheelchair caught my eye. She was small and thin, her face so listless it was as if every last bit of her will to live had been ground into that body.

But she was moving the wheelchair herself. It looked incredible. Like a miracle. I held my breath. That small movement was more than I could even imagine doing now.

Then our eyes met.

I shut mine, as if I couldn't breathe. As a child, I had believed frightening things would disappear if I closed my eyes. Now closing my eyes was all I could do.

But reality was cruel. I knew better than anyone that this body would not disappear just because I closed my eyes.

The trip to rehabilitation in my wheelchair was a daily routine, yet that day it felt unusually heavy. My wishes had never entered into it. I was not a person moving of my own accord, but an object moved by someone else. To be precise, I was being transported. Like a cow led to slaughter.

The rehabilitation room was another battlefield. The moment we enter, we are classified. Those with sensation and those without. Those who can move and those who cannot. The degree of paralysis was my name tag, and that classification chart was all too clear to anyone who saw it.

I felt wretched. Unable to protect even my own body, I had become a person who had to be classified. Not a human being as an existence, but a patient defined only by function. I had never known that the short fall from human being to function could bring such long, deep pain.

And so my first rehabilitation session was filled with the foreboding that it had ended before it even began.

"Hee... From today, thirty minutes at a time on the standing frame,"

"And I'll be beside you to help you stretch."

I only nodded. Standing frame. An unfamiliar term, yet somehow not unfamiliar. I had heard the explanation. Equipment on which you fixed your body in place and slowly practiced standing. Someone had devised a tool for standing, for people like me who could no longer get up alone.

I was dragged over to the strange-looking machine. Once I was laid on its blue board, the nurse fastened sturdy straps around my body. Wrists, waist, knees, ankles. Everything was secured. I looked like someone laid on some sort of execution platform.

"We're going to raise it now. Slowly..."

"It's all right."

The machine began to tilt. My body, which had been horizontal, rose through fifteen degrees, twenty-five, thirty-five.

My heart lurched. I felt sick. My vision doubled. I had done no more than imitate standing, yet my whole body fought it. My ears dulled; my lips went dry. The sky turned yellow. It felt as though every blood vessel in my body were twisting. My heartbeat filled my ears.

Then, very faintly, someone's voice reached me.

"Hee? Are you all right?"

"Hee...?"

My eyelids grew heavy. My sight was going dark. At that moment, a voice burst through the silence.

"I said I won't do it!!"

"I!! WON'T!!"

When I came to, I was back in the ward. No words came out of my mouth. Only the cold tears gathering at my eyes spoke: I was not ready to stand yet. Hearing that I was awake, a doctor came. He kept shining a penlight into my eyes.

"Mm... You're all right."

"It seems to be orthostatic hypotension."

My caregiver asked quietly,

"Then... What do we..."

"What should we do...?"

"That can happen from standing up suddenly."

"We'd better take it... A little more slowly, and see."

Those words were cruel. Even standing was not yet permitted to me. Even the smallest hope had to be put off with the word slowly.

Then a voice sharper than those words cut through my mind.

"I said I won't! !!! WON'T!!!"

The shout broke out inside me again.

And I thought of that girl. The girl who had pushed her own wheelchair. A movement no one else would envy, but which had looked like a dream to me. She was still sitting in her wheelchair. At the end of the corridor, she watched me with lifeless eyes and let out a quiet sigh.

Our eyes met. Just one second.

Then we both turned sharply away, as if we had never seen each other, as if neither of us wanted any feeling to show.

In that moment, I knew. We had recognized each other. And we had witnessed each other's end.

The day drew to a close.

A day in which I had achieved nothing.

Dawn came.

It was my first taste of pain. It hurt so much. A groan escaped me before I knew it. A scalding pain swept through my lower legs, as though someone were pouring boiling water over them. The feeling of flesh being seared. A hot searing, as though blisters would soon rise and burst.

The first pain. And the first sensation.

My groaning woke my caregiver.

"What's got into you...?"

"Does it hurt...?"

"Yes... It's never been like this before..."

"Does it hurt a lot...?"

"I'll get the nurse!"

She hurried out of the room.

The quiet inside me collapsed with the pain. At that moment, as I fought a heat that had boiled up to its limit, beyond the curtain it was dawn and everyone slept soundly. But inside the curtain I was alone, fighting a war that seemed about to take my breath away.

The nurse came running, put a hand on my forehead, and said something. But all I heard was her breathing. Her lips were moving; the words lost their way in the air and never reached my ears. Tension gathered on her face, haste brushing her fingertips. That was all.

She ran to the reception desk and soon came back with an IV bottle and a syringe. They seemed to hold something I wanted to believe would save me. But that was my mistake.

The moment the drug entered my veins, my body reacted. My stomach twisted. My whole body heaved as though it were retching. My vision spun white; I thought my breath would stop. I wanted to hold on to something, but I could do nothing.

Then the thought came: Is this really saving me?

Wouldn't it be better to endure the pain? Or should I choose to escape it, even if that meant suffering something worse? If I had to bear another kind of pain to be rid of this one, was this treatment, or punishment?

Questions drifted endlessly through my mind, but in the end I could choose nothing. One drop, then another. I could only accept the liquid falling silently into me.

That dawn was, for me, a time harder than anyone else's. Once the commotion had settled, my caregiver was already talking to someone outside the curtain in the morning.

"Honestly, I got such a fright yesterday."

"I know... Pain before?"

"There wasn't any, was there?"

"Exactly, with all that sudden shouting..."

Voices from beyond the curtain. The smell of coffee. The smell of people.

Such ordinary conversation suddenly felt strange and warm.

"Is the kid all right?"

"Yeah..."

"Much calmer, sleeping now."

"What happened..."

"They'll tell us on the rounds, I suppose."

"Yeah..."

"You must have had such a fright..."

They consoled each other about the night, exchanging little laughs. The laughter was brief and quiet, but there was something precarious about it.

Then the ward door slid open. A doctor with a head of white hair stepped inside, and the still air grew slightly tense. Instinctively, I closed my eyes.

"I heard you had a very difficult time last night."

"How are you now?"

My caregiver, sitting beside me, began slowly.

“Yesterday... Really...”

“So sudden, such a fright...”

“There’s never been pain like this before...”

The doctor nodded lightly and leafed through the chart. After a moment, he spoke carefully.

“Mm... Seeing that the pain is coming...”

“It’s hard to say anything for certain yet,”

“But it may be a sign of the nerves coming back to life... There are cases where things improve.”

“Let’s watch and see.”

Let’s watch and see.

Those words were familiar. Doctors, nurses, family, they always said that. ‘Let’s watch a little longer.’ Today too, I could do nothing but become ‘the person being watched.’

The rounds ended. Soon a rrrattle—the sound of wheels announcing breakfast—rang through the corridor. Trays clattered; someone opened a door. Amid that familiar morning scene, I still could not sit down at a table. Unable to eat anything by mouth, I had to begin my day with a few drops of thick liquid through the tube in my nose. A body that could not even swallow water properly. Even an ordinary sip of water had become something dangerous, something that could bring death.

Food for someone who could not swallow, pushed from a syringe through my nose and down into my stomach. A soft, jelly-like substance that hardly deserved to be called food. Whatever it was, it was merely fuel for survival.

It could never be called a meal.

Even with that, if I choke just once, the liquid entering my lungs makes my whole body convulse. I know. The true meaning of ‘eating,’ I know it now, down to the bone.

Because I had “eaten,” I had to be taken back to therapy. Occupational therapy, which I had missed the day before. With hands and arms that had not yet recovered, I had to go and prove myself again. They secured me in the wheelchair and set off for the treatment room.

Today too, I am going to draw despair, not hope. With my waist strapped in place, I listened to my caregiver’s footsteps clicking down the corridor behind me. The wheelchair crossed the corridor a little too quickly. People paused in doorways, their eyes brushing over me.

“At such a young age, how...”

“Oh, what a shame...”

Words tossed out in passing. Clicking tongues. Wearing wrapping paper called pity, those words gouged straight into my chest.

“Stay strong.”

“It’ll be all right.”

At those words, I collapse again. There is no reason to be strong. Nothing will change if I am. Strength is, perhaps, the kind of thing no one can give or receive.

All I needed here was a day I could live through.

Not something like hope for tomorrow.

Each gaze I feel as I pass through the corridor, each one curls my existence inward. Silent and strapped in, without control over my body or the freedom to speak, I arrived outside the treatment room. The door opened. Once again, I felt cast out into the world with nothing but the label patient. Here, where they mean to cut me to measure, today too I must struggle quietly, yet desperately, not to lose 'me.'

Sinabro Occupational Therapy Room.

Like its name, little by little, the room was quiet but held a weight of energy. The breathing of people trying to move forward, day by day, a little at a time, but surely. Those quiet movements were flowing along the walls. As I entered, a woman therapist approached with a bright smile.

"Hee!"

"Did you have a good breakfast?"

"You'll have therapy with me from today."

A person whose sentences ended in exclamation marks instead of periods. There was something alien about that affectionate voice. But it was the only sign of welcome in this unfamiliar room, and I could only nod. What I saw behind her startled me. Someone dropped a block and picked it up again. Someone stretched a rubber band slowly with an arm and held it there. Another person was turning a little ring on their hand, sweating.

Every movement was urgent, every effort fierce. Yet the room was strangely quiet.

A space where only breathing proved that people were alive. Wordless struggles. Silent resistance. It was like watching a documentary with the sound turned off. Then a familiar silhouette came into view.

The girl I had seen before.

She walked over as though indifferent, yet subtly, without passing me by, sat down opposite me.

"You know this girl, right?"

"You should be in the same ward!"

At the therapist's words, the girl lifted her head a little. Our eyes met directly. This time we did not look away. We had neither the strength nor a reason to. We had not spoken yet, but we quietly read each other's time in those eyes, as though we already knew too much. At the edge of despair, the same starting point, placed there as though by chance, and perhaps the first page of a story that had to be written again. The therapist looked from me to the girl.

"You two know each other, right?"

We shook our heads at the same time.

"..."

"Oh? You two don't know each other?"

"Your beds are right next to each other?"

"Say hello for a moment!"

The therapists smiled, leaving us to make the connection, and stepped away for a moment. An awkward silence. A face I was meeting for the first time. This was my first conversation with someone since coming to the hospital. I smiled sheepishly and spoke first.

"Hel. Lo."

"Hi."

A small, brief greeting. Yet something passed between us. As if unwilling to let even the awkwardness break, I went on.

"I..."

"Saw you... Yesterday."

"Yeah, I saw you too."

"Oh, you did..."

Before the conversation could falter, I hurried to ask a question.

"Um... Um..."

"Oh! What room are you in?"

"Me, 1402."

A short silence. Her voice sounded a little more at ease now.

"So am I?"

"Why have I never seen you?"

Only then did she look away slightly and say, quietly,

"..."

"Because the curtains are always closed."

Her words hung in the air.

Words I understood too well. Which made them hurt all the more.

That was why we couldn't have known each other. This meeting felt like a closed curtain opening for the first time. Only a little, but unmistakably.

Then, a faintly rank smell rising from somewhere. It was a diaper.

"Oh, we'll have to change today's slot."

The occupational therapist said it, and the care assistant took out a towel and answered.

"I changed it once... Around ten this morning..."

"A bit early today..."

"I changed it twice last night too..."

I turned my head.

I knew those words weren't addressed to me. Even so, the fact that my body, my smell, had become their topic of conversation felt crueler than any explanation. The girl's expression, our conversation just broken off, was sharper than silence.

On the way back through the corridor to the ward, the wheelchair's wheels seemed strangely heavy. For the first time, I understood the reality of that diaper smell with terrible clarity.

Embarrassment, shame, and a surge of emotion rose into my chest, but I acted as though nothing were wrong as they moved me onto the bed. Even lying there, I could not close my eyes for a long time. The look that said it's all right; the words see you tomorrow. Even those kindnesses made me smaller.

"Hee..."

"I should've changed your diaper before we went..."

"My fault..."

"Just wait a moment..."

To have a diaper changed, there is a gate I have to pass through.

Being stripped.

By now, being stripped naked like a dog or a pig is nothing unusual. My personhood had long since been trampled. My clothes were far from me in an instant, and once again I had to lie facing the ceiling.

"We're behind the curtain, so it's all right, isn't it?"

I hated those words most of all. Strange hands touched, turned, and exposed my body, a body I could not even remember my parents touching. Each time, something in me gave way. I knew only how to endure; I had lost the language to speak. I was stripped again and again. My body, my mind, even the little fragments of dignity I had left were erased one by one beneath those hands.

I remembered crying as a child because I had wet myself when I was old enough to know better. Now I do not cry. I only bite my lip tight. The curtain was drawn quietly so our eyes would not meet, and my pride came down with it.

But as I lay looking at the ceiling, a thought came to me.

'My dignity can't disappear over one lousy diaper.'

'This is just proof that I'm alive right now.'

That night, I quietly whispered to myself that it was all right to forgive myself.

'Yes, I lived through today too.'

Another day passed, and morning began again. The therapy I had missed yesterday was moved to today.

Ten in the morning. Back in the occupational therapy room.

I wondered what the therapist had discussed with the doctor. Her eyes were especially kind today, her voice a little softer.

"If you work hard..."

"Your upper body might recover."

She clenched a hand and smiled. That one sentence made a tiny crack in my heart, which had settled down like a ceiling. Recovery in my upper body. To be told I could hope for something I had thought impossible felt like a small salvation amid the despair. I decided to let myself be intoxicated by that hope for a moment. Or at least pretend to be. Whether the hope was real or an illusion could wait.

Because, for now, I wanted to believe again,

And so, with that hope, occupational therapy began.

The therapist smiled beside me.

"Today we're going to try picking up a tissue."

"Picking it up...?"

"Yes... Spread your hand, as wide as you can..."

"Like this, feeling as though you're putting strength into your fingertips..."

"Try making a fist..."

"At first, there won't be even the slightest movement, and it'll be hard..."

"But we keep going, without stopping!"

Hee gave the smallest nod. The therapist placed a little tissue beneath Hee's palm. Eyes squeezed shut, Hee strained with every bit of strength to move a single finger. The effort showed in a face taut with concentration.

Nothing moved.

Another attempt.

No change. But giving up was not an option.

Hee swallowed a breath and resolved silently,

'To live, I have to do it. If I want to live, I have to move.'

But, against that wish, the finger did not stir at all.

The days accumulated. Then, on the fourteenth day, the grasping exercise began again. At that moment, the tissue crumpled, just a little.

Really, just the slightest bit.

The occupational therapist opened her eyes wide and shouted.

"It moved!"

"Now! Just now!"

Hee opened their eyes wide and looked down at both hands. The tissue had puckered slightly. One finger was trembling. Tears gathered in Hee's eyes. It was not the finger that had moved, Hee knew, but the will to live.

Translator's Note

The translation preserves the narrator's anger as well as restraint. Images of classification, curtains, and being moved by others carry the loss of control. The shift from first-person narration to Hee in the third person near the end follows the source. Medical statements remain part of the fictional narration; the translation does not add clinical claims. Short utterances remain separate, and repetitions and unusual images follow the Korean closely. Explanations not present in the source have been kept out of the translated narrative.

Source Note

The Korean source includes this note on the standing frame on page 41: A device that distributes body weight and helps maintain a standing position. It is mainly used by people who use wheelchairs because of spinal injuries or stroke, and is an essential tool during rehabilitation.

Rights Information

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