

The Child of Clouds

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English Translation Sample

Work Information

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Short Synopsis

In a world where emotion leaves traces in the clouds, unspoken loss has scarred the sky. Ryu's familiar school days acquire a quiet strangeness through Un, a boy who asks why photographs are kept and whether scattered dandelion seeds can return. As ordinary details begin to shift, the river, the sky, and the adults' silences draw memory and mourning into the children's daily life.

Before the Excerpt

Ryu has begun spending time with Un, a classmate who feels strangely familiar. Un approaches the smallest everyday experiences as if they were new. After lunch, the boys pass the rest of the school day together and walk toward Ryu's grandmother's home.

Translation Sample

Excerpt from Chojae

When they came out after school lunch, the front of the school shop was a sea of people, as expected.

“Wait.”

Ryu asked Un.

“Hey, got five hundred won?”

“...No.”

“You’re lying.”

“Really.”

Ryu grinned and squeezed into the crowd. Un stood watching him blankly. A little later, a carton of chocolate milk rose above the heads.

“Hey!”

Ryu held it out, out of breath.

“Take it.”

Un stared at the carton.

“Is it mine?”

“You think it’s mine?”

Un studied the straw for a long time. Ryu laughed.

“Hey.”

“Not there,”

“Stick it in beside that.”

Only then did Un put the straw in.

One sip.

He rolled it slowly around his mouth, then swallowed. His eyes widened a little.

“It’s sweet.”

Ryu laughed.

“You only just realized?”

Un looked down at the chocolate milk.

“I’ve never had it before.”

Another sip. This time he held it in his mouth a little longer.

“...When it’s sweet.”

He thought for a moment.

“It makes you feel good.”

Ryu burst out laughing.

“Depends on the person.”

Un laughed too. Watching him, Ryu found himself regretting buying only one.

Then the classroom door flew open.

“Hey! Everybody in!”

“We’re taking a class photo!”

Someone shouted, waving a phone.

“Hurry up!”

The others got up one by one.

“Hey, move back!”

“Tall people at the back!”

“You, stand there!”

In no time, the back of the classroom was crowded. Ryu was about to join them when he turned.

Un was still standing by his desk.

“Hey.”

Un looked up.

“You come too.”

“Me?”

“Of course.”

“Aren’t you in our class?”

Un hesitated, then walked over slowly. Ryu took his arm and pulled him to his side.

“Here,”

“Smile!”

Click.

“One more!”

Click.

“Done!”

As soon as the photo was taken, everyone scattered. Some went to the shop; others headed into the corridor to finish their soccer game. Ryu took the phone.

“Let’s see.”

It was just as he was about to enlarge the picture.

Ding-dong.

The bell rang for class to start.

“Hey! Seats!”

The teacher’s voice came from the corridor. Un watched the others move away. Then he asked quietly,

“Why do people take photos?”

“Hm?”

“Photos.”

“Why do we have to leave them behind?”

Ryu answered without thinking.

“Just, it’s fun to look at them later.”

“Why?”

“They remind you of that time.”

Un seemed to turn the words over in his mouth.

“Memory.”

“Yeah.”

“Photos are all that’s left.”

“My uncle said that a long time ago.”

Un looked toward the window, then asked again.

“Then, if you don’t forget.”

“You don’t have to take them?”

Ryu smiled.

“People all forget.”

“That’s why we take them.”

Un said nothing. Then, a little more quietly,

“Really?”

Ryu shrugged as though it were nothing.

“Yeah.”

“You’ll know too when you grow up.”

Un looked out of the window. Sunlight hung quietly at the edge of the window frame. He murmured,

“So... You take them before you forget.”

Looking disappointed, Ryu set the phone down on his desk.

“We’ll look later.”

“Why?”

“After class.”

Un nodded.

“Yeah.”

They never did open the photograph again that day.

Two more bells rang after lunch before the others poured out of the classroom.

Ryu packed his bag too. Un stayed at his desk until the end. He put his pencil into its case, brushed away the eraser crumbs, and passed his palm over the desktop. As though he had always done it that way.

“Aren’t you going?”

Ryu asked.

Un was looking out of the window.

“Yeah.”

He answered, but did not move.

“Ryu.”

“What?”

Un looked at him for a long time, as if making sure of something.

“You...”

He stopped. Ryu waited.

“What?”

Un lowered his eyes to the desk and ran his fingers down his bag strap.

“...Nothing.”

“What is it?”

Un was silent. Then he asked cautiously,

“Here.”

“Do you like it?”

Ryu laughed, surprised.

“School?”

“Yeah.”

“Well.”

Ryu looked around the classroom. Desks covered in scribbles. A plant on the windowsill. The noticeboard at the back. Traces of his friends’ chatter still lingered.

“Lots of things are uncomfortable.”

“Lots of things are a bother.”

“Still.”

“It’s familiar, so I like it.”

Un nodded slowly.

“...Because it’s familiar.”

More quietly, he added,

“That’s why you like it.”

He looked at Ryu again. His lips moved slightly, as though he were about to say something. But in the end he said nothing.

“Let’s go.”

Un smiled and put on his bag. In the corridor, the others were already running down the stairs. Un held the handrail and walked slowly. Ryu laughed.

“Hey!”

“Are you an old man?”

Un laughed too.

“No... I’m afraid I’ll fall.”

Ryu grinned.

“Really... You scare so easily.”

“Where are you going?”

“Want to go together?”

Instead of answering, Un adjusted his bag strap and went down the stairs first. Ryu took that for an answer and followed.

On the way home, they walked side by side. Neither spoke. It wasn’t uncomfortable.

Suddenly Un stopped. A dandelion was blooming beside the path.

“What’s this...?”

“A dandelion.”

Un took the stem carefully.

“Whoo.”

In an instant, the white seeds rode the wind and scattered. Un stood still, following them to the end as they dwindled to dots. Ryu laughed.

“What are you staring at?”

“Where they go.”

Ryu glanced up too. The seeds had already mingled with the sunlight. He couldn’t see where they had gone.

“Wherever the wind takes them, I guess.”

Un kept looking that way, then asked quietly,

“Then... Can they never come back?”

Ryu gave a little laugh.

“Why would a dandelion come back?”

Un didn’t answer. He only watched the direction in which the seeds had disappeared. They started walking again. After a few steps, Ryu turned. A single stem remained by the path.

“But.”

Ryu said.

“They still bloom again.”

Un looked back toward where the seeds had gone.

“What about those?”

“What?”

“Who knows. Somewhere.”

His eyes returned to the stem. The wind was already passing.

“I see.”

Yet Un could hardly turn his eyes from the far edge of the sky where the seeds had disappeared.

They walked on. After only a few steps, Un stopped again. This time he took off a shoe.

“Why?”

“There’s a stone in it.”

Ryu took the sneaker and shook it, tap, tap. A little pebble fell out. Un put it back on as if nothing had happened.

“Thanks.”

“You’re pretty sensitive, aren’t you?”

Un thought for a moment.

“Just.”

“What catches... Stays a long time.”

Ryu nodded without giving it much thought.

“You worry about every little thing.”

Un smiled instead of answering. Before Ryu knew it, he was a few steps ahead. The dirt path sloped downward little by little. The sunlight sloped with it. The sky looked different from the one at school. The clouds seemed low. No, it was as though the sky had come a little closer. Ryu looked up again. This time there was no mistake. A fine line stretched across the middle of the sky. He blinked. It was still there.

“Un.”

“Yeah.”

“That.”

Un did not look up. He only said quietly,

“...It’s closer.”

Ryu frowned.

“What is?”

Un did not answer. He began walking again. A few steps farther down, the river came into view.

“Do you come here often?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

Un looked at the river.

“It’s quiet.”

“Our school’s quiet too.”

Un shook his head.

“Here...”

He watched the river for a moment.

“It stays still.”

Ryu looked too. A river that truly said nothing.

“Let’s go.”

The moment they crossed the river, the air changed.

“Hey.”

“Yeah.”

“You were acting weird earlier.”

Un smiled.

“So were you.”

Ryu grinned.

“True.”

For no reason, they both burst out laughing. After laughing for a while, Un stepped back down to the riverbank.

“Wait.”

Ryu followed him down. The river was calm. Sunlight trembled in little fragments on the surface.

Ryu picked up a flat stone from beside his foot.

“Know this?”

Un shook his head.

“Skipping stones.”

Ryu held his wrist low and threw.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap. Tap.

The stone bounced several times across the surface, then sank in the distance. Un's eyes widened a little.

"That's amazing."

Ryu showed off for no reason.

"It's nothing."

Un picked up a stone too. He bent his wrist, copying Ryu.

"Like this?"

"Yeah. As low as you can."

Un threw hard.

Plop.

The stone sank without bouncing once. A brief silence. Ryu burst out laughing first.

"Hey!"

"You just threw that."

Un laughed too.

"Why won't it work?"

"The angle."

"The angle?"

"Yeah. Keep the stone flat when you throw."

Un picked up another stone and turned it between his fingers a few times.

"Like this?"

"No."

"Lower."

Un threw again.

Plop.

Again it sank straight down. Ryu clutched his stomach, laughing.

"You must be terrible at sports."

Un laughed, embarrassed.

"It's my first time."

Trying to stop laughing, Ryu asked,

"Is everything your first time?"

Un did not answer. He only looked at the river. Then, in a small voice,

"...Yeah."

They sat side by side on a bench by the river. The wind passed, carrying the smell of water. In the distance, a bird skimmed the surface. Neither said anything for a while.

Then Un's pupils trembled slightly, as if he had heard something. Among the sounds of the water, the faintest laughter drifted past. So brief that the wind soon scattered it. Un watched the far bank for a long time.

"Why?"

Ryu asked.

Un turned his head slowly.

"...Nothing."

"Just because, again?"

Un smiled.

"Yeah."

"Just because."

Ryu didn't ask any more. They watched the river in silence. Each time the wind crossed its calm surface, small ripples spread.

On the way back to Ryu's grandmother's house, they found the gate not quite shut, as always. Ryu pushed it open, and the smell of earth walked out first. The yard was spacious. When he was little, it had seemed the biggest playground in the world. Now, oddly, it looked a little smaller. A low table always stood in the same place on the wooden porch. On holidays, at memorial rites, on days when nothing happened at all, that table had never moved. The smell of radish soup rose from the kitchen, and the smell of wet earth followed from the backyard. The earthenware jars had long cradled the sunlight. Young leaves were just appearing on the pumpkin vine along the wall. At the sight of the little side gate, a memory flickered of running through it as a child.

Just then, someone came out of the inner part of the house wearing a dark blue vest and rubber shoes, a small cloth bundle in hand. Ryu greeted the visitor first.

"Hello."

The visitor smiled.

"You're here."

Ryu bowed. But the visitor's gaze passed him and stopped on Un. Just for a moment. The hand adjusting the bundle went still. Nothing was said.

"Who's that?"

"Geumsun, the dangol."

"Ah..."

Ryu's grandmother's voice came from inside.

"You're back..."

Then Ryu's uncle's.

"What took you so long?"

“Well, one thing and another...”

“You should eat...”

Ryu took off his shoes. A little earth clung to them. He shook it off and set them neatly at the edge of the porch. Ryu’s aunt spoke warmly.

“Hurry and wash your hands first...”

“Yeah.”

The water from the backyard tap was like ice.

“Wow! That’s freezing!”

Ryu snatched his hands away. Yeonsun laughed from the kitchen.

“You sound like you’re dying over that.”

“It’s ice water.”

“Even with spring here, the water’s winter...”

Grumbling, Ryu put his hands back under the stream. The smell of burning wood came from the hearth, and the smell of radish soup followed from the pot. Sitting beside the hearth, Ryu’s grandmother stirred the soup once, put on the lid, and lifted it again. There was barely any smoke, but whenever the broth came to a boil, the pieces of radish quietly changed places.

Un was still standing at the threshold. His eyes met Ryu’s uncle’s. But it was Ryu’s aunt who spoke first.

“Are you Ryu’s friend?”

Un hesitated for a moment.

“...”

“Come in.”

Un bowed his head.

“Hello.”

“You haven’t eaten, have you?”

Before Un could settle on an answer, Ryu cut in.

“Whatever you ask him, he says he’s fine.”

Un gave Ryu a look.

“When did I say that?”

Ryu’s uncle chuckled.

“Nobody’s fine.”

“Sit down.”

Un looked around the yard. Earthenware jars. The wooden porch. An old persimmon tree. A small wind bell hung from the eaves. A breeze passed.

Ting.

The clear sound flowed lightly across the yard. Un stopped in his tracks. He reached out and lightly touched the bell.

Ting.

This time it rang a little longer. Un stood listening until the sound had gone.

“Do you like that?”

Ryu’s grandmother had come over without his noticing. She smiled as she asked. Un nodded.

“Why do you like it?”

Un moved his lips for a moment.

“The sound...”

He swallowed a breath, as though choosing his words.

“It stays a long time.”

She looked at Un for a long while. Then she said very softly,

“There are always sounds that stay.”

Un only tilted his head, as if he hadn’t understood. She offered no explanation. She went to one side of the porch and took out a porcelain bowl. Pouring clear water from a kettle, she set it carefully at one end of the table. Ryu watched and asked,

“Grandma.”

“Yes?”

“Why do you put that water there?”

She glanced at the bowl.

“We might have a visitor.”

Ryu looked around the yard. It was empty.

“Who’s coming?”

She shook her head.

“Who knows.”

“Whoever’s coming knows the way.”

Ryu grinned.

“What if they don’t come?”

“Then I just change it again tomorrow.”

She said no more and went back to the kitchen. Ryu looked puzzled.

“My grandma’s like that sometimes.”

Un watched the bowl without speaking. The bell at the eaves was reflected upside down in the clear water. A breeze passed.

Ting.

Once again, the sound of the bell stayed a long time in the yard. Un stood still until it faded. Then he took off his shoes and crossed the threshold. Seeing him, Ryu's grandmother paused for a moment.

"You're hungry."

"Yes..."

"Sit there."

On the table were radish soup, seasoned bracken, stir-fried kimchi, and rolled omelet. Ryu's grandmother glanced at Un and silently took out another rice bowl. The round sound of porcelain touching porcelain spread through the little kitchen.

Un looked down at the rice in front of him. The hand reaching for his spoon stopped briefly. When Ryu looked up, Ryu's grandmother was ladling soup again. The two of them soon finished their meals.

"Thank you for the food."

"Are you full?"

"Yes."

"That's a relief."

The table was cleared. Ryu's aunt carried the dishes into the kitchen, and Ryu's uncle turned on the television. Ryu sat at the edge of the porch, rubbing at the earth on the toe of his shoe for no particular reason. Un walked silently toward the gate.

"See you tomorrow."

Instead of answering, Un smiled.

It was night. Ryu came out for a drink and looked at the small porcelain bowl at the end of the porch. Clear water. Ryu's grandmother sat quietly before it. Ryu asked,

"Grandma."

"Yes?"

"Why do you put water out every day?"

She did not answer at once. Taking the bowl in both hands, she changed the water.

Splash.

Fresh water filled the bowl. Then she spoke.

"Because they're thirsty."

Ryu tilted his head.

"Who?"

For a moment, she watched the moonlight trembling on the water.

"The dead."

Ryu looked at the bowl, a little startled.

"Dead people get thirsty too?"

Ryu's grandmother smiled faintly.

"Not from being dead."

A short silence.

"When you cry a long time."

"You get thirsty."

Ryu didn't understand. But she said no more by way of explanation. She only passed a finger once around the rim of the bowl.

"Crying."

"You don't only do it with your eyes."

"The heart cries too."

"The throat cries too."

The wind passed. The water stirred, just a little. She looked down at it again.

"So the water."

"It isn't for the dead."

"The ones left behind."

"We put it out so they don't stay choked up to the very end."

Ryu said nothing. He didn't understand, but strangely, from that day on, he could never imagine that bowl empty.

"Grandma..."

"Shall I close the gate?"

Ryu asked. Without even looking toward the gate, she said,

"Leave it."

"Why?"

"We have to leave the way here open."

Ryu asked nothing more. Once again, the wind brushed across the yard. That day too, the gate was left not quite shut. The bell rang once, as though someone had come and gone.

Translator's Note

Ryu's teasing and Un's pauses are kept simple. Their questions are allowed to remain questions. Yeonsun's regional speech is rendered through plain diction and an unhurried cadence rather than an English regional accent. The bowl of water is left to acquire its meaning through the scene itself. The term dangol is retained and explained separately. 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 defines the wind bell on page 35 as a small bell hung from the eaves so that it sounds when the wind blows.

Term Note

Dangol is retained from Geumsun's designation in the Korean text. It identifies her ritual role; the scene offers no further explanation.

Rights Information

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