

The Fifth World

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English Translation Sample

Work Information

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Short Synopsis

Taeyang lives in a body that does not warn him when it is hurt. Working as a counselor, he measures other people's troubles against the suffering he knows. When he encounters a woman for whom the smallest touch can bring severe pain, the distance between their physical worlds begins to unsettle his emotional one. Their tentative connection opens a story of pain, memory, and the difficult work of understanding another person.

Before the Excerpt

Taeyang, a counselor who cannot feel physical pain, has met a woman whose CRPS makes even a slight touch painful. The day after taking her to an emergency room, he prepares to meet her for lunch.

Translation Sample

I had never looked forward to morning. Not a single day. Day after day, it was repetition, like a squirrel running in a wheel, more than living. But today, I even thank the alarm clock going “beep-beep, beep-beep.” Today, when I would meet her, I got ready feeling the same, yet somehow different. We had a lunch appointment, after my morning counseling session. As though someone had stirred a spoonful of excitement into my morning milk and given it to me, my heart raced, and my steps were light. With a light heart, I climbed into Jigugong, my beloved car.

The client I was to meet that morning was a young person who had suffered abuse at home and was staying at a youth shelter. Today was our fifth session. A client who still hated themselves so much, who kept saying they should never have been born.

“I should never have been born!”

Even while we met at a café and talked about this and that, I kept looking at the clock, which would not keep up with me today. And I thought only of her. The session ended just before lunch. An unfamiliar text flew in after it ended. Deciding to check it later, I headed for the address in yesterday’s message.

As I had last night, I drove with the window wide open, one hand stretched outside. Even to me, the sight of myself so full of expectation felt awkward. Riding that awkward current, the navigation voice announcing one minute to arrival made my heart beat even faster.

“One minute to arrival.”

“You have arrived at your destination. Ending guidance.”

Following the announcement, she got into the car, moving carefully, looking a little flushed. A bandage was wrapped around her right wrist, and her face bore a faint red flush. Her skin was a light tone, as though white and a little flesh color had been mixed together, with a slight pallor about it. Her hair was dark brown.

She and I reached our destination in a silence so deep that even the sound of swallowing rang out loudly. I could not think what to say to her. But for some reason, she kept sweating. Only after we arrived did she say something, in a worried tone.

“We’re here...”

“Do you think there’ll be a lot of people here...?”

“No...”

“I booked somewhere quiet, but...”

“Did you...”

“Then that’s a relief...”

“Yes...”

“Let’s go in...”

I escorted her. I made sure no one could touch her. As for me, it didn’t matter if my feet were stepped on or I was kicked. I couldn’t feel it. All the way up in the elevator, she kept watching my reactions. She was anxious, and I had to keep signaling with my eyes that it was all right. When the

elevator reached the first floor, people crowded in, bringing us to about one centimeter apart. She drew her right hand in even tighter against her heart. It felt as though heart and heart were touching, with a wrist between them. I gave my body over to that strange feeling I had never felt before.

We reached the restaurant, and I called a server over with a familiar ease to ask for our reserved seats. I had asked beforehand for a table with no one around it. We sat down. After ordering, we went on talking. She still seemed to have every nerve on alert for her arm.

“Did you sleep well last night?”

“Yes...”

“Last night I slept fairly well compared with other nights.”

“Ah, I see...”

“Mm... That’s a relief.”

“You were very startled yesterday, weren’t you...?”

“Even being brushed against hurts so much...”

“Ah... I heard yesterday.”

“I wouldn’t dare even guess how hard it must have...”

How could I, who felt nothing, dare say anything to her? I did not even have the courage to comfort her. But she offered more comfort to me, who must have been startled.

“No, it’s all right.”

“Yesterday was my first time out in about a year...”

“So I was especially nervous... Haha...”

She let out a slightly awkward laugh.

“Ah, I see.”

“At first I was very startled...”

“But after hearing from the doctor, I understood.”

“The illness you have, I’ve seen it in a book...”

I knew I had just said the wrong thing.

“Ah...”

“N... No, that’s not what...”

In fact, in the early hours of that morning, while hurriedly looking for a restaurant for our appointment, I had thought I should look up this illness called CRPS. The internet only said, “a chronic pain condition involving severe pain, swelling, and changes to the skin,” and brought up photographs in the browser in which even I, who could not feel pain, seemed to see a little of it.

“It’s all right...”

“It isn’t a common illness...”

Behind the woman's trailing words, I felt a bitter air. Somehow our relationship was one shared through illness, yet she still did not know that I was ill. Only I knew about her. For the past twenty-odd years, I had told no one. My illness, kept so thoroughly secret.

Then, the voice of a server breaking our awkwardness.

"Here's your food."

"Ah!"

"Just in time, the food's here!"

"This one... Like this..."

"This one... You eat it like this."

The server explained how to eat the food and offered a few brief words. She answered with great spirit, putting all her enthusiasm into eating.

"Ah..."

"Yes!"

"Enjoy, and eat plenty."

She was a little flushed, but she seemed to be taking the food in well with her eyes. After we had enjoyed the food for a while, when the plates were beginning to empty, I asked her.

"How is it?"

"Is the food to your taste?"

"Ah... Mm..."

"Yes, it's really good."

"It's been so long since I've eaten out..."

There was a slightly overflowing feeling in her words. I had had that experience too, so it was like looking at myself. For a moment, I had a slightly strange feeling, as though hands were clasped in our two hearts. 'Yes, I'd been very lonely too...' Telling me to eat plenty, she kept reaching out with the hand she had been cradling and gesturing to me.

In my memory, a hospital stay that had begun so very suddenly. Looking out the window, a sky without a single cloud, so blue and seemingly so high. But I could not leave my room because of an infection near my heart. Looking at myself like that, I thought I was like a prisoner locked away. Back then, this was what I thought. 'It's my fault for being ill...' Outside, people gathered in twos and threes to take pictures beneath the cherry blossoms, even patients enjoying the blossoms with friends pushing their wheelchairs. I could also see someone alone, earphones in, taking in the scenery with their hand. The more I put myself into those scenes, the smaller I became. Soon, when I had grown so small I could no longer see myself, someone came into the sterile room and called to me.

"Patient, I'm here to change your IV."

"Yes..."

I answered weakly. I was ill, sitting there receiving an IV, dressed in white cloth covered with the words 'S University Hospital.' At the far corner of my bed, a rectangular name card listed, in order: Name, Taeyang; Age, 25; Sex, Male; Diagnosis, CIPA; Date of Admission. And, just as the nurse had called me, I was a patient who was not even allowed a name. Patient... Patient... I hated that word so much. I have a name too, Taeyang. Why call me patient?

For a long while I was floundering in my thoughts, until a 'clatter' broke through them into my ears. It was the sound of someone colliding with a server, dishes spilling and breaking. When I saw that it was her, I ran to her in alarm. The server was saying sorry, but once again her body trembled, and she drifted somewhere toward the boundary between deep consciousness and unconsciousness. She seemed to be falling into an unconscious world of her own. The server was flustered. I took her on my back again and ran straight to the emergency room of the large hospital across the street. We reached the hospital in about five minutes. Thankfully, she seemed to calm down only after receiving morphine, a painkiller. The server kept bowing, saying how sorry he was. Completely drained, I made an effort to tell him it was all right, reassured him, and sent him away.

I still could not understand her illness, much less say that I understood her. She and I existed in our own completely different worlds. When she woke, I took her in the car and brought her home. All the way home, she too seemed utterly drained. Her skin, her face, and her lips were pale, and her eyes were quietly closed. Breaking the silence, the navigation announcement rang out.

"You have arrived at your destination. Ending guidance..."

I watched her sleeping for a long time. We had reached her home, but seeing her seemingly asleep so soundly for the first time in a long while, I could not even wake her. Thirty or forty minutes passed like that, and she woke with a shudder, as though startled. I too had been nodding off beside her and woke at the sound of her waking. We decided to walk a little in the park in front of her home and got out of the car.

We had been walking in the park for a while when she showed signs of wanting to sit. She hesitated a moment, then sat carefully on a bench, looked around, and began to speak.

A little flushed, but speaking in a cheerful tone.

"I thought it was perfect!!"

"What a shame!!!!"

"Yes..."

When I answered in a rather composed tone, she soon continued in a composed tone too.

"Even though today ended like this..."

"Thank you so much..."

"No..."

"I should have paid a little more attention..."

Looking truly sorry, she gently stroked her painful arm and went on.

"No, after I became like this..."

"I found going outside the scariest thing."

“At first, even taking one step outside scared me...”

“I would have been the same.”

“What sort of situation...”

As I chimed in, she began pouring out her stories like a flood.

“One day I was making ramyeon at home.”

“And the pain came on so suddenly...”

“I nearly burned the whole house down...”

“Haha!! Funny, isn’t it...?”

She seemed a cheerful person. She told her difficult stories with laughter, as though they were nothing, then paused for breath, let out a deep sigh, and went on.

“It’s just... Somehow...”

“For other people, like everyday life...”

“All the things that happen...”

“They’re so hard for me...”

Each word, each word she let out as though calm, hurt my heart all the more because it was calm. When I saw clients sobbing as they spoke about things that, to my mind, were really nothing, I had thought them pathetic. But she was doing the opposite. She spoke of things she should have been sobbing over as if they were not her own.

Only after filling the park near her home with talk for a long while did we part. I hadn’t disliked talking with her either. If anything, perhaps I wanted to hear more.

Because of the pain that had come upon her so suddenly, we had to part without even arranging our next meeting.

My first meeting with her had been a very small lunch meeting, but it had become a memorable one. I was a little tired, yet I also felt a satisfaction I could not explain. That satisfaction in my heart must have been pride in being a counselor. Until now, not once had I met a client as a counselor. When they came to me and poured out their worries or pain, I only placed them on the scales of my own suffering, which would never move, and judged those worries and that pain. And I thought. ‘Why come for counseling over something like this...?’ Or, ‘No worry could weigh more than mine.’ The worries of all those clients I had thought of that way seemed to be speaking to me. ‘Everyone is living in a fifth world, just like you...’ ‘Everyone is born into life as their first session, living this first life with difficulty in their own way...’

Hearing that, I felt at a loss as to how I should go on as a counselor. I hurriedly called someone.

“Oh? What is it at this hour?”

Yes, I had thought of Professor Rowoon, my senior colleague, my counselor, my supervisor.

“I think... I’ve been too selfish...”

“All of a sudden...?”

“What do you mean?”

“Am I...”

“Really a counselor...?”

Professor Rowoon seemed a little taken aback by my question. The professor answered with a little humor. Among the things the professor had once said was, ‘Counselors have to change their clothes.’ The idea was that you had to lead the counseling to suit each client.

“Huh...?”

“What’s got into you all of a sudden?”

“Were you asleep? Did you have a dream?”

“No...”

“Well, then!”

“Calling me this late at night!!!”

“Come to the counseling room when you have time!”

“I have a lot scheduled, so I’ll call before I come...”

And so I started the car, put on a sad song to match the rain just then falling, and decided to give my body over to the gloom. The rain began to grow heavier, and I stopped the car for a while. Then I took my diary from the bag on the passenger seat. I pressed and pressed the replay button on that recorder I had somehow turned on without realizing it, and listened. My recorded voice was a voice I had never heard before.

“How should I live now...?”

“You’re doing very well just living as you are now.”

“It must have been hard, all this time.”

“You’ve worked so hard holding on.”

“Sniff... A conversation this warm between people...”

“I’ve... Never... Shared...”

At this point, I replayed the recording. My voice, my conversation with her, all were combinations of words I had never used before. Even though this was a counselor’s field, I realized I had never, not for a moment, put on a counselor’s clothes and approached a client. That was why I had not taken on counseling in which I had to empathize with my heart, and had mainly met clients whose cases centered on incidents. Perhaps even my reason for choosing counseling such as sexual violence and domestic violence had been a process of healing myself, scolding all those fathers and mothers as I had never been able to, and seeing my clients as myself. Meeting her, I had grown a handspan. All my time with her had certainly been eventful, but that time was recorded as beauty on a page of my diary.

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Today, a new day for me as a counselor.

I, who had understood no one,

The worries I had thought small in proportion to my pain, my absolute scales,

I realized that all of them had been traces of beautiful lives.

‘Today too... Has ended like this...’

I closed the diary, and before releasing the parking brake to leave, I remembered the unfamiliar text. I hurriedly searched my phone, but that one message, gone I knew not where, I could not find in the end. All day, during the time I was with her, everything had seemed to stop, but time was passing. It was the first time I had spent a day so absorbed in another person’s affairs. Looking at myself in the rearview mirror, I was haggard, but the eyes within were alive. And so I put my first meeting with her in order and brought it to an end.

Translator's Note

The Korean repeatedly moves between bodily sensation and emotional feeling. This translation keeps that overlap without suggesting that an inability to feel physical pain makes emotion impossible. Taeyang's judgments remain his own, including their harshness. His growing warmth is allowed to emerge gradually through gesture, hesitation, and the recurring language of measurement. 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.

Rights Information

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