



IMPRESSING

HEAVEN

지성이면 감천이다

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FOREWORD

Since coming to Korea in 2007, I have gotten to know many English speaking young adults among the Koreans I have been meeting. They are my students, tutors, assistants and friends and I am grateful for their confessions and inspiration.

The stories in this collection are based on my memories of some of my conversations with these as they opened up and shared their experiences, dreams and insights. This is not social science. Rather, it is creative non-fiction. It is not the result of a premeditated research project. Instead, the writing began as personal memoirs of these many precious exchanges, and lead to my imaginings about the unfolding of their life paths. I thus carried out a professional exploration as a result of the writing. The names and some circumstances of these subjects were changed. Therefore, the stories herein do not serve as a precise scientific record. Rather, they serve as a resident-abroad, EFL teacher's reflection on real life experiences.

These days, teachers learn the importance of being reflective in order to be better, more ethical, and more socially responsible. That is the importance of raising their consciousness about who they are, who they are with, where they are, and what they are doing.

Language teachers especially have come to realize the value in cultural awareness and appreciation for cultural diversity, for example. In the context of globalization, cultural awareness and appreciation of both students and teachers can fend off assimilationist trends and policies while facilitating the improvement of the language learners' communicative effectiveness.

Hopefully, a textbook like this can also help students to reflect on their identities, situations and plans. Humanity lives in a fast-paced complex world today where change is rapid, profound and constant. It is difficult to sort out meanings, values and directions in this context. Teaching aids that assist in these tasks can enhance teaching as well as the relationships between the foreign language and the learner, and the foreign teacher and student. Furthermore, they can help young adults make important life decisions.

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©October, 2011

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword

1. Flying

2. Nursing Dreams

3. Pasta

4. Home Boy

5. Jodi

6. Managing

7. The Singer

8. Walking Sideways

9. Honing Success and Edging Ahead

10. Turning Pages

11. Digging a Well

12. A View from the Other Side

Glossary

IMPRESSING HEAVEN

I. Flying

Everybody wants to fly. There are different ways to accomplish it.

The youth dream of flying. They want the magic of dreams to come true. They want their journey to take them to great and glorious heights.

The youth are in a hurry. They have a sense of urgency. They want to get there quick.

The youth like are attracted to radical departures. They do not like being grounded. They seek new places, new feelings and new ways. They are adventurous and they are impatient.

At the same time, they are less conscious of time. The dream occurs outside the dimensions of space and time that elder and learned humans have drawn for themselves, which makes the dream all the more attractive. Anything is possible in a dream.

The vision of flying is a vision of existing outside conventions and beyond the reach of time and space. The space where one aspires to fly is limitless. It is magical. Gravity is not an issue there. Ability is not an issue. The physical can be stretched and altered so as to accomplish astounding things.

It is common to have dreams. It is necessary to keep hope alive. It is necessary for the bud of new things sprouts from the seeds of dreams.

It started with mountain climbing. If the spirits of ancestors like to inhabit the tops of mountains, it is likely to establish a launching pad to the stars and heavens and maintain the choice of flying back to Earth for brief inspections and perhaps occasional deeds. The higher elevations are the connections to the immortals and eternity. Who does not desire to go there? Climbing the mountain can bring mortals closer to eternity with its grace, splendor and wisdom. Now there is technology to take us higher.

In contemporary life on Earth, the accumulated knowledge and range of inventions, research and experimentations feed this imagination. Given the heights of wealth and technology so far achieved by mere mortals of bones and flesh of varying intelligence and dubious morality, the excitement about pressing forward into the future augments. "If we can do that, we can do more," it is thought. More people ask, "Why not?"

Moreover, the flourishing technology of exciting and inspiring the imagination lures on the dreamers. The media are expanding and compounding. We have the tools to fly farther in our minds than ever before.

Perhaps the technology of movies is just as fascinating as the story of movies these days. Technology as movie-maker and star protagonist are fantastic these days, bringing darkness and light, horror and joy. The dream-weavers-for-profit egg on our dreams. Paralleling discoveries in science and the paranormal, they invite us to stretch our vision of reality farther and farther. The process of following visual explorers and travelling inside our imagination to new realms and dimensions may be more important a movie-going experience than curiosity, tension and logistics of plot, than quality and movies of characters.

Some critics may characterize the industry as an illusion mill that creates false hopes and misleading ideas. They worry that change and difference as portrayed in the media may be excessively violent and therefore unhealthy. They worry that the boundaries between dreams and reality have become blurred, causing too much confusion.

However, many philosophers question what reality is and who determines what it is. More often, reality is understood as experience. Experience varies as much as people do.

Interpretation, narration and emotions have become more important, in actual fact, than material things. The makers and traders of things are probably lagging way behind the crowd.

For one thing, science means something else nowadays. Molecular and quantum physics have highlighted the uncertainty, flexibility, and movement of the universe at all measurable dimensions. It insinuates that the bizarre may be normal and the normal unusual and illusory.

Indeed, research and invention bait many a young person who wishes to create and find glory in solving problems and earning recognition. Then there are the builders who simply try to build mountains, ladders and flying machines to the sky where they aspire to soar. This is demonstrated by the ongoing plans to construct taller and taller buildings, where one might one day climb so high as to touch the heavens. Certainly, the space program hopes to go farther to penetrate the heavens and exist with the gods of the universe.

Not a few people will seek flight through the arts. The imagination offers escape, novelty, change and transformation. Such a journey may well lead to performances abroad.

The majority of young people in Korea want to take to the air and feel the wind beneath their wings. They want to be somewhere else and be somebody else. They want escape to a new life. They want to grow tall.

Most wish for international travel. They earnestly strive toward finding the time and the money to explore the Earth's airways, see famous places firsthand, encounter different people and experiences, and taste a variety of cultures. They want to reach higher status and experience. They seek paths into international trade and industry that will provide launching pads for exploring the world by air. They apply to international study programs and grants for overseas training. They study related fields and languages.

Not a few young men actually become pilots. They usually find an avenue to do it through military work if they opt to join the air force. They must study and pass certain examinations, and then take specific training. They may pursue officer training and get support to complete academic studies including study of English and other foreign languages. They may alter their course and find positions in private airlines.

In the eyes of many young Korean women, becoming a flight attendant is the ultimate dream. It is fashionable to be a flight attendant. Flight attendants are considered to be exceptionally beautiful, graceful and intelligent women doing important work and serving the nation well.

Korean flight attendants are always female. They represent the height of grace and cultivation. They present an image of the ideal Korean woman with enviable beauty, precise etiquette and unflinching poise. They also represent the modern Korea and the success of its progress for they are working women doing an important job in the technologically advancing global industry of aviation. They serve the nation and make the nation proud. They are ambassadors for the nation and serve to raise the standards of Korean contemporary life and present it to the world with great pride. They represent the flying colours of the Republic of Korea's rising status and power in the world.

Of the vast numbers of young women who dream of becoming flight attendants, only a handful will make the grade and be allowed to enter the field. Candidates go to great lengths in order to impress airlines recruiters. They overspend on ways to enhance their physical appearance. They have their faces reconstructed, they wear special lenses to alter the appearance of their eyes, they diet furiously, and they consult magazines and beauty experts for the best tips on clothing, hairstyles, cosmetics and accessories. They practice correct posture, gestures, facial expressions and gaits. In addition to all those efforts, they study foreign languages, especially English.

Despite all those efforts, most candidates will ultimately fail. Perhaps, in the course

of failure, they may alter their perceptions of airline hostessing and learn. Perhaps they may come to understand the illusion that has duped them and see that the career is not as beneficial to women as they had first believed. Perhaps, though, they may never recover and always feel inferior, letting sexism and patriarchy again cheat and rob.

Indeed, it is to be expected that many aspiring fliers may fail, but failure will not daunt most of them. They will try out different types of wings and different flight plans and persist.

Despite exceptions when individuals shut down and give up, the dreaming will not stop. For those who can grow, their learning experience will fertilize new dreams. Those ones will find new vehicles and take off again. They will not abandon the dream of flying; they will merely find a new way to fly.

II. Nursing Dreams

Freshmen enter their first day of conversation class full of trepidation and excitement leaving the clamor of the lively hallway to penetrate the cold silent chamber. Some students have had few encounters with foreigners but a foreigner will teach this class. That is as much a cause for nervousness as is the prospect of having to speak English aloud in public.

Outside the room, it is bedlam in the hallways and around the campus buildings. Hormones are galloping and the mating dances, pursuit of talent, the will of dreams, and heedless whim of serendipity proceed following the natural rhythms of the heavens that pursue their own course, regardless of the imposition of human design.

The young people shuffle one by one out of the buzzing life beyond into the cold and unfamiliar classroom, murmuring nervously or excitedly. Students who enter the classroom without a friend feel especially nervous. They worry about the classroom dynamics. Will classmates be nice? Will there be new friends? Will I understand the teacher? Will the teacher be nice? Will the student feel embarrassed? Will she or he succeed to calm the nerves and loosen the carefully stored yet atrophied English concepts and linguistic forms so as to **utter** the language competently enough to get a decent grade?

Well trained to find order, they quickly examine the room with its lack of décor and inspiration then chose their seats among the abused desks, scraping hollow metal legs along the floor and carefully sneaking glimpses of each other. They plant their oversized handbags and tightly packed cases and backpacks around them, and stack of books on the metal framed desktops, cell phone ever in hand as a reassuring support that demonstrates associations and belonging, and can serve as an aid in social emergencies. A seating pattern soon emerges.

Despite the worries, the prospect of entering the English as a foreign language conversation class is thrilling. Meeting strangers from many other lands full of celebrated wonders and intriguing mysteries is the next step to unlocking the secret treasures and sharing the joys of faraway cultures so as to—eventually, hopefully—traverse the vast waters to distant shores and explore unknown territories and live new experiences. Therefore, students generally eagerly anticipate the experience of being in a conversation class at last, especially with a foreigner at the helm.

For the most part, regular school lessons in English are dry and unexciting. It is puzzling how one could spend so many hours year after year supposedly learning a language without learning much about the cultures in which the language is based. Students sweat over memorizing lines, completing grammatical exercises, being quizzed on vocabulary, and finding strategies by which to match, choose and fill in words and phrases correctly, week after week, exam after exam, and get through all the hoops and log jams without actually using the language.

There are merits to this way of life. In this system, for example, the roles and power relations are clear. Here is how it is supposed to go. The teacher, while subjugated to the commanders of the institution, has the power in the classroom and takes the floor while the students listen expressionless. Ideally, students obey with humility and without question or comment, while competing furiously against their own shortcomings and the aims of classmates to get top marks and demonstrate achievement. The teacher supervises and guides the students through the lessons, then makes corrections and decides fates and lifestyles in deciding scores.

The brightest and the most self-disciplined sit upright at the front of the class. The shirkers, the timid and the less able resign themselves to the back rows, hoping that, by effacing themselves, their deficiencies or lack of interest are effaced. Aside, the teacher may sigh at the thought of the effort it might take to tow the latter group along, but is actually

relieved by the presence of obvious “more advanced” students of English at the front and preoccupies herself mostly with them, the prescribed classroom geography that places the teacher at the front of the room her excuse.

The students, if they are bent on academic achievement, which is usually the case, are expected to spend hours at home or at school every day and many evenings, from six to seven days a week, memorizing material or completing assignments for the dreaded government exams that mean everything. Good scores on the government exams are the tickets to more opportunities and financial and social success. The teacher must stick to the material for the exam and there is not much time to get creative or try new tricks as long as the clock is ticking on the examination cycle. That being the constrained situation of teaching a foreign language in the Korean public education system, the teacher has little opportunity to try out new methods and venture into practice activities, no matter the training and conscientiousness of any teacher.

Hanging over the students are the stress of this competition, their duty to family and society, and the weight of past failures and heavy hopes. The atmosphere has become somber after having dragged baggage into the classroom. The students face the teacher with a combination of aching anxiety and burning curiosity.

Today, their new teacher, a middle aged woman from Western Canada, surveys the gathering before him trying to get a sense of the group. She smiles and introduces herself.

The students are mesmerized by the open body language, expressive face and the flying hands. It is most distracting. They cannot understand much at first. Then, they realize that it is time for students to introduce themselves.

The teacher writes the questions and responses on the white board with a black marker. “What is your name?” “My name is ~.” “How old are you?” “I’m 20 years old.” “Where is your hometown?” “My hometown is in *blah-blah*.” “What is your major?” “My major is *blah-blah*.” The students chuckle a little at hearing the expression, *blah-blah*. Seeing these sentences, a remembrance surfaces. As the teacher reads them, they begin to sound familiar. A waving arm gives a signal and the students realize that they are being asked to repeat the sentences after the teacher.

Then it is up to the most daring in the group to volunteer to be the first one to utter an English sentence in class, and ask one of the questions to a fellow student. Someone in the front row leans forward and smiles when the teacher looks his way and singles him out to do the job. He turns to the student beside him and begins the drill. The conversation is repeated working its way from the front rows to the back, so that the shier people at the back have a chance to hear the lines over and over before it is their turn to speak them. The exercise becomes less scary as the students laugh to hear themselves speak the strange words while the teacher coaxes and cheers them on. The room is starting to warm up and look friendly.

“Do you have any questions for me?” asks the teacher after the last pair has done the introductions. “What do you want to ask me?” she says, rephrasing the question. They already know her name. They had heard her say it and can see it written on the board ahead of them. The boldest student in the front row grins widely and ventures the question they all want to ask: “How old are you?” He and the rest of the class are fully aware that that is a naughty question to ask of a Westerner, especially a woman, but they want to see the reaction.

“Older than you,” comes the measured reply. Everyone laughs. The teacher smiles back.

The teacher urges the students to stand up and introduce themselves to more classmates with a new question: “Why do you want to study English?” First she writes some possible answers on the board, soliciting the reasons for studying English from the boldest of the group and noting them in correct English. Finally, she gets all the students to rise and

stand beside their desks. Then she has them follow her lead to repeat all the phrases about studying English aloud. Once again modeling an activity, she approaches a student and asks her, "Why do you want to study English?" Hesitatingly, the young woman glances at the board and takes a minute of modesty before uttering the chosen answer quietly. The teacher repeats her answer loudly for the benefit of the class. She approaches a second student with the same question and then waves both her arms to get them all to turn to the strangers in the room and converse. After a few minutes, the students lose their doubt about speaking in class, having accepted the permission to speak and subsequently given themselves to the pleasure of some sociable discourse. The voices rise, bubble and sparkle. The teacher looks around, an expression of satisfaction on her face.

The teacher soon discerns the more able speakers from the rest and takes note so that one may be called upon to translate or demonstrate a task. The students find buddies and the teacher creates working groups.

It will take a few weeks for the Canadian teacher to learn half their names. She teaches five classes this term and four of them have enrolments of more than 25 students each. Some students want to use English names, which can help as long as the teacher can keep track of the Korean names that accompany the English ones. The teacher uses tricks to help her remember Korean names. For instance, Kim Ji Eun is filed in her memory as "the kimchi girl." Then there are the names that sound close to English or European names, such as "Yu Nik" because the teacher recalls the name as "the unique girl" or "Han Sang" that quickly becomes "Hansen" in the teacher's mind or "Jeon Sang" that may be recalled as "Johnson." She remembers the student named "Yo Heong" that made her smile because she thought of it as "Johanne." Gradually, the names become more familiar and a rapport builds.

Hence, the atmosphere warms up over the weeks and increased spoken English proficiency simmers as each day's recipe is given in various media and the continuous practice cooks up results. The teacher takes pleasure on witnessing the production of the goods in her kitchen. She constantly encourages them, reminding them that the activity is the key for better application in the real world. Through the dialogs about hopes, dreams and careers that continue to stew, she hears the bubbling excitement of their prospects for the future. She knows that some of her students will have fine and interesting lives with many kinds of success. She is glad for them and she is glad to have a role in assisting them to proceed. That is her best compensation.

However, there are always some students who do not keep up. Out of that batch, a few may give up altogether and quit accepting an F due to incomplete work, while others may adjust their academic goals, perhaps changing their major subject or program of study, but resolving to complete the course nevertheless and receive a B grade or less. Often, these are very practical decisions, perhaps through consultation with friends, family members and academic advisors. For the benefit of the latter type, the teacher often provides enough support and makes enough adjustments to ensure a passing grade of at least a C, if the student indicates a sincere effort. There are those who simply switch gears and abandon their work in English, not showing up much for a few weeks perhaps, or skipping tests and assignments as they make a transition. Some top students may drop a course, especially when that golden opportunity of a good job or prestigious training comes up.

There are some, though, who might not make much effort but choose to stay. Perhaps they are young men intent on postponing their time in military service by prolonging their studies. Perhaps they have other goals but cannot appease their parents wish that they continue academic study. Perhaps they play a waiting game to see if another program accepts them, or to have somewhere to be until the start date of some other program or project.

In this particular class, there are two struggling students out of a class of 28 who quit.

As they are registrants of her class, the teacher has no choice but to assign an F to their records. However, there are three struggling students who work hard and steadily to improve their work and the teacher is happy to assist them achieve greater progress so that they may attain a solid B grade for their efforts. Actually, one of this threesome receives a B+ in the end. There is also one well performing student whose work suddenly declines and he explains that he has made alternative plans and thereby made his study of English a lower priority. He sticks around enough to complete the main assignments and the final exam but sacrifices an A grade. This is a conscious decision made according to well weighed considerations of all available options, and the teacher appreciates and respects this thinking.

Yet one good student gradually withdraws, first attending intermittently but showing up for the two main assignments and the midterm examinations before disappearing altogether. She remains a mystery until the teacher receives a note attached to a final assignment near the end of the course. The note says, in brief yet correct script, "I am sorry I missed your class. You are a very good teacher but I decided to become a nurse. Thank you for teaching me. I hope you understand."

On the day of the final exam, this student enters the classroom and submits to the written and oral conversation tests. When she hands in the test paper, she reiterates, "I want to be a nurse now. I will not study English anymore."

This particular student has remained loyal to her class partner too. Therefore, one reason for showing up at the final examination is to fulfill her role as class partner. Her former partner in the class has patiently awaited her presence in order to perform the oral test tasks. They have corresponded and practiced outside the class, apparently.

The teacher smiles at them, pleased that the pair have maintained respect and made arrangements for the school work to be completed. Clearly, the one who left is no longer concerned about English, but she has decided to complete the work in order to get a respectable grade, even though she has lost points due to absence. The teacher feels satisfied and thinks that the decision to change course and train to become a nurse may be a very wise decision. Too many students and families pin their hopes on obtaining academic degrees for the sake of status and conformity when there are opportunities in well paying trades and professions.

Too many students and families believe that studying English will resolve their problems and guarantee success and respect. The teacher naturally thinks that study of foreign languages is worthwhile and likes to see her keenest students learn and benefit from foreign language studies. Regardless, she still knows that the obsession with learning English is not productive in many cases. It is therefore a relief to hear that a student doubts the hype of English education and especially that certain students apparently ill suited to foreign language studies overcome the social pressure and find some other path.

III.Pasta

The buzzer startles Hae Jin for the twentieth time this morning. She leaps up to go see what the company president wants this time.

“I think our website should have a page in English,” announces the president abruptly. See what you can do. Find an English language website developer, but it must be a Korean website developer.”

“We will need a translator, in that case. Is there a budget for translation?”

“Yes, yes! Whatever. Just get to it, will you?”

Hae Jin leaves the president’s office with a frown on her face. She can envision some problems with realizing this proposition, the latest whim of her headstrong and impatient boss.

She retreats to her desk to resume the task at hand, which is the payroll. She has just started doing the biweekly payroll accounting. It is tedious and draining because accuracy is imperative to prevent mistakes and complaints from staff. She has had no training for this kind of work and she does not like it. The boss had dumped the responsibility on her at the 18th month mark of her history in the administration of this machine parts factory.

When the president had hired her to be an administrative assistant in the factory office where he worked, she had been happy and her family pleased in the beginning. It had been an honour. What was more, the factory was expanding at that time, a sure sign of success.

Her competency in English had been a major factor. It had given her an edge as a job candidate. Now, however, the employer was taking advantage of her.

Back then, she had not expected to be doing all the things that she has to do nowadays. Now she was acting as the president’s assistant and payroll officer and sales clerk and liaison and hostess to foreign clients. It was all too much and quite stressful.

She has trouble sleeping. She works long hours and sometimes works on Saturdays. There is a long commute to this isolated location on the fringes of the city. She feels exhausted most of the time. She has little time for socializing.

It is not longer a joy using English on the job. For one thing, there is a lot of technical jargon that even her foreign English speaking friends do not know. For another, she does not usually get to talk with native English speakers on the job. Rather, the clients tend to be Japanese or European. Therefore, they make mistakes constantly in speaking English and it is hard to communicate with them, especially over the telephone.

The worst thing about the job, however, is the boss’ terrible habit of beckoning her on impulse by use of the buzzer throughout the day. Some matters are not urgent and could be read as emailed notes in due course. Else, he could just phone her and speak with her, but he likes to have her rise and go to see him in person. It is a company president’s pleasure and female assistants are often treated as servants.

Hae Jin looks at the employee profiles and then at the payroll figures that are displayed on the monitor. She squints then reaches for her reading glasses.

It is the last Friday of the month and she will have to stay in the office until the payroll is finished, which will probably be around 9:00 p.m. as per usual. There is no time during the regular daytime business hours to do it all for there are too many other tasks to perform meantime, not to mention and innumerable interruptions.

Hae Jin breathes a heavy sigh.

It is almost lunchtime. The company cafeteria food is passable though tedious. Today, she has a lunch bag with some *kimbap* and noodles. She often just remains at her desk to eat during the 30-minute break, although the phones and her boss sometimes interrupt her.

There is therefore not much opportunity for rest. There are no officially scheduled

morning or afternoon breaks. Getting up and down to fetch tea or sit munching on snacks would be seen as a sign of laziness and therefore should be avoided.

At least her office co-workers are nice. Once in awhile, they go out together. The company paid for weekend retreat at a spa this year, their third year of employment, as part of the company's celebration of the factory's third anniversary. The third anniversary had also prompted a decent salary increase so that they are paid properly at long last.

The salary system is another way employers take advantage of employees, however. Not a wage system, employers push the limits of the job perimeters, often causing overwork.

Also, employees lack precisely written job descriptions. In service industries and occupations, workers are assigned to departments they can end up struggling to perform multiple roles without specific training and knowledge. That way, they are forced to learn by error on the job, which causes blame and fear together, which increases stress levels. Such is the situation that Hae Jin and her office co-workers face. They try to cope by solidifying and functioning as a group.

Hae Jin turns away from the computer's screen to eat her noodles. Her reflection in a desktop mirror catches her eye. Noting her pale complexion, it strikes her that she is turning into limp doughy pasta herself.

A friend once challenged her about her acceptance of this job. "You are an English speaking university graduate working in the head office assisting the president. You have power. Use it. You can make suggestions to your boss. You can stop his using the buzzer constantly. Just change the service, disable the technology and tell him it works better for you if he phones and emails you, or makes a daily meeting. Come on. Don't let him drive you down!"

The friend had been right but the challenge had upset Hae Jin. She knows that she goes along with what others press her to do too much. However, she feels that it goes against her character to do otherwise. She does not like friction. She just wants to do the job. Her only defense has been hiding. She usually retreats from people when she has the opportunity. Yet, she knows this is unhealthy behavior. She does not like what this job is turning her into: some kind of lump of pasta, or a shadow.

The next day is Saturday. She goes to work on Saturday so that someone is there to answer the phone. The president does not like to use voicemail. He thinks it is best for a live person to answer and speak to callers. Therefore, he has the office staff takes turns manning the phones on Saturdays.

She leaves the office after the designated quitting time, 1:00 p.m., and takes the 45-minute bus ride back to her apartment in the impoverished tenements where she lives among foreign factory workers in crowded units. This is what she can afford, at rate of 300,000 won a month rental fee on top of the payments she must make on the bank loan that she got so as to pay the 30,000,000 won housing deposit.

Once in the door, she collapses on the bed for awhile before sitting in a sudsy bath. Then she puts on jeans to go out and find something convenient to eat. She picks up some fruit and crackers, after taking some soup and rice at a tiny local restaurant.

Back at home, she munches on some slices of pear in front of the TV. Her younger brother eventually enters the apartment after a day at his part-time job in a shopping mall. He is a full-time student and he shares the apartment with her at her mother's request. He does not say much, except that he asks to watch a different show. She goes to her bedroom to look at a magazine. By 8:00 p.m., she dozes off.

Sunday is not much different. She has breakfast with her brother and they talk before he goes out to study at the campus library.

This Sunday, a chum calls her. She asks to meet Hae Jin at a coffee shop that

afternoon. After a little prodding, Hae Jin agrees to the meeting. The two friends drink lattes and discuss jobs, friends, families and movies for a couple of hours. Then they go to shopping in cosmetic stores.

The next morning, Hae Jin is back at her office desk by 8:30 a.m. By 9:00, the boss is there and starts buzzing her. Today, he wants her to edit a parts catalogue and send it to a translator by the end of the week.

Hae Jin sighs a heavy sigh and returns resignedly to her desk. Soon, he buzzes her again. Sometimes she does not know how she makes it through each week of this stress and bother.

“How is the English webpage coming along?”

“I did the payroll on Friday and so I’ll deal with it today. Is that okay?”

“All right then. Get to it.”

Hae Jin contacts the website developer that the company has been using and they tell her not to worry, that they know a good translator. They discuss the pages and sections that are to be translated into English. Hae Jin then looks for an opportunity to report back to her boss. The boss gives approval

Three weeks later, after a series of visits by Norwegian, German and American clients about a set of new parts, and an executive meeting about the prospects for building a branch factory somewhere else, which had all required extra work, the beta format of the English webpages and the first two sections of the catalogue are ready for approval.

Glancing at them, Hae Jin can see right away that the translations are inadequate. Not wishing the president to feel the humiliation of becoming aware of an error in judgment or suffering a complaint by a client, she buckles down to make corrections. She takes the work home at night and on the following weekend. She consults reference books and native English speakers. Paragraph by paragraph, page by page, she struggles to figure it out and correct all the errors with proper English herself.

She cannot do it all herself and imposes on foreign friends more and more for accurate corrections. However, the foreigners are teachers, most of whom have arts degrees. They are not familiar with the technical language of this specialized field of factory machinery. A couple of them get annoyed and refuse to do any more translating after working on a few pages, for they do not care about the company. They think the favour is too big. At first they wanted to do favours for Hae Jin since she is a friend who occasionally helps them with surviving in a foreign country, but the technical catalogue translation is too much.

For three more weeks, Hae Jin struggles with the arduous task. The boss periodically asks her how the translations are coming and whether the deadlines will be met and she answers positively without explaining the problem she has encountered. She even shows him completed sections. He does not know any English but she must prevent a client from complaining nevertheless. She just hopes that the kinds of clients are also stymied by complex texts in English or ignorant of proper spelling and grammar.

Some weeks later the webpage and catalogue are made public. Hae Jin anxiously awaits the response, figuring that a complaint could come at any moment. No complaint comes, however. She has pulled it off.

There is no reward for having carried out the extra work, for nobody knows about it. Her colleagues know there was some work in reviewing the translations but they estimated it was just a bit of adjusting here and there for more favourable phrasing.

Hae Jin ploughs her way through the end of winter and into the spring time. It is a marvelous warm and sunny spring full of promise. Hae Jin thinks that her dedication and loyalty will pay off. It is prestigious and honourable to have a high ranking role in a successful firm, a firm that works hard for the national and regional economies. The effort

with steady commitment should bring the rewards of regular pay increases, greater personal savings and more company benefits. Her status would thereby improve and she would be able to impress eligible men better.

By the summertime, Hae Jin buys a car and moves. She is paid back the housing deposit, which pays for the car and pads her savings. Her aunt having informed her that the tenant had vacated the family's downtown apartment, she and her brother ask to be lodged there. The aunt and her parents agree and the siblings move into the spacious modern apartment in July. There is not rent or deposit to pay. Outside it is heavy with a sweltering temperature, but the apartment is cool and properly equipped. The location is more amenable to socializing because restaurants and bars are just outside the door.

Not only does the change in dwellings offer relief to Hae Jin's oppressive life, so does the new car. Without the necessity of enduring the long bus rides to and from work, the workday is shortened and less tedious, even though the fight through the hectic traffic sometimes causes aggravation.

The company fares well even through the economic slumps because it maintains a steady clientele and produces indispensable factory equipment. Hae Jin has chosen the employer well in this regard.

There will be another scheduled raise in pay in the new year. In the meantime, the company has increased the bonuses for performance, holidays and birthdays.

As the fall approaches, so does Hae Jin's next birthday, which causes her to reflect. She wonders if she will feel like nothing but a worn out dish rag within a few years.

She wonders whether the men may regard her as a disgusting pumpkin of a spinster and scoff at her. "What will happen to me?" she asks herself.

Her mother leaves this question for herself to answer. As far as she is concerned, her eldest child has done well and is fulfilling responsibilities to both her parents and her younger brother. The schooling and other support that the family has bestowed upon Hae Jin have been paying off. The family has no complaints, except that they urge her to find a man now.

They think that her prospects are good. Hae Jin is tall and thin. She is healthy, they assume. She likes to wear very feminine clothing in pastel colours. She is not an aggressive and demanding modern woman; rather, she is kind and cooperative as well as clever and well educated.

By late October, a cool wind begins to blow. Then it changes direction. Hae Jin is caught in the autumnal crosswind and an idea seizes her brain.

One Monday morning, she is dutifully carrying out her assigned tasks when the dreaded buzzer starts buzzing.

The buzz awakens something deep inside her soul. Suddenly, the idea wants release. Suddenly, she is gripped with the realization that she cannot endure. She cannot exist in this stifling climate. Whatever the risk, something must be done. Things must change, she tells herself.

When she reaches the doorway of the president's office, she braces her shoulders and sits up smartly in the visitor's chair facing her boss. Her boss issues some orders and she makes note of them.

When he has finished speaking, she remains. He looks up inquiringly. "Anything else?" he asks.

"I've made some new plans. I will go back to teaching English or something. I will leave this job in two weeks."

The man is quite surprised. He asks what the problem is.

"It's personal," she assures him. "I need a change. I'm not sure that business administration is what I want to do."

“Heh. You should make up your mind soon. You’re not getting any younger.”

“Exactly,” she replied confidently. “I think I will go back to school and get some focus.”

“Do what you like. You had better place an employment ad. You’ll have to train someone, you know.”

“What about one of the girls here? They know what to do and how to do it.”

“Hmph. We’ll see.”

Hae Jin turns to exit the room. However, the boss calls her back. “Hae Jin.”

“Yes?”

“If things don’t work out for you, come and see me. You have been a very helpful employee.” He allows himself a slight smile then closes his expression to resume his work.

Hae Jin knows she has been fortunate. Some bosses would resent an employee who quit.

Hae Jin sits at the table in the Italian style restaurant. She gazes at the food before her then tries a small bite of it. This pasta is sweet and full of texture. The sauce is rich and creamy. The cabonara ham is tasty and the onion and olives embellishes the flavor with light side effects. The oiled salad sitting beside the plate of linguini is elegant and attractive with its lively colours and fresh appearance. She reaches for the carafe and pours her friend and then herself some red wine into the tall goblets.

“So you’re teaching English again? I thought you were through with that. Have you made a U-turn and reversed direction?” asks the young delicate looking fresh face framed by auburn tinted curls that poises across from Hae Jin.

“No, this is just a stop-gap. I’m just a temporary replacement. I’ve enrolled in a law program.”

“You want to study again. Yuck. ...So, you want to be a lawyer? That’s difficult work.”

“No, just some sort of paralegal position. Like, maybe I’ll specialize in some legal aspect of business or government work. Community or charitable service may be an option.”

“It’s a man’s world, legal stuff.”

“Lots of women are getting training in law these days. Anyway, the point is, it’ll be useful knowledge. I want to keep learning and doing interesting things.”

“Ha! Maybe you’ll meet a lawyer! Now I get it! Good for you!”

“Well, maybe.” The two women laugh.

IV.Home Boy

“I’m on holidays for a couple of weeks so I’m visiting Dublin for a few days,” Jae Yeong tells the hotel clerk. It is a lie.

Jae Yeong has escaped a volunteer posting in a home for the disabled in a village and is hiding in Dublin. It is a violation of his temporary work visa to leave a job and stay as a tourist in this country. He knows they will be looking for him.

“Well, now then. Welcome to Dublin. Make the best of it. There’s some information for tourists over there on the table,” replies the clerk pointing to an array of pamphlets in the lobby.

“Thank you.”

Jae Yeong takes the card key and ignores the pamphlets as he crosses the lobby to climb the creaking stairway to the third floor. The room is tiny and dark but clean and adequate. He sits down heavily upon the narrow bed.

He needs to clear his head. About 30 hours ago in the middle of the night, he had slipped away from the visiting personnel’s dormitory beside the big old farmhouse. He had walked the 12 kilometers to a village where he waited to ask someone about buses, explaining falsely that he had an important appointment in Dublin. He had been lucky to catch a lift in a delivery van early in the morning before anyone at the house knew and could sound the alarm. Now he is able to lose himself in the big city.

However, he has to come up with a plan quickly. He is aware that there may be police or immigration officers looking out for him at the airport. He could hurry to catch the earliest possible plane before the word has spread. Or, he could take his chances, linger in Dublin and enjoy it for a few days before departing for his homeland, South Korea. Then the notion strikes him that nobody could object if he wanted to go home, really. They would just take the visa and send him off. He is free to choose.

He knows that leaving early will disappoint his parents. They had approved of this trip and funded the travel expenses in the interest of having him become fluent in English, to which nearly all Korean parents aspired. He has the return air ticket and just needs to change it.

Then he wonders whether he could just have the visa file adjusted were he to find some other volunteer position here in Dublin. Maybe that would work. That might keep his parents happy.

To be sure, the Irish authorities would probably not welcome him back to work, after quitting his post like this, at least for awhile. That does not matter to Jae Yeong, however, because he has had a bad experience working in Ireland during the three months since his arrival in January and does not wish to return to Ireland soon.

He had found the overseas volunteer opportunity through an internet search. There was a nonprofit organization looking for volunteers from abroad who wanted a working holiday for six months to a year. They provide lodgings and meals in addition to a living allowance in return for 25 hours of assistance in the care of the disabled residents in the home. There were pictures of beautiful green farmland and a large old-fashioned house that looked very appealing. Furthermore, the webpage stated that one would not get very lonely because there would be a team of foreign volunteers and enough to keep him busy in the house.

It had sounded like easy work. He had estimated that there would be plenty of time to see the country on his time off, a good opportunity to travel and practice English as well. Also, He had thought that he might be able to relate to Ireland, considering that, like Korea, Ireland too had been colonized by a brutal neighbouring people across the water. He had wished to tell people in Ireland about Korea.

Therefore, Jae Yeong had written a couple of enquiries and sent them using email. Satisfied with the replies, he had completed the online application form and prepared the documentation for a visa. The prospect had been exhilarating. Secretly, he so had wanted to get away from his home town, his family and his studies. He had longed for an exciting adventures and a new identity. He had wanted to learn and experience a lot in life.

Three months later, he had arrived in Ireland. It had been and was still delightfully beautiful and exotic to his eyes. He loved the sound of the Irish voices and their mix of quaint and modern ways.

He had begun his work at the home for the disabled with great enthusiasm. The other foreigners had been interesting and the director had seemed kind. But he assigned everyone household chores, which he had not mentioned before the volunteers had come (though it would have been logical to have anticipated that there would be housekeeping tasks). Then a conflict between a couple of the volunteers had developed and soon one of them had left, creating an extra burden on those who remained. The workload thereby increased.

Anyway, he had started to like the work less and less. Many of the residents could not communicate very well and he had not had as much time to speak English as he liked. A couple of the patients were actually mentally ill and had caused a lot of disturbances wetting themselves, screaming, vomiting, hallucinating and such at all hours. When he could communicate, people often had gotten impatient with him. A few had mocked or said bad things about foreigners in Ireland.

What was more, the night work had increased as well. The volunteers had agreed to work one night a week. However, the real needs and demands of the disabled residents had caused frequent midnight disruptions when they could not sleep or wanted to go to the bathroom during the night. One of the remaining volunteers would never take a turn at extra night work and he eventually had run away.

There had been no replacements available and the director had had to make extra efforts at soliciting help. It would have taken awhile to find more volunteer staff. There had been no money for salaried staff, of course, although, of course, paid professional staff would have had more commitment and expertise. The organization had been forced to make do with volunteers ever since the government had begun to withhold funding 10 years before.

In his effort to manage the needs and demands of the residents, the director had turned to the use of coercion to make the volunteers cooperate. He had threatened to reduce the allowance should volunteers not cooperate as he liked. And, he had reduced the volunteer staff's free time. He had assigned each to three nightshifts a week. These changes had only worsened the atmosphere. Soon, the volunteers had begun to feel that remaining there in the house was not worth the opportunity to see the country. There was actually little opportunity to explore Ireland here in this remote countryside location, and the reduction in allowances and free time drastically restrained the opportunities to ramble on weekends. The local pub and restaurant had not been enough to keep the visiting residents entertained and satisfied.

Sadly, three of the volunteers had made their moves and bolted last night, each heading in different directions. One had planned to catch a boat to go home Spain, another had wanted to see if she could spend some time in London before returning.

Jae Yeong wonders what the other truants are doing now and where they ended up today. He wishes he could talk to them.

He wants to talk to somebody and he contemplates calling his parents, or at least a friend back home. As he is not yet ready to speak to his parents, he decides to call a friend. Finally he is able to spill his emotions and explain his situation to somebody.

The friend listens sympathetically and patiently to the torrent of bottled up Korean.

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