

KANG Byoung Yoong

## DAD LIKES TODAY

### Today's Paths

After a humble and neat lunch, I am off to class for the afternoon lecture. As my wife smiles and waves at me, her presence overlaps with the warm rays of the sun. The scene cheers me right up.

The spring sunshine lights up the surroundings, and its warm energy showers over me. This apartment complex is my favourite area to walk around. I like living here, as there is something unusually warm and special imbued in the buildings – they are embracing the sunlight. The past and the tranquility here comfort me.

We have lived here for a long time. We were happy, and we are still happy, so today I like our being here even more. Built in 1988, the gaps between the buildings are quite wide, decked out with flowering plants. My eyes soften as I walk alongside the countless trees and lawns. Walking under the rows of big, beautiful trees is my time of happiness, and when I walk here with my wife after a day's work, there is no happier path than that. It's also a strange path, which furthermore makes my steps to work even lighter. The path among the trees is made up of soil instead of concrete. Branches spread out randomly, without any pattern. It gives me a unique pleasure to tread on soil and look at the green grass. The sound of my steps relaxes my mind. The yellow flowers in the grass also raise the corners of my mouth. The buildings' moderate height and the wide space between them signal its history, and allows one to look up at the high blue sky that stretches above the complex.

Today, the sky stretches even higher than other days. There's not even a single speck of cloud. I always find my apartment building sophisticated and traditional, probably because of the red bricks that make up the facade. They look as if someone has carefully placed them one by one. In Europe, especially in eastern Europe, red brick houses are easy to spot. Once I asked a Slovenian friend about the reason. Why are there so many red brick houses in Ljubljana or in Prague? With a look of nonchalance, the friend answered: Red bricks were the easiest and cheapest to get back in the day. They were everywhere, so what you are seeing now are just cheap, common housing blocks.

Maybe that's all there is to it. I believe that happiness in everyday life is a sum of common things coming together and becoming beautiful. Just like the common red brick houses gathered one by one to create a beautiful city.

There is a small shopping arcade at the entrance of the apartment complex. Inside, there is a small supermarket, a small locksmith, a small stationery store and a small fruit store. That's all. I am a regular at the fruit store, run by a pleasant-looking guy from Bosnia. He always greets me first, as most people do in Slovenia. Whenever I encounter them in the elevator, on the street, or even when they don't know me, it is always they who say hello first. When I moved to this country, this situation felt awkward, and it took some time for me to get used to it; now I say hello first.

The owner's greeting reaches me along with a sweet scent of fruit. Though small, the shelves of the store are always packed with a variety of fresh, tasty, and surprisingly sweet items. One day, while sharing a tangerine bought from the store with my wife, we both felt homesick, for the taste was so similar to the tangerines we used to eat in Korea. That sentiment had to end in tears. The European

pears we once bought at the store on a fall day, too, tasted just like an Asian pear popular in Korea. My daughter once commented: Dad, it reminds me of Chuseok. It is a store that sells memories with taste.

But that's not why I became a regular at the store. It is the portion of *deom* he adds whenever I shop. *Deom* is care. No father can refuse a fruit seller's kindness, adding an extra seasonal item like a tangerine, an apple, or a persimmon, being told with a bright smile: This is not for you, sir! When he makes sure that to me, I can see the sincerity in his eyes. I can see his affection in the extra gift. As on any other day, the man smiles and waves at me, and I greet him back. Passing by the store, I walk to the end of the arcade and exit the complex to meet the river.

The river flows slowly when I catch sight of it. As usual, it flows at its usual pace. I've never seen this river make big waves. Rather, it sometimes flows too solemnly; it doesn't seem real. It's as if I was looking at a picture of a motionless river. Sometimes people stir the surface as they leisurely glide in small boats. I once saw the waves spreading along the path of the oars into the river.

The ducks are heading somewhere today, swimming in a row. There aren't many people on the street on a hot day because it's hot, and not many on the street on a cold day because it's cold. But birds are not like that. There are birds in the sky even in the middle of the winter. Animals are consistent, unlike humans who quickly adapt their way of life to the environment. If it was a balmy day, you could have seen a cruise boat with people rowing and cutting the current, though not today.

This is a river that crosses the capital of a country, but it is not as grand and long as the Han River in Seoul. The river Ljubljanica is narrow and peaceful. The name means a small river in the city of Ljubljana. But then, the origin of the city name Ljubljana contains the sense of love, so as a whole, the name Ljubljanica bears the sense of being small and lovely. Could it be that the river has followed its fate according to its name? Or could it be named thus according to its nature?

It's not just the surface that calms you down. It's the surroundings: the footsteps and expressions of the people when they walk along the river with a look of peace. I've never seen anyone moving in a rush along the river Ljubljanica. I've never seen anyone in anger either. Even bicycles walk when they pass here.

Today is not much different from usual. I'm at peace, attuned to the idyllic vibe here, along with the cafes and restaurants sparsely dotted the riverside. The buildings don't seem to stand close to the other; they seem rather indifferent. But maybe that's how they show mutual respect, by standing that way, not interfering with each other.

That's peace.

The sustained peace I treasure.

The stable calm ensured by distance and sufficient mutual respect.

You can see a castle across this small, lovely, peaceful river. The castle overlooks the entire city from a hill at the centre of the city. It looks down on the city, but not arrogantly. Instead, what I feel from it is warmth, like a kind-hearted grandmother's gaze. The castle is waving its flag as if waving its hand to greet people. It is the same loveliness and peacefulness found in the flag when it flaps. It moves in a constant shape at constant intervals, as if it has been programmed that way. As if it's saying, You may change, but I won't.

I walk along the riverside while looking at the view until I reach the corner with the little cafes. Come

to think of it, there are no really big cafes in this city. One is Nostalgia, an old cafe that matches its name. Nostalgia is not like those artificially induced retro-concept cafes; it makes you feel the natural wrinkles of time. Inside, I find an old jukebox that looks like it's been there forever. It seems impossible that it would work at first glance. The worn chairs in front of the cafe look easy – perhaps too easy for a middle-aged, short-haired non-smoker like me to sit in. I need to be older, maybe old enough to have my white hair flying in the wind. I could be smoking while drinking beer. If not beer, whiskey would be good.

What you hear whenever you pass by Nostalgia is the jazz music flowing from inside. It would hit me and often get me thinking about my hometown. When they played Stanley Jordan Trio's "Autumn Leaves" one autumn afternoon, it reminded me of the stone walls and fallen leaves in Gwanghwamun where I used to walk with my wife. When they played Stan Getz and Joao Gilberto's "The Girl From Ipanema" on a summer day, it reminded me of a snowy bowl of *bingosu* I ate at a famous department store in Apgujeong. Jazz makes me miss Seoul even more.

I am from Seoul. I was born in the city and spent my whole youth there. I studied, met my wife and got married there. My daughter was also born in Seoul. Come to think of it though, isn't the whole thing odd, that a cafe in Ljubljana makes me miss Seoul? Also, that a Slovenian cafe with an English name plays an American song? And that a Korean passer-by misses his country through it, and lets himself be taken over by this sentiment every time?

Yet it's all true. It is foolish to find a reason for this longing. Longing is longing, like wind is wind. Wind suddenly blows from nowhere, cools you down, and then leaves. Longing, too, visits you without notice, throws new feelings into your heart, and leaves. That feeling lingers for a long time.

Today's track is Nat King Cole's "When I Fall in Love." Cole's deep, enticing voice streams out of the speaker and covers the floor. It's music for spring. I can't help it, but my mind is back in Seoul again. I see the petals flying out of the library window one day. Cole's low voice follows me and scatters behind my back. Like the wind, it vanishes without a trace.

After passing that nostalgia-evoking cafe and crossing one of the crosswalks, I take the left turn to campus, the place where I work. I am scheduled to teach an Introduction to Korean Literature 2 class for second-years in the afternoon. My main teaching subject is Korean literature and culture.

Let me give you more detail. I'm a professor of Asian Studies at the University of Ljubljana. There are Korean, Japanese, and Chinese Studies majors in the department, and I teach Korean literature and culture-related subjects to students majoring in Korean Studies and guide their thesis projects.

I'm always in a good mood when I am on my way to teach, and today is no exception. I value the time I spend in the classroom, every aspect of it. Each word is significant: Korea, literature, and culture. But above all, the presence of those who want to learn it completes the significance. It's good to be able to see the lively expressions of the students and to exchange opinions in the same space with those important presences in my course. I adore the moment when laughter and sighs are delivered to me through the air. I really like it when my body can physically feel that atmosphere.

The way to school is beautiful, and it is a joy to think of the people I will meet once I get there. I really like the way to school.

## Today's School

The university at which I teach is in Ljubljana. As its name suggests, it is located in the capital city of Slovenia. It's the largest and top-ranked university in the country. I know – I am too lucky to work at a place like this, despite my shortcomings. I would say it is a miracle.

In the early 21st century, Korean music, movies, and dramas suddenly gained popularity in Europe, and the university also began to take an interest in Korean Studies. That trend opened up an opportunity for me. When Koreans didn't even know where Slovenia was, I prepared applications and knocked on the door of this university. That happened already more than 10 years ago.

Like many other universities in Europe, the University of Ljubljana does not have a campus. It isn't fenced in. Separate buildings for each college are spread out throughout the city. Some are in the central, some others are in the northern part, and some others are scattered in the western part. The School of Architecture stands across from the School of Humanities, which is where I work. The buildings are not really dedicated to a major. The arrangement is very different from Korean universities. Still, some things are the same. Even without a campus, people meet, talk, share knowledge, and make things together. People can form solidarity over a fenceless university community. Small bonds can empower people, even if they don't form a large group – because it's not a physical fence that creates a sense of belonging.

The School of Humanities building where I work is on a street called Aškerčeva Cesta. Anton Askerčev was a well-known Catholic priest and one of the country's leading poets. Isn't it romantic that a university building is built on a street named after the country's representative poet? Askerčev's profession as a religious figure makes the atmosphere of the building even more sacred. Maybe that's why I am struck with awe whenever I stand in front of my school building. And once again, I make up my mind to turn over a new leaf. A Korean professor who commutes to a building on Han Yong-un street may feel what I feel.

The faculty's history is long, but the building's is not. It's a blue, unremarkable modern building that was built in the late 20th century. In front, there's a bicycle stand, a common sight in Slovenia. Students often get by on wheels, so the stands here are longer and more numerous than by other buildings. As usual, all the stands are full today. It is common for students and staff to ride bicycles to and from work. For me, it is a walkable distance, but I cycle as well from time to time, as I can look out at the world during the ride. You can see more than when you walk, and you can see in more detail than from a car. That moderate distance is what I like the best about it.

In front of the school building, there are benches where students can sit, chat, or smoke. Today I see a bunch of them holding cigarettes as usual. The scene of them sitting or standing by the bench is a joy to watch. I feel like I'm getting younger when I hear young people chatting, and it's also lovely to see them puffing their cigarettes, either with cute expressions or serious ones. When I see the students who greet me first while smoking, I smile. At first, I could never get used to the idea of students waving at the professors with a grin. To be precise, it didn't make sense to me. I wasn't used to seeing them smoking in front of professors.

However, I soon realized that it's not as rude as Koreans think it is. You know, hands that wave with real pleasure are way better than heads that are forced to bow. It didn't take long for me to realize that it was better to smoke and exchange opinions rather than curse them at a bar behind their backs.

As always, some students smile brightly and wave one hand as they spot me, holding a cigarette in

the other. I love this scene – their laughter, their waving, and even their cigarettes. I smile and wave back, exchanging laughter and joy.

There is another person who always greets me as I enter the building – it's Auntie Maja, the building supervisor. In the security office, she smiles and shares her kindness with the staff and students all the time. Whenever she gets a chance, she checks up on me about three things. First, she asks if I've had a meal. Second, she asks if my family is doing well. Third, she tells me not to overwork.

She is fluent in English, but we always talk in Slovenian. I prefer it that way. Since I live in Slovenia, I want to talk to Slovenians in Slovenian. It can be difficult and frustrating, but the struggle is exactly what I like. I think learning the other's language means that you are ready to understand their perspective. If you want to communicate with someone, you have to open your heart first. The first step is to understand their language. It's okay if your language is broken. The key is not skills, but a mindset. We know many cases where we can't understand each other, even though we speak the same language.

In fact, the three things she asks after are not particularly common to Slovenians. Auntie Maja once said she was curious about how Koreans greet each other. I told her that we usually ask each other whether we've had a meal. Since then, she has always greeted me in a Korean way. After she saw my daughter when she came to visit the school, my family's well-being became one of her concerns. She told me that if my family struggles with life here, I should take them back to Korea. There is no duty greater than caring for your family. However, I am pretty sure my wife and daughter like Slovenia even more than I do.

Dad, my daughter once said to me. Places alone can't make happiness, people can. She added that she's happy enough in Slovenia because she has a lot of Slovenian friends. My wife agreed. Maybe you should go back to Korea if your "intermittent" homesickness bothers you too much! We are happy enough here. I know she meant it as a joke, but I felt touched and grateful for them. My daughter and wife moved here because of my job, so it is wonderful that they love this place as much as I do, or even more so.

What a great relief it is. Not all families in the world live happily together. What matters is the depth of the family, not the size of it. A large family does not have to be always happier, nor does a family with a lot of money. A family that understands each other from the bottom of their heart is a happy family, and I am happy to say that I'm happy.

Auntie Maja thinks I'm a typical Korean who works overtime, after she witnessed a scene the other day. I have to say that, compared to average Koreans, I am lazy and often put off my work. This habit of mine was what caused her misperception. It was not long after I came to Slovenia – I was reading a book in my office on a weekend night, past 10 p.m. It wasn't really work-related, but for pleasure. But of course, any kind of reading could have been work-related for me, a literature specialist. Anyway, she saw me on her last tour of the day, and with intense surprise, she warned that I could die from exhaustion. Working more than eight hours a day is bad, without exception. It's wrong to come to the office on weekends, she added. As I explained I was just reading a novel, she still didn't relent, again warning that novels should be read chilling on a sofa at home. After that night, every time she sees me, she emphasises working in moderation. She's right. Being a workaholic is not fun. Reading novels in a comfortable chair is fun.

In the ten years of my posting here, I've never seen her frown. Her mood is, somehow, mysteriously consistent. It feels like she's wearing a smiling mask. When I asked a senior professor about the mystery, I learned that she had changed since her husband passed away about 15 years ago. She has

turned into a gentle person since then. Before that event, her voice was very loud and she never said hello first. She was notoriously called Ms. Unkind at the school. It is impossible to imagine Auntie Maja as a rude manager. However, I know that a person can change in the wake of a painful loss. Auntie Maja greets me again today, in an attitude far from being unkind. I give her my usual reply, that I just had lunch at home and that my family is doing well; and I only have one class to teach today, so will call it a day early. I walk up the stairs looking at her content smile.

My office is room 505. At least that's what Slovenians say, but if you think from a Korean perspective, it's on the sixth floor. In many European countries, the first floor is referred to as the ground floor. At first, it was really confusing. Many times I waited on the second floor when I was actually supposed to be on the first floor. Many other times I waited on the ground floor when I was actually supposed to be on the first floor. When I had to press 0 on the elevator, half-unconsciously, I often pressed 1 instead and ended up on the second floor. It took me quite a while to adjust to such a simple thing. But now I've adapted to the system. Now I think it's better to start from zero. The number makes me feel like I am starting from a fundamental spot.

The school is a six-storey building, so my office, room 505, is located (in Korean terms) on the sixth floor – the top floor. There is an elevator, but I always use the stairs. Seeing me getting around on foot, people think I deliberately walk for health reasons, but it's not really that. I just want to see people. I can see students as I walk up. I can run into my colleagues on the way down and small-talk. I want to be close to people's hustle and bustle and their colourful expressions as they go about their busy days. For me, there's nothing better than that. How odd that the same people are completely expressionless in the elevator. After effortless bows, they all avoid looking at each other like they have forgotten how to make faces for good. The only exception is when they meet someone they know well. But the people on the stairs are full of life, and for me it is important to get that kind of energy.

I feel alive as I climb the stairs today. I go up one step at a time, paying attention to the movement of my body as well as the bodies of others passing me. The whole process lightens me up. When I see my students saying hello to me or greeting each other, or some other students sitting on the stairs and talking to each other, I realise I am alive. The random languages they speak; the loud and small voices in the air; the language of this and that country – my mind races with excitement being surrounded by them. There should be different opinions, ideologies, and stories in those unknown languages. As I continue to climb while looking at these people and thinking about them, I reach the sixth floor in no time. My legs don't even have time to get sore.

The second room at the end of the corridor is my office. I share the small space with two other colleagues. Jakob is a professor of Chinese classics, and Sara is a professor of Japanese literature and translation. So there are three of us, researchers specializing in literature in the Asian Department. This may not be the case in Korea, but in Slovenia, sharing an office for academics is common, usually for three, four or even five people. I'm pretty lucky that I share the space with just two others. At first, I wished I had an assistant to help me with my work, as well as my own office like Korean professors. But I don't wish for that anymore. I now believe that sharing an office with other academics can create a synergetic effect in many ways. I don't need an assistant anyway, as I am not doing anything so great that it requires others' help. Personally, I learn a lot from my fellow professors in Chinese and Japanese literature.

It was not long ago that Sara and I had a long conversation about the novelist Kim Sa-ryang. Sara was very interested in Kim, as he was a Korean writer born in the Joseon era who was nominated for the Akutagawa Prize for his debut piece in Japan. In particular, she said that the sentences in "Into the Light" were exceptionally beautiful – enough to count among the best Japanese novels she had ever

read. Are there any works he wrote in Korean after he crossed the border up to North Korea? When Sara asked me, I explained in length about the writer's tragic life and the shifts in literary culture in North Korea. That's so interesting. It would be nice to have more chances to discuss how to translate and introduce his works written in the two languages to Europe. Then she added, If possible, a joint project would be nice. Sara is a lovely and active colleague who beams with a positive energy. She is a scholar who likes to ask first, listen to opinions, and share them. Positivity and proactiveness are one of the most important virtues for a scholar, but in reality, that kind of scholar is rare to find in Korea. Sara is a friend who showed me a new type of scholar. Her high voice engages people.

Jakob, on the other hand, is a quiet guy. In Korean terms, I'd say that he's someone who is reticent yet warm-hearted. Jakob is a world-renowned researcher in classical literature and is especially well-known in China and Taiwan. It's been said that, for being in his early 50s, he's had colossal research accomplishments. He has been selected the Best Scholar by the Slovenian Academy, the country's highest authority, for the past three years straight. But if you don't know about his background, on the outside Jakob is just a middle-aged man who doesn't talk much. He laughs easily, but he is not a conversation starter. Jakob always calls me Kang Byoung-yoong *seongsaengnim* (teacher). When he addresses me, he says everything including my first and last name, and even adds the Korean title *seonsaengnim*. This is in contrast to how other colleagues call me, Professor Kang or even just Yoong, after the last syllable of my first name. I love Jakob's clear pronunciation.

One day, I told him that he didn't have to call me by my full name. I only wanted to show respect, he said, but of course, I would stop if you are uncomfortable. He insisted that he wanted to keep addressing me this way as long as I was okay with it. Just so I can contemplate them when I pronounce each syllable of people's names. Jakob always uses honorifics for his fellow professors, which is very rare in Slovenia. But his use of honorifics has never made me feel uncomfortable. In fact, I like his code of address. One's self-esteem gets a boost when one feels sure that someone highly regards you. I learn things inside this little office that are hard to learn outside. Jakob's deep and consistent tone soothes and clears my mind.

It's a shame I can't hear Jakob's honorific addresses to me today – he is not in. As I open the door, Sara smiles brightly. We exchange a brief hello before I am seated. I can hear Sara's quick and cheerful keyboard typing behind my back – she must be writing an email. I turn on my computer too. The warm spring daylight flows through the window, softly filling up the room. The typing sound disappears for a moment, and I can hear Sara's voice from behind. You think of bears in spring, right? I can't help but burst into laughter. She makes guesses through the only Japanese metaphors I know. I reply: Haruki Murakami! Noru Wei-nomori!

Sara doesn't even look back and continues typing, exclaiming, Bingo!

### Today's Students

Introduction to Korean Literature 2 ("Uvod v korejsko književnost 2") is the subject I will teach today. The students and I examine the overall contents of Korean literature. I taught Introduction to Korean Literature 1 last semester, and the students taking my class this semester have completed the previous class. There are students from other majors, but all of them have more than intermediate Korean language skills. Over 90% of the students are sophomores in Korean studies. I always try to treat all students equally without discriminating, but personally, I get along the best with second-year students in their second semester. I am at ease being around them. It's good that both I and them are able to talk in Korean, and they are all done with the disordered and hectic freshman years. They are calmly carrying on with their school lives. For them, the big final-year challenges ahead such as their graduation theses, career, grad school, or studying abroad are yet to come. The



second year's timeline puts me in a comfortable position as a teacher.

Last semester, we looked through the history of Korean literature. This semester, we are discussing writers we nominated as possibly representing the history of modern Korean literature. The students did not learn Korean literature in middle and high school, and some couldn't even read Korean before starting the course. It is not easy to give an in-depth lecture in an introductory class like this. However, I try to understand my students and encourage them to share their opinions and thoughts as much as possible. I hope that they enjoy the process of learning culture through literature and vice versa.

That's what literature is like. I try to stay faithful to the process of thought-sharing through the text in the class. After all, the best way to understand the text is to read it, so I encourage students to do a close read from beginning to end, even of a single piece, for reflection. I think the highlight of the first-semester was writing a *sijo*, a traditional three-verse stanza Korean poem. After going through the history of the *sijo*, I introduced modern *sijo* instead of the original form in archaic language. The modern form would be easy for students whose Korean is still at the learner's level. So I try to let them experience a beautiful *sijo* that they can understand on their own. My selection for the curriculum was Lee Ho-woo's "Flowering." I told them to read his *sijo* slowly twice. The students expressed interest in translating it, saying that they could visualise the moment of a flower blooming in front of them.

The flowers are blooming. The sky is opening  
At last, the last tremor of the last leaf  
The wind and the sun are holding my breath, and I close my eyes, too

When I first read it, their response was not so impressive. But the second time I read it, we all closed our eyes together. No one forced us to do so. Some students recited the line, one leaf, one leaf. We were collectively imagining the moment of a flower blooming.

This, I believe, is literary communion. Reading together, feeling together. But even for students who appreciated the *sijo*, when I asked them to write one, their expressions suddenly grew murky. Probably it's because they thought it was an impossible task to complete with their Korean skills. However, when three or four of them were asked to write as a group, they were enthusiastic about creating a piece together. When I asked the groups to read their composition out loud, they read them clearly in Korean, like true reciters. It's the power of rhyme that does the magic. A *sijo* about Korean idols was, and still is, coming out every semester without fail. Slovenian nature is also one of the main subjects. There were even students who adopted dad jokes while writing it. As I watched my Slovenian students composing their *sijo*, listened to them, and read them again, I partook in literary communion. These are the moments when I learn as I teach.

Last semester, a team of students expressed the difficulty of writing a poem in this cheeky way.

Teacher, stop making us do difficult things like this.  
Teacher, we're not yet good at things like this.  
Teacher, we're going to run away if you keep making us do this.

I am glad that no one ran away during the course. They built up confidence by receiving my positive feedback on their poems. Don't worry Seonsaengnim, we'll keep writing them. The students laughed, and I followed. Don't even think about running away, I won't force you anymore. The students laughed again, and I laughed along with them. A bond can be literary, or it can just end with laughter. Either way is fine. I enjoy the moment of realising when I am moved by someone's



words written in Korean. It's a blessing that we share the delight in that experience.

This semester, we are reading and exchanging ideas about short stories. I asked students to read Kim Seung-ok's "Record of a Journey to Mujin" last week, but I don't know how many have read it. There is no Korean short story translated into Slovenian. But there are quite a few volumes of short story collections translated into English. This class Students who take this course read one piece in English every week. My lectures cover the topic of Korean literature, but English is the main language we use in class. It's impossible for me to teach in Slovenian because I'm not fluent in the language. But then, teaching in Korean would be a big burden for the students as well. It would have been ideal if we shared the same mother tongue, but since we don't, teaching in English doesn't seem to be a bad idea. English is an equaliser for our communication. People can treat others as a child if they don't speak a language properly. But those people neglect a big truth; although one's pronunciation may be poor or short in vocabulary, you can't overlook the depth of their thoughts, which is the same as when they speak their mother tongue.

Before I realized this, I may have unwittingly treated my students like children when they spoke in Korean. When I speak in poor Slovenian, my students may feel the same about me. But in English, we meet at a linguistic middle ground. Compared to my Korean, my expressions in English are bound to be rough, but it is a foreign language for all of us, so there is no linguistic advantage granted to anyone. It opens up the possibility for a frank and direct exchange of opinions, and I like it. As a teacher, I don't like to manipulate my students with words, nor do I want to stand in a superior position to them with words. No, I don't want to take the lead over them, especially if they are my students.

Nineteen students sit in the room today. The number of students registered in the Korean department is twenty, and with the addition of two students from other departments taking this class, I would say the attendance rate is good.

I check if they have read through Kim Seung-ok's "Record of a Journey to Mujin" to the end, and get nods from most of them. When I challenge them with a claim that the structure of the story resembles the Harry Potter series, some of them giggle. Could the male protagonist Yoon Hee-joong be called Harry and Mujin be called Hogwarts? To my question, the students stare at me with puzzled expressions. Hee-joong arguably went to Mujin to learn about life through an awakening, just as Harry went to Hogwarts to learn magic and come of age. Only a couple of students put on a smile of understanding. Some sigh as if dumbfounded, while others keep their heads tilted. I continue. As we have learned, the purpose of a novel is to record the journey of one's leaving, gaining insight, and returning. The students' sighs disappear at last, and their tilted heads slowly return to their original positions. Both novels are concerned with a journey. After all, a novel is a novel, regardless of where it is set. A novel is an art of communication, and universality is essential for communication. Then I ask my students if they can find universal significance while reading the book, and they begin to share their opinions. Prompted by my trivial theory, some cite the names of Slovenian masters they have read, such as Ivan Cankar and Boris Pahor. Some elaborate, and some others disagree, as expected.

Just like that, more novel ideas are unveiled through Kim Seung-ok. The new chapter that my students have just written is as interesting and complex as the author's original story – it is beautiful. Being surrounded by this atmosphere is the best part of the class for me. When we share stories about stories, and when the students' expressed feelings shine on the text, I feel fulfilled. And I reflect on myself.

Again today, I am learning as I teach!

I know students don't like to get caught up in a conversation with a professor for too long, but I shamelessly love that part of the class. It's hard to pin down what's so good about it. It's just so nice to be able to do things together. It is indescribably amazing.

Could it be compared to fog? It's clearly there, even though you can't hold it with your hands. It's hard to figure out how much of it there is. Just as you can see what fog is only when your skin feels it, the good vibe that I get in class is real only when I am in it.

### **Today's Espresso**

After the lecture, coffee comes to my mind. I like to sit in a place filled with the scent of coffee and go over what the students said during class. I try to forget what I said as much as I can. I try to let it go with each sip, and instead, contemplate what else I learned today as I went to teach.

I like spending time alone there. Coffee for one is the best.

So I head to my regular cafe, not the office. Unless there is an urgent or overdue task waiting for me, this is the routine. Enjoying the repetition of everyday life means that you are always content in it. That's right. I'm afraid to break the joy of the mundane routines of my life. I'm afraid that all these things – warm afternoons, nostalgia-filled walks, welcoming faces, people who I can talk and share my thoughts with, the fragrant time I spend on my own – might disappear.

I walk out of the back gate of the school building and head toward the river Ljubljanica to see the city museum. As I go into the narrow alley on the right in front of the museum, it is there – the tiny cafe. It may be too small to spot, but you can't just pass it by once you've caught the amazing scent of coffee. It's a place where your nose tells you to stop, not your eyes. Cafe Veter, where I drop by every day, means "wind" in Slovenian. It's not a coincidence that I think of my wish whenever I sit here- the words "wind" and "wish" are pronounced the same in Korean. Cafe Veter is the place where I savour my coffee, maintaining this tranquil daily life without having to face any winds of change. It's my wish that all my things stay this way. When I am off to Cafe Veter, I announce jokingly to my wife: I am going out to make wind. (In Korean, the phrase "make wind" can also mean "to have an affair.") Then my wife makes a stand: Well, don't get hit by it! (In Korean, the phrase "hit by the wind" can also mean "stood up".) Cafe Veter is not far from my home and work, so it's a place where I can stop by from time to time, like the wind. This is one of the places I miss whenever I am in Korea on holiday.

I push open the big wooden door and enter the small cafe as I do on other days. Greeting the waiter, I am seated by my usual corner window. No one comes to take orders from me, and no one talks to me until I talk to them first. Instead, someone brings me the Brazilian Santos espresso, exactly what I want. I've been sitting in the same spot for years, ordering and drinking the same menu. Everyone, including the owner and even the part-timer, knows my taste. Even if a new part-timer comes, they make the same coffee for me without fail. Sometimes people ask if I want to try other kinds of coffee at all. But I'm not one of those people who'd easily change up their taste. Every time I choose the same bean, I am transported to the Santos port in Brazil, where I've never been. I feel the warm sea breeze through the coffee for some reason. It's a sea breeze that bears benevolence. In my imagination, I savour my kind of coffee, which is not too strong and just right. It's a moderate acidity and bitterness. The best part is the clean aftertaste after a sip. The taste immediately disappears from my tongue, but it lingers in my brain. How can I not get addicted? There is no need to drink any other type.

Earlier in the class, a student claimed that it was “very very” hard to finish the story because the female character was unlikable. The student made a strong frown, repeating the word “very” twice. I didn't speak for the author Kim Seung-ok or the character Ha In-sook. I could have convinced them that Ha's gender might not be important; Yoon Hee-joong's alter ego might be Ha; Yoon might have realized something by looking at his other self through Ha; Yoon could be Ha; it might not matter if it was the opposite.

If the student asks my opinion one more time, I might say all this. But I intended to be a listener, nodding instead of challenging the student. I believe it's better to keep your thoughts to yourself when they run ahead. The stream of thought is like that of water. I don't think it's something that can be changed all of a sudden. If the idea isn't offensive or harmful to others, you can let it flow for a while. Thinking of the student makes me smile.

It is when the unique bitterness of the espresso crosses my throat, and the clean aftertaste lingers in my mouth that I walk out of Cafe Veter. I cruise through the narrow alleys of the city that have existed since Roman times. The bumpy stone tiles that are fun to walk on, and the river breeze feels just right today. Everything is perfect.

I am more at ease after the coffee. The ebbs and flows of the river seem to be steady and serene like any other day. I never get bored by the scene of a flag flying on top of the castle that is far away.

Yes, I would say a cup of coffee a day is my thing. That “small” moment of sitting and reflecting with a shot of espresso. That's my thing.

My daughter opens the door and calls out to me.

Dad!

### **Dad's Today**

Dad really likes Today.

He was in a sterile room with Today again today.

As usual, he went on a trip to Today.

He didn't come out of the room all day to stay in Today.

In Today, he would have met mom, who he can no longer meet in reality. He would have walked on the streets where he can no longer walk. He would have visited the unremarkable school building that he loved so much, and he would have run into people who are only visible on screen. He would have smiled at the colleagues he can now meet through video calls. He would obviously have climbed up and down the stairs to give face-to-face lectures that have been unavailable for 30 years now. He would have been pleased to meet students and see their faces. After the lecture, he would have had his daily cup of espresso at his favourite cafe. He must have daydreamed of Brazil while drinking it, where he can no longer travel. And then, he must have walked home in bliss, feeling the breeze by the river. Maybe he met my past self in that Today.

It was me who presented Today to dad.

He always looked happy in the sterile room while totally immersed.

It's already been ten years since he hasn't left the room of Today.

Ten years ago, after mom died in 2040, he suffered from depression. Mom used to say the ideal lifespan for humans is their 60s, and dad would hate her saying it. I always found it cute to watch

them squabbling. But then mom passed away exactly on the year of her 60th birthday. It wasn't even May, her birthday month, when she closed her eyes. She didn't even let us wish her a happy 60th birthday.

It was spring. Mom, who was healthy until the day she died, didn't open her eyes in the morning. It didn't seem real. It was a death neither from chronic disease nor the pandemic. Because mom always slept like a log, dad didn't immediately notice that she had left this world. As usual, he got on with his early morning routine in the study, and he has blamed himself ever since for his incompetence at the moment mom stopped breathing. I hate that I was reading the damn books while your mom was saying goodbye to the world. After that, he threw away all his books and became a literature teacher who never read books.

Though there was no sign of struggle in mom's leaving, dad's struggle started exactly from the day she left.

Mom and dad had always been together since 2020 when the Dπ pandemic changed the world. They spent 24 hours together, literally and physically. They were always close in the first place, more than any other couple. But they became even closer after 2020. Then, just 20 years later, mom passed away. Dad told me that it is too unusual nowadays to die at the age of 60, though it was relatively natural back in his grandfather's days. But when I learned that my great-grandfather managed to live to be over 80, mom's death seemed somewhat unfair.

The world became a totally different place in 2020 as the Dπ era began, but mom and dad stayed consistent. Our family life didn't change much either – at least until mom died. Perhaps it was his stable income due to the particularity of his job that kept us going.

Neither mom nor dad had a large group of friends anyway. It was always like that in Korea as well as in Slovenia. Rather, they valued the few friendships that they did have. Citing Haruki Murakami, dad said one should be able to take joy in the small things, to which mom nodded. Mom and dad knew how to enjoy small daily joys. For them, eating delicious fruit was bliss. A brief greeting with neighbours in the morning made their whole day. After Dπ took over the world, the two held fast to their happiness by looking back at their beautiful ordinary days. They adjusted little by little to their new life, but mom's death demolished everything.

Dad used to be a tranquil person without mood swings. The depression that hit him was awkward, as if he was speaking an obscure foreign language. He had always been a positive man. He got sick of the idea of online teaching, which he used to like when mom was alive. He lamented that education without contact is not true education. In the end, he had to retire earlier than his peers.

It was clear that what tortured him after his wife's sudden death was depression, but he just didn't admit it. He knew that admitting it could only make things harder for him to move on. The world is just suffocating, he would often say. I am just getting old, dear, my energy is gradually wearing out, inside and out. Dad was always good at complicating easy concepts and simplifying difficult ones. He referred to his skill as an "occupational disorder." Dad had always been a good listener and speaker, which was a perfect fit for his job– at least until mom died. Back then, his personality traits helped him adapt relatively well to the new environment despite his older age.

In 2020, the world changed.  
Dπ spread rapidly around the world.  
Simply put, Dπ swallowed the world.

The sweep was rampant and violent.  
It was beyond control.

When the first Δπ case was confirmed in the U.S. on Christmas that year, no one anticipated the outbreak would shake up the whole world. Even when countless people died in the beginning of 2021, and when the impact became a global catastrophe, world leaders were confident that vaccines and treatments would be ready in a few months, asking people to wait quietly for the time being.

During the subjective period of “for the time being,” countless people died out. Many were dying from waiting, and many others were waiting for a solution as they were dying. “For the time being” lasted 30 years. But no fundamental cure has been found so far.

The Δπ is still active.  
People are still dying.

Δπ is a disease named after the phrase “disconnect from the periphery(π).” It eliminates a person's immune system. As if peeling off the skin of a fruit, the virus peels off immunity layer by layer. When a person is stripped of their immune system, they become helpless and vulnerable.

Δπ removes all the armors of the body, but as long as a person doesn't get sick afterwards, they can stay alive. Δπ never kills people directly. Many have died from a virus that killed them indirectly. The cause of death for those who were infected was either a chronic illness they already had, or a new disease they caught after their immunity had been depleted. In many cases, they would be hospitalised for another disease that had penetrated their bodies, after their immune systems had been destroyed by the Δπ. So people died after being infected with another disease. Some people died of a mild cold after meeting with friends who didn't know they were actually infected. A friend who carried a cold virus caught Δπ from another person, and then died. Δπ infiltrated into our lives, invading one layer at a time.

The first thing the virus did to us was to disconnect personal relationships from the periphery. People began to fear socialising. People were afraid to go outside in the open air, or they often could never come back after finally working up the courage to go outside. In the end, outside of their families, most people had to maintain all relationships in the virtual world.

Places have become increasingly sterile. A world where people do not go out and live in sterile spaces is not novel to those born after 2020, but it was a challenging reality to adapt to for the previous generation. Things that used to be as unshakable as the truth began to disappear one by one. The university was the first institution that closed its physical doors. Education was necessary, but it was hard to think of a good reason for meeting in person for lessons. Except for a number of majors such as medicine and engineering, all classes on the ground were closed. Virtual classrooms commenced.

Dad was no exception from the shift. The school building he used to commute to was gone. He was still a professor who lectured, researched and even published papers at conferences – but he could not be present at school. After the building disappeared, stores began to disappear. The streets became quiet.

"We used to walk in the street," became a fictional expression. People used that phrase to mean, "Did it ever happen?" Even until then, my dad stayed positive. He might have pretended to be, or maybe it was possible because mom was with us. Things will get better soon, he reassured us. Through the screen, he stressed to students about the promising aspects of the pre-Δπ era. Of

course, there were many others who believed so besides dad. He shed tears upon the news that the blue building he worked in would be permanently demolished. He regretted that the world was forcibly erasing what could have been left to age naturally. His tears didn't mean despair but were pure sadness. And with mom's comfort, he found resilience again.

For those born after 2020, the pre- $\Delta\pi$  world did not exist. For them, things from the previous world like walking down the street were not as essential. But those born before that began to fall into two groups; dad had to choose one. According to him, the classification seemed to distinguish between those who had met people in person and those who had not. That's how the virus divided us: the quick adapters and resisters. But survival was hard for both groups. Products began becoming available for the needs of both groups.

One of them was Today.

It's a program which takes you to any day of your choice. Installed in a sterile room, Today summons a day you want to re-live. In virtual reality, you are allowed to be in a day of your choice. You can enjoy Today in a clean and safe environment. It's a world of contact that you can enjoy in a contact-free world. The program reminds you that it is impossible to meet real people forever; it only allows you to believe that you have met them.

I gave Today to dad for his sake.

As expected, at first he rejected it, bitterly saying that he was fine without such a thing. But I can't forget the smile beaming on his face on the first day he entered Today.

When I asked him which 'today' he went to, his answer defied my assumption – I was expecting a special day like a birthday, anniversary, or at least one of his dates with mom. But he just said that he went to an ordinary "today." It was a day that he couldn't even recall which date it was. It was not even a day he spent in Korea -- he summoned a certain 'today' in Slovenia. There was no need to eat any fancy food, nor to experience something special in that "today" he wanted. When he told me that with a smile, what I found was true bliss in him.

It was just what I wanted. He grinned.

I could reclaim the mundane happiness again. He grinned again.

It was a normal spring day in 2019 that he chose to visit.

It was one of the pre- $\Delta\pi$  days that he chose to re-live.

Waking up at dawn; reading a book; eating breakfast with mom; watching me off to school; working at the school in the morning and coming home for the lunch break; lunch with mom at noon; walking along the riverside to school; having a little talk with colleagues at the office; a coffee break. And coming home.

It was just a day that could have been any other day in 2019 or 2018.

A day that could have been in spring or autumn.

But I couldn't understand. Why did he choose such a common day among so many?

And why has he repeated the same Today for the 10 years since?

I want to ask him someday:

When is today for you, for real?

Does today in a real sense even exist?

—

*Translated from the Korean by Eugene Kim and Beth Eunhee Hong*

The story first appeared in <SF Kim Seungok>, a collection of Korean young writers dedicated to Kim Seungok, a representative writer of modern Korean literature.)