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Mr. Oh

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Mr. Oh

The doctor say he no can help me. He don't find any problem. He say: Mr. Oh, you might think perhaps about consulting another doctor. A psychiatrist. Many times, such phantom aches and pains can be caused by stress or excessive worry. I can give you a referral if you'd like.

No, I shake my head. I know what he talking about. He don't believe this pain in my neck. Almost I can no longer swallow. He think I'm crazy, have some kind of mental problem. What he know anyway? Doctors, they just suppose to find place where pain start and fix it.

Two months ago this start. Sudden pain in neck. Near back on left side. Like somebody take my skin between finger and pinch. Like my older brother used do. Like I do to younger brother. Hard to move with that kind of pain. That kind enough for making stay down. Last week, two days I not get up. I stay in bedroom, watch Korean videos. Usually feel good to hear Korean language, my ear understand right away. But with pain in neck, hard to enjoy. Korean sound like English coming long way to me. It take time to travel, and in meantime this pinching. This the third doctor I see. This one specialist. Always they say they can find nothing. Wife come with me, but she don't believe me either. She just trying to help me.

On way home, when Wife say: What he say? I tell her he say I depress, go see psychiatrist. Wife worry, then mad. She want to know where exactly pain is. I try to explain but car almost hit fence, so she say: Watch the road! Watch the road! I say I watching the road fine, but she want me show her where pain is or not? She say: Your problem you nervous all the time. Never relax. I say she make me nervous asking question and then screaming when we far away from fence anyway. She just say I nervous again. I yell to Wife she never support me. That why I nervous all the time. She only get quiet, watch the road.

I never nervous when I young. I don't care anything. Now worry too much. I almost sixty. How many ahead? I think not many.

Too bad, too bad.

I know it make no sense to look too much at history, but how else we going to understand self? We are—how yousay—*sum* of decision we make. That who we really are. How we act mean who we are. I study Kierkegaard at Yonsei University in 1957. Long time ago but coming back to me now. I

remember he say only understand life backward but have to live forward. OK, but sometime man come to place where not so much forward but much much past. What you do with everything remember but now gone? Can't bring back, can't forget.

I have conversation with Mr. O'Brien last week. He owner of two Texaco stations. Every week he bring his dirty towel from the shop. He say: Mr. Oh, do Korean people drink as much as the Irish?

Yah, I say, even more. You people drink beer. Koreans drink *soju*. Stronger, I say, patting my stomach. That where it burn.

Mr. O'Brien think for a minute. He say: Somebody told me that the Koreans are the Irish of the Orient.

You know what I think? I think Irish are Koreans of Europe, but he too nice, so I say Korea more like Italy. I trying to think of the word . . . I draw with finger on counter.

Peninsula? Mr. O'Brien say.

Yah, peninsula! Peninsula. Can be attacked from many sides. Always have to be careful. That why they have mafia. Koreans and Italians emotional too. Eating and drinking important.

Mr. O'Brien look like he don't know what I'm talking about, but he smile.

Then Mr. O'Brien say: Hey, yeah, Ireland is a peninsula too.

He hit me on the arm. He say: Yeah, that's true.

After doctor appointment, we go to laundromat. Drive by Suds-n-Things, laundromat two block away. Parking lot empty. Our place have three cars. One belong to Daisy, day-lady worker. She maybe 75, look like 65, act like 55. She never stop talking. Strong too, lift laundry, help customer carry basket in/out, talk, smile all day.

Two dryers not working. Always some kind of problem. The change machine break too many times and people don't close washer door tight so it leak. Sometime people put too many clothes inside, the door open by itself. Sometime people so stupid. They don't understand if too many clothes, then no washing take place. No place for water and soap to go. Same with dryer. You fill it tight, it take years to dry. Many, many quarters. No long-term thinking.

First time I come here, I worry: how much can laundromat make? I ask Mr. Eberly, man who sold me place, how he make enough to pay two ladies work here. Mr. Eberly say it a good neighborhood—low-income white family. Blacks go to other laundromat, one where no one work, man only come at night to take money and fill change machine. But here, this what I wonder: why people who able to own house, no matter how small, why they not buy own washer and dryer? What they spend in one year at laundromat enough to buy very nice set. Kenmore. Maybe even front loader.

This what I think: problem is vision. People think only one day ahead, one month. One year too long to think about. I understand, but have to do anyway. Even don't know what happen next six month or year, still good to have some plan. Still good to be working for future. Also, people who live around laundromat spend little bit of money every day, never have enough. Hard for them to imagine spend six, seven hundred dollar at one time. Wife act like that too sometime. She remember time when money come in and go out before we even see. Hard to take breath or to plan.

Today, one leak. I turn machine off and push door close tight. Wife already cleaning floor. Then dryers. I go behind dryers to see problem. Two small wire broken. Look like maybe a rat. Rat have sharp teeth. I feel pain again in neck. It feel like burning—first flame, then cold. How can doctor be right? Has to be real, I can feel it. But maybe everybody right, I crazy.

Sometime Wife say so. She say, You crazy. You dreamer. When we going on cruise, when we go to Europe?

I say, Not now. She don't understand I'm talking about future. Sometime only joy is drink and talk about future.

At laundromat I see what being owner mean. It mean see people steal. This the truth. They take everything even when nothing to take. Toilet paper from bathroom, old magazine, plastic ashtray. One time somebody take money out of machine before me. One time man walk in and pull register from wall and walk out. We never find. That guy act like he not even stealing, he just taking back what his. He think world owe him easy life. Who so stupid told him that?

Everybody know Koreans work hard.

One time daughter come home from school. She say: Dad, that's a stereotype. It makes us seem inhuman.

No, I say. We human. But Koreans always have to work hard. That what Koreans best at. Surviving. So many country try take over, Chinese, Japanese, Russia, America, we always have to work hard just be Korean. In situation like that, it doesn't matter rich or poor. You never know what happen. Even today. War or stock market or getting killed in store with gun. Why they want to kill? Just take money and go.

What are we working for?

Doesn't matter. Understand work, understand life. That what life is. Life is hardest work.

I wonder: why when I say it sound so easy? My daughter look like she understand but don't want to believe. If she understand Korean, then I can explain.

Her English very good. My Korean very good. Sometime not work so well together.

She look at beer can on table. She nervous. She say: Dad, do you think you might be an alcoholic?

I so surprise I say:
Yah, used to be. Now I just enjoy.

Son say: When I grow up, I'm going to be David Letterman.
Daughter say: I'm going to be an immigration lawyer.
Son now vice-president in bank. Daughter immigration lawyer. They happy. I happy. Make everything worth it. How come I depress?

Every day Wife tell me go see psychiatrist. Pretend no hear. She say I thinking old way. It no big deal. She say Kim Shin-Ho go to one. She say I being selfish. She say she have to live with me too. When she say that, I show her what it mean to live with me. Black eye. Even though that not what I mean.

I go to psychiatrist. Dr. McDowell. Work in Atlanta, two hour away. Doctor, he is younger than me, maybe thirty-five. First he just want me to talk, then he ask lotta questions. Where I born? What year? When I move here? What I do. What Wife do. What children do.

I tell him everything he want to know. Born in Pusan 1937, move to America 1976. For six year I owner of Sunshine Laundromat in Piedmont. Wife do what I do.

He ask me if I make money.

Not too good! I say. Why he want to know that?

He say he ask because maybe I'm stress.

Yah, always stress about money, but that natural. Never know what will happen. That not the problem. I have nice house and Mercedes. Children doing good.

I ask him what kind people come to this place. People with mental problems?

He say: No, not really. He look at round, gold watch on desk.

I say: Still, anyway, some are crazy?

No. I don't believe in crazy people, Mr. Oh.

Not even Hitler?

Personally, I think he was more evil than crazy.

Yah, but he must be crazy to hate so much. Too much feeling one way or other make you crazy.

I think of all times I yelling at Wife and children. They look at me like I crazy.

I not able to talk about even in Korean.

Doctor nod at me. Go on, he say.

Why people get depress?

Doctor say: Depends. Sometimes it's chemical, sometimes environmental. Sometimes they're sad about the death of someone they've loved. I also think it's natural in the course of life.

Doctor, you think you a good man?

We're not here to talk about me.

OK, I talk about myself. I say sometime yes, sometime no.

That sounds about right. That's what makes us human. But we needn't talk in terms of good and bad.

I point to my head: That what it say here. But you know what my feeling say? *Nnnnnnnnnnnno*.

That might be anxiety. What about this pain in your neck?

Nobody believe it real.

Do you?

I not sure.

What do you mean?

When I feel it, seem real, but how come they don't find any problem?

Well, Mr. Oh, the mind is very strong. Sometimes when—

Why my mind want my neck to hurt?

That's just the physical locus of the pain. The real pain may be psychic. That is, it resides in your memory and in your past.

I shake my head. I already know.

I wish I speak English better, I say. Then you understand more. Inside feelings—I point at chest—hard to explain in English. Korean have more words to describe feeling.

Try.

Wife speak better English than me. She friendly too. Make friend everywhere. Not me. I hard, I know. Make family not happy. Yell too much. They look at me like bad father, bad husband. They right. My father was good husband, good father. He was proud man. Important in Korea. My grandfather was mayor of town in North Korea. Near Yalu River. You know that river?

Doctor shake head. He don't look embarrass. Then how can he understand?

One of biggest in world. Run next to Siberia and China, what they call before Manchuria. My father send me to best university in Korea. He take good care of us. He do better job than me.

From what you told me earlier, it doesn't seem like that's true.

I not talking about money. Sometime I talk when time to be quiet, and don't talk when time to. I drink too much, every night. I spend money without telling Wife. When I worry, I not able to help it. Sometime I make Wife unhappy.

I stop talk. I remember something happen two year ago.

Doctor say: What?

I say: Two year ago we have our wedding anniversary, twenty-six year. We go to steakhouse near Pelham Road. I tell her that twenty-six year ago I smart. I go back in time, I choose her again. I ask Wife if she do same. You know what she say?

Doctor shake his head.

She say: No way, José. She smile at me, but I know she mean it.

How do you know she means it?

Because she say so! She say: I mean it. But forget it, now I marry you, we make best of it. She good at that.

Why do you think she feels that way?

Why? When we first married in Korea, I always out. Having fun, drinking. In the beginning, Wife is happy—when she look at me, she look happy. Afterward, she look like it hurt to see me and smile at same time. My father, he have a lot of money, but not me. I buy things, I gamble. That some of the reason why.

What do you think would make you happy?

Same thing make everybody happy—amnesia.

Doctor say: Hmm, time's up. Let's both think about what you've said. Can you come back next week?

I say OK, but I no go back. No way, José. Who say talking make life better?

Wife in waiting room reading magazine. She heavy now but still pretty. In the car she say I crazy, but that is OK because she crazy too. She say live too long, become crazy one way or another. She say that still it better if I not yell too much. Better if I speak in low, even voice. She say smile more. Americans always smiling. Who care if they hate her inside, she hate them inside too. Important just to smile.

Hot inside car. I about to roll down window when pain come. I pull to side of road. This time, feel like hand pressing down into shoulder, pushing me into seat. Wife look at me to see why we not moving. I looking back at her from long distance.