

Lost in 翻譯

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Mist settles on rooftops. Pools of amber light the road, reflecting the neon lights. The soft sound of rain encompasses a small café on the edge of Taipei. The paint is peeling away from the wall and a woman sketches the shape in a small notebook.

She doesn't notice that she's already finished her coffee and picks it up to her lips. She's lost in the two words circled by the wall cancer sketch. Uncanny and its German translation Unheimlich. Heimlich means home, so a more direct translation is un-home.

“你好,” says the wait staff in greeting to a man leaving his umbrella at the door.

“晚安,” he says in response with a certain vibrato that is reminiscent of wood instruments and the sound of the sea cresting stones. He wears a grey suit with both buttons fastened. This is against the etiquette established by King Edward in the early 1900s that

the bottom button should never be used. He takes the jacket off entirely and hangs it over the chair.

He is the only thing capable of drawing the woman's attention away from her notes. She sits with a leg crossed on the chair; her slippers discarded beside her. The humidity has made her curls invade the soft rounded edges of her face. Before they have time to exchange pleasantries and remarks about the weather, he extracts his laptop, and two HB pencils the same length.

She spies a list of words in the glare of his glasses. At the very top sits Unheimlich.

“Do you have something against German?”

“How do you...” He lowers the screen of his laptop. “We're not translating into German.”

“I know, it's a placeholder. That's why it was green.”

His gaze lingers on the top corner of the ceiling. She notices the sharp angle of his jaw and draws her eyes away too. “What do you even mean by using the word un-home? We're not discussing homelessness”

“But it is a kind of displacement.”

“I thought we'd settled on uncanny?”

In the sheen of his glasses, she can see the dates and various messages arranged in an immaculate order devoid of any coloured structure.

“It's just not the right word.” She thumbs the tabs along the edge of her book.

“不気味の谷.”

She stares at him and the new word in the air as if she can see it hanging there. He struggles to hold the intensity of her crystal-blue gaze. He thought once that if he could only see one colour in the world, he would want it to be the colour of her eyes, the colour of a clear sky.

“It's Japanese for Uncanny Valley. Roboticist Masahiro Mori talks about the emotional response to objects resembling humans.”

They watch the same water droplet fall down the window, collecting speed before running off the glass.

“It does use all the uncanny valley attributes such as, the ambiguity of humanity and humanness.”

“Nothing is symmetrical,” he says.

“But those are technical qualities to the work, not the feelings of the character.”

“What's she feeling then?”

The woman shifts in her seat.

“My job is to translate it from Mandarin to English-”

“And I'm consulting so that the tone and mood isn't sterile and lost in your robotic-.” Her mouth is still open, and she extends her hand as if she can catch the words and throw them back in.

“What's wrong?” he asks, his tongue laced in care.

She couldn't say the word; all she could say was. “I miss home, my people. I'm tired. I feel so...”

“Alone,” he said it for her.

Despite herself, she nods. She knew he'd find the right word, the one she'd been avoiding and hating herself, for this was the only time in her day when she didn't feel that way.

He clears his throat. Heat rushes to his cheeks. He's practised these words eleven times, and then because he felt uneven and unprepared another nine, and ten more after that, every day for a month.

Each day they'd sit in this café translating a single word. Sometimes he would disagree purely to hear the inflection in her voice and how she always advocated for meaning.

His practice script read; I have deeply enjoyed your company. If you are free some night. I would like to take you to dinner.

But all he managed to voice was “Food?”

“Don't pity me please.”

“No.”

Within the lines of his face, she could read him. He extended his arm. She took it in hers. ✍

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