

The Go-between

You see, it is not my job to say if it is true or not. I am the interpreter. I will tell you if the words are correct or not, in my language or in English. But the truth? That is not the same thing. The truth is for others, it is not me to say. And yes, sometimes it is difficult for me. There is so much misunderstanding and I try not to think about that. Sometimes the communication goes very badly. They do not understand each other but what can I do? I am the interpreter not the translator. There is a difference you know. Did you know?

You are an English speaker, an educated English speaker. You should know there is a difference. An interpreter works with the spoken word, the translator with the written. And that of course leads to other differences, more subtle because the craft, the place of work, are different. Do you say “is” or “are” different? You see there is no end to the effort of mastering a language that is not the mother tongue. There are always small imprecisions that do not easily fit together. And that is the advantage of the translator, he has time to tinker. The interpreter must work quickly, standing between or beside the speakers. Oh yes, you are correct, sometimes in a booth at the back of the room, very far from the speakers, but still, metaphorically, I would assert, between them, between their minds. The words come so quickly. We must provide near instantaneous conversion from one language to another. By necessity, we must focus on the literal meaning of the word and the phrase.

Translators have more freedom. They can turn a phrase over in their minds, play with it, attempt several combinations, smooth and bevel the edges of the phrasing and of course, be less literal, more metaphoric, to convey the essence, the sense of it in ways we interpreters could never hope to. In some ways, I envy them although I confess, I find translation to be boring. Perhaps it is the difference between live theatre and film, such a metaphor conveys the excitement and demand of our work but possibly not the rigidity that we suffer under. We are bound more strictly to the literal meaning of the words in order to remain faithful to the meaning. I suppose a translator would say that we do hasty work. Perhaps, to continue the exalted metaphor, I might say that we rapidly work in fresco while the translator has the luxury of oils.

But if you think this work is not difficult my friend, I must tell you that I have seen people sent to their death and have been unable to intervene, unable to assist, although if I had reached out, I may have saved them and I did not. I could not. I am the interpreter. There is a line you see. A line drawn by law. There are rules. I am the interpreter. I am the go-between. I deliver the message. I do not tamper with it or comment on it, no matter how absurd or wrong-headed it is. I interpret, I do not intervene and yes, this is not good for the soul.

I will tell you a story by way of illustration. It is the worst but there were many where meaning went awry, fell between the cracks. You Canadians like to say “between the cracks”. I must tell you, they are sometimes very large cracks for we are talking about the gaps between languages. Perhaps it is similar to different computer programs that are built on different concepts. I am the program between programs to allow them to talk. Oh this is not such a good comparison. I am

too ignorant of computers. But the concept is correct. Languages are based on different concepts, different perceptions of reality. I am sorry to be so banal. This is all so obvious yet we ignore it every day. We have the same human experience but our peoples have formed social and linguistic realities that are so very different. So those cracks can become such deep crevasses and that is a very good analogy. I have climbed in the mountains of my home country, stepped over the innocent cracks of crevasses that reach down hundreds of feet into the glacier, such a brilliant green the ice. The crevasses open with the shifts in temperature between day and night and they are suddenly not so easy to cross and a misstep leads to disaster. You cross at your peril.

At other times I think of languages floating like untethered islands on the surface of human existence with nothing below but black, undefined space. It is so easy to lose your way crossing from one language to the other, to sink into confusion and misunderstanding. The interpreter is the go-between, the boatman, to take you from one island to the other.

So you see I have taken you from mountain to ocean in the blink of a metaphor. You may think that I exaggerate but let me tell my story. Meaning, or lack of meaning, has consequences. Oh it does, it does. I have interpreted for ministers of government at affairs of state where the words are polished stones carefully laid upon the table and I suppose there could be a misstep but it is all so carefully calculated and re-calculated that it usually results in tedium. If there are crevasses there, they are ones of attitude, political will, but rarely linguistic miscommunication. No I am speaking of the refugee hearings. You knew that much of my work at one time was at the Refugee Board? I interpreted the testimony of refugee claimants during their hearing. For an interpreter, this is, what is the expression? “Grunt work?” Yes, grunt work.

You sit alone next to the claimant, without an alternate, not like the government and United Nations, changing seats with a partner every twenty minutes. The hearings can last all day and there are few breaks. It is exhausting really, work for a young man, although I know several older men and women who take the work out of desperation. They are not linguists, they are immigrants in need of work. Of course their English is not the best and I cannot help but wonder about the results.

You might think the work would be easier since the language lacks the precision of diplomatic exchanges but this is precisely the problem. Yes, that was a small linguist’s joke. It is my amusement to put the same word into the same sentence as different parts of speech. I find it more interesting than puns. Noun-adverb is one of the easier combinations.

If I may continue, it is the sloppiness of the language that presents the challenge. Often the claimant is uneducated or from a town or village, speaking a dialect with no sense of doing so. Although I must say that many of the Board officials are almost as bad. Their carelessness with language is truly unforgivable. They bandy about acronyms like bureaucrats. “That’s not what you said in your PIF”. What is a “PIF”? Are these people idiots?

Excuse me, I become incensed too easily over such matters which is why I had to leave refugee work. So many of the Board members, they are the decision-makers, seem to have no sense of

their language, of the precision required when crossing the crevasses. For me, it was like working in a medical clinic where the surgeons were casual about sterilizing their instruments. They knew about bacteria, they knew the effects, but they were not careful about their equipment. To be fair, the more accurate analogy would be to a field hospital in a war zone. The volume of refugee hearings is immense and perhaps fatigue and burnout were partial causes. However, as with hospitals, we are talking about human lives. Incorrect decisions send people back to death and torture.

Please, no, I am fine. I must tell the story. The doctor has encouraged me to speak of it and I do not. And now I will, with you. But it was not that one claim alone, it was the accumulation, the frustration of seeing too often the meanings go astray and being unable to prevent it. This one, the final one, was merely the culmination of the accumulation, although certainly the worst. So please, if you have patience for this patient, let me begin.

The claim was not a difficult one, quite ordinary really. The claimant, a young woman, spoke with a strong accent, typical of the northern regions of my country. She was educated, having studied for a time at the university, interrupted by the events which caused her to flee. The people of her region often invert their sentences to suggest doubt or uncertainty. They rarely employ the subjunctive. They also have their argot, as with most regions, where the language has stewed in its own juices for many generations. But none of this presented a serious challenge. I travelled in the region as a youth and was familiar with the regional nuances. It was not a true dialect, more of a heavily-accented vernacular.

Ironically, that became one of the issues in the case, whether or not the woman was from the north. It was so obvious, not worth a moment's thought. If they had only asked me. But of course I am the interpreter. I am not a witness. There is a line and it cannot be crossed. I accept that the law requires certain immutable formalities. Still, in the more obvious cases, there should be a way to lift a finger, raise a small message flag, to warn the members, to tell them: "That is the wrong road, it leads nowhere. Do not waste your time. This is a woman of the north."

But I could not and did not. Besides the issue only emerged later in the testimony when the member exposed the depth of his doubt and disbelief and, if I may say so, his ignorance. Early in the hearing, there was no warning of future hazards on the path. The case was proceeding in a most predictable manner. In the previous few years, since the uprising, the Board had granted refuge to many political dissidents from that region. I interpreted many, many cases. The government repressions had been unusually harsh. It was often rumoured that the President resented the northern ethnicities although his wife was from that region. The human rights documents thoroughly documented the excesses of the government. It was the usual sort of thing: arbitrary arrest, indeterminate incarceration in conditions inconsistent with international norms, execution without due judicial process. It is all such sanitized language to describe the breaking of human bodies and spirits. I suppose it is necessary to avoid appearances of bias, to serve as a neutral international authority. Still, the documentary evidence was quite clear. The police and security services were quite ruthless in suppressing any suspected political activity.

And this woman had done that, or said she had. Her name is unimportant. She was a robust woman, attractive in a large bodied way, with a vigorous manner. She even laughed in response to one question, an open full-throated laugh and there is very little laughter, understandably, in the hearing rooms of the Refugee Board.

She had the features of the north, a prominent nose, a certain cast to the skin, dark, unruly hair, and a confident, near brazen manner. I have seen a dozen of her sisters in the market places of the northern towns. Her manner may well have been her undoing. I believe the member found her to be too confident, too lively. After the things that had been done to her, he was expecting a more diminished person, more damaged, I suppose. He did not say anything to suggest this view, but I have interpreted often for this member. He is a rather obvious person, lacking subtlety, although he attempts to hide his feelings. If he had looked more closely, he might have noticed the dark circles under her eyes and certain moments during the hearing, not when she was testifying, when she appeared distracted and inattentive.

Her story had its anomalies of course, they always do. It was unusual for a woman of poverty to attend the university. Most of the students were men, or daughters of the urban professional classes. Her father was a small landholder. Here you would say a subsistence farmer but the social standing and connotation would be very different in my country. Her father would have been a man without education, born onto the land in the same manner as his father and countless generations before him. The Great Emancipation of the peasant class occurred less than a century ago although little changed in the lives of these people who were famous for their fortitude and stubbornness. They lived a hard, independent life.

Despite her background, the woman attended the university, studying agronomy, again an exception for a woman, although not inconsistent with the interests of her district which was famous for its orchards and flowers. I remember a near intoxication as a young man walking the district roads in the evening, the overpowering scent of jasmine and violet, as the heat rose from the land. The air was thick with the perfumes of the fields and orchards and the sound of cicadas.

“What would you smell if you rode through the Valley of X_____ on a summer evening?” One question, if the member had doubts about her origins, one question could have answered all. It would have been so simple. No person of the district would have answered anything else. Jasmine, violet. In spring, the fruit trees, but in summer, the flowers overwhelm. I could have told him.

But the member was already building his doubts in another direction. The country documents said that only the leaders and activists within the student movement were liable for arrest, as well as those caught during the more violent demonstrations. Another document said that politics were dominated by men. All of the prominent leaders were men, both in the student movement and the separatist party. There were women who were active, but in the background. The revolutionary movements, like the government itself, had a man’s face.

I confess that my view, if I had been asked, would have been different than the member’s. It was

possible to see this woman as an activist. She had a power and a confidence that communicated itself to others. She was not afraid. But I was not asked of course. That was not my role.

If I may point out however, she was placed in an impossible position. In the study of psychology it is called a double-bind. I believe you would say a “no-win situation”. Because of the horrendous torture, and I have not come to that yet, the member expected a diminished and defeated person and she was not that. She was too spirited and confident for him. Yet if she had appeared as a diffident, non-aggressive person, possibly because of torture, then he would have found her not capable of being a strong, articulate political activist. But it is impossible. If she were more outspoken, she would be less credible as a torture victim and if she were more beaten down, she would be less credible as a political leader. It is possible that she was both and he saw her as neither.

I suppose the root of the problem is this process of pigeon’s holes. The members know so little about the countries of the claimants. They rely on categorizations, objective knowledge, learning the names of places and politicians, reading about social customs and practices. It is all a mass of generalizations and ,of course, in a country as large as mine, or any country, I suppose, exceptions abound. Too often the member is putting the square peg claimant in his round pigeon’s hole. He is trying to identify someone from a cartoon, a minimal, stereotypical sketch. And now you tell me that I have become an expert witness, instead of an interpreter. And you are correct, naturally. It is not only the misunderstanding of language that takes me to the edge of sanity, it is the misunderstanding of my culture, my history, my people.

It is impossible for the member to know so much about my country. I have learned these things with my mother’s milk.. He hears claims from thirty countries, none his home country. But he relies on his book-learned information as though it were the only measure of credibility. He has no understanding of how little he knows. Here, I have a stark example but first I must tell more of this woman’s story. Please excuse my digressions.

She was in her second year of studies, a good student, quiet, without money or relatives. She lived alone and later, in a house with other students. One of them was a leader in the student movement. He became her lover. She joined the movement, distributed pamphlets, attended meetings, became part of the executive committee. The police came looking for him after a series of unusually violent riots. They found her, not him, and took her. I will not tell you of the horrible things they did. There is a medical report, a psychologist’s, not a medical doctor. The scars are psychological not physical. Why is this so difficult to believe?

It is not. But it is, if you view her situation through pigeon’s holes. Her background and gender are not correct for the university or her field of study. The sociology is wrong. Young women from the country do not live alone or in houses with men. They live with parents or other relatives. Young women are not seen alone with men. They do not take lovers. They do not join executive committees of revolutionary movements. Perhaps they would covertly distribute pamphlets. I suspect the member even believed that agronomy students do not become involved in politics. My close friend said that agronomists study cow shit instead of the horseshit of

politics. He is a very clever and profane man and I apologize.

This square woman did not fit into any of the member's round pigeon's holes. Unfortunately, her story was true. I am quite certain. You have an expression in English. "The exception proves the rule". Her story was proving several rules.

Half-way through her testimony, it was becoming clear that the member had doubts. He began to interrupt her lawyer to ask his own questions. I observed this with some misgivings because it was already clear to me that her story was true. She was testifying about her first year at the university. Suddenly the member interrupted to ask how could she afford to go to university. I remember his question which was most informative about his views.

"But your father is a farmer with a rather small farm. In your country, do farmers earn enough money to send their daughters to the university?"

It was a very rude question of course and I am sure that the member had read that only the children of the wealthy and urban professional classes attended the universities, which, in most cases, was correct.

She replied that her father was a landholder. I used this word "landholder" for I could think of no other in English. I found it impossible to convey the sense of the word that she used. The word is peculiar to her region. It refers to a man who has a small landholding which belongs to him alone. The word came into use some hundred years ago at a time when the large estates of the north were broken up by punitive taxes and state decree. For the first time, tenant farmers, commoners without nobility, were able to own and till their own land. It is a word that grew from the blood and soil of the north. It was a powerful word that said everything about the ambition of the northern peasants to own and control their own land and, ultimately, their own destinies.

"Landholder" was a pale and tepid substitute but I could think of no other. To this day, I can think of no other. But the member was solely concerned with the size of the land, its modest dimensions and inability to support a family, let alone subsidize an education. He pursued this line of questioning for some time, focussing solely on her father's limited income and lack of education. Finally he asked that if there were only money for one, why she, instead of her older brother, had been sent to the university. Again, I am sure that he was thinking of her gender.

Her answer was striking. She said, "My father preferred me." This is, admittedly, a non-answer that she stubbornly clung to, without elaboration. It was impossible to divine the family secret that lay beneath it. Was there a disability? A family shame? It seemed obvious that she was protecting some family privacy whatever the cost. The people of the north are famous for being difficult.

These are small matters but I mention them because they were also paths by which the member reached his conclusions. It was obvious that the member was inclined to walk in a particular direction regardless of her responses.

He was bothered by her poverty. He was bothered by her gender. He doubted that she had been a student or if a student, a political one. I am quite certain that he saw her as a child of the urban middle class, probably from the city. Of course all of these skepticism only emerged in the written decision. There were no documents proving that she was a student. The political underground had smuggled her out of the country with a false passport and a plane ticket to Canada. She had fled the country upon her interim release, without a passport, fearing re-arrest. She assumed the student house had been rifled by security police. She never went back to find out. All of her roommates were in hiding or in prison. It was rumoured that her lover had fled the country. No one knew for certain.

The university was a state institution. It would not provide information about her to a foreign agency if she were truly a political dissident. Her lawyer had sent two letters without receiving a response. She had a smuggled letter from her parents which spoke of her being a student. The member pointed out that “anyone could write a letter”. It had been mailed from outside of her country. Of course, for her parents, it would have been too dangerous to mail it from within the country. Everybody would know this. The human rights reports expressly mention that mail is routinely opened by the authorities. Her lawyer failed to point this out to the member.

Still, at the conclusion of her testimony, I thought there was some hope. The claimant had given a simple yet vivid description of her arrest. Perhaps my imagination is too active. During her description, I could hear the breaking of the front door below. She said it was a series of heavy, muffled sounds followed by a loud bang. She was in her bedroom on the third floor although her door was ajar. I could hear the shouts and pounding of the boots of the security police upon the stairs. There were violent sounds of breakage from the kitchen on the second floor. She heard the shout of someone below, another student, and then a scream followed by violent sounds of breakage, possibly a window.

She said her room had no window, it was a small garret room. There were loose boards in a short wall built under the roof. Her lover had spoken of converting it into an escape hatch, leading under the roof. It was one of many things he spoke of but did not do. She described her panic, of feeling trapped and hiding under her bed, of realizing it was a stupid hiding place as more shouts and screams came from below, of tearing her fingernails as she scabbled at the loose boards to make an opening and feeling a flash of hope as she pulled a board free just before two men banged into the room. Something struck the back of her head and her next memory was in the prison.

During his cross-examination, the member asked her what the student had shouted from below and she replied, two words, “Police, run!” And to my regret, “police” is the word that I used and it was incorrect. She had used a vernacular word, probably popular with students although I have been away from my country for some time and cannot say for sure. I had thought of using the word, “cops” but it did not sound right, so I said “police” and wanted to pull the word back as soon as it was out of my mouth but I could not. I considered and rejected the word “Fuzz”. It has become an old-fashioned word in English. In the 1960's, they would have said “Pigs” which is a closer connotation, suggesting the social alienation of youth but it is still not correct. “Pigs”

implies uniformed policemen. The word she used refers to all police, regular and security police. In my country, security agents in civilian clothes were far more pervasive and far more feared than the regular police. These may seem to be minor nuances but they can be important, indeed, even fatal. They create unnoticed assumptions that send the questioner off in the wrong direction.

I was more satisfied with the word “run”. The literal translation is “flee” but “police, flee!” would have sounded awkward. In my language, the word is used exactly in these circumstances, it is an imperative, telling someone to escape immediately or there will be disastrous consequences. It is a word that young people would use.

Unfortunately, the member fixated on the word “police” asking if the men breaking into her room wore uniforms. The woman said that they did not. Then how did she know they were police? She became confused. I had been careful to use the same word that had been shouted from below. Now I saw that it confused her. The question did not make sense to her. I thought of explaining the ambiguity to the member. But I hesitated. It was not my role. How to explain that the member took the word “police” to imply solely uniformed police? Perhaps I could say it was a technicality of our language, not a misperception of the evidence. I was uncertain.

Before I could formulate an explanation, the member was asking another question. Why was she then so certain that the men in the room were police at all and why had the house mate from down below shouted “police” when he could not possibly know if they were police or not? How did he know they were police? She became more confused and said that she did not know.

I had hoped to explain the confusion to her in our language but the member’s questions were so quick and short, there was little opportunity to add an explanation. Again, I hesitated. This is not the role of the interpreter. It is definitely against the rules. I am not supposed to add extra information in my own language. The Board member would think I was coaching her. But if I could explain to her or even to the member, explain how the secret police function and are feared in my country. It was so simple. There was no need for this confusion. And I hesitated, most understandably and unforgivably, knowing what happened. It was too late.

I thought perhaps the lawyer would understand and would clarify the evidence later. He would have an opportunity to ask more questions. The member is a stupid impatient man. Who else kicks down the door and puts you in prison besides the police? But he believed his question was more subtle, how did she and the roommate below know they were the police in that first instant of breaking in?

And the answer was because the word “police” includes, even, in these circumstances, implies security agents in civilian clothes, and I could not, I did not, find a way to say this. In my country, the uniformed police direct the traffic. The secret police kick down the doors. Even later I might have saved the situation, spoken to the lawyer during the coffee break. This is a violation of the rules as well. No evidence is to be discussed outside to the hearing room. But surely truth and justice were more important. Unfortunately, the lawyer had disappeared by the time I left the hearing room and he returned at the last minute, looking quite distracted. I might

have spoken to the Refugee Claim Officer, have asked her to speak to the member, to explain. But she was an abrupt, imperious woman, unapproachable and I did not approach. In the end, I hoped for the best, assuring myself it was a minor issue that might still be resolved.

In his written reasons, the member wrote that the woman's arrest was central to her claim and her account of the arrest was not credible. When confronted with the "blatant contradiction" of how she and her unknown house mate had assumed that strangers were "policemen" with "no other evidence than their forced entry", the claimant had given no reasonable explanation. The inevitable conclusion was "that the story had been concocted."

In an earlier part of the reasons, the member had already rejected much of the claimant's story as a being "inconsistent with the country information". He did not accept that her father, "purportedly a poor farmer without obvious means", had scrimped and saved to send a daughter to the university when the average education for women was five years and "men were given preference in education and economic opportunity". He also did not accept that a young woman from the "traditional, rural regions of the country" would "act in a manner that was completely inconsistent with the social mores of the time and place". The member was careful to point out that he was making no judgement about her moral conduct, other than to note its inconsistency with "known information about her society." In conclusion, he said that "she had not satisfied the burden of proof on a balance of possibilities that she was a person who had a well-founded fear of persecution due to her political activities." Such formal and impressive language to mask such stupidities.

Ordinarily, I would know none of this. My responsibilities end with the hearing. The final decision, unless it is given orally in the hearing room, and those are normally only the happier, positive decisions, is delivered in writing weeks later. It is only for the eyes and ears of the claimant and her counsel. The interpreter rarely sees the conclusion of the play.

More than a year later, I was seated in a small café over a hot tea, sheltering from a cold and rainy November day. There was a young man sitting in a nearby booth who seemed familiar, a pale, featureless face except for the over-sized glasses. Ah, yes, it was the young lawyer who had represented the woman and after some hesitation, I could not prevent myself from approaching to ask him about the outcome of the case. Yes he remembered me. Yes, of course he remembered the case. He seemed curiously eager to have me join him. I of course was most eager myself although fearful of the outcome.

A diffident man, more intelligent and compassionate than I had first supposed, he approached our common subject with caution. He said it had been one of his first refugee cases and his most painful. He had since gone into another area of law. Solicitor's work was more to his liking. From this I inferred bad news. I admit my hands began to tremble. He said yes, it had been a negative decision. The member had believed very little of her story, saying that she had not been a credible witness. He himself, his name was Nathan Crisco, still believed her although he conceded that he was being perhaps a little naive. The member was very experienced.

I hastened to assure him that I too thought that she was telling the truth although it was not my role to draw conclusions. Her story was completely consistent with everything that I knew about the northern people. I told him there was no doubt that she was a woman of the north and I was certain that a few skilful questions could have easily confirmed that she was the daughter of a farmer and an agronomy student at the university. That part was obvious. He looked at me reproachfully. Yes, how silly of me. It was his responsibility to ask such questions. He looked away, misery overwhelming his eyes. I assured him that probably nothing could have dissuaded the member, his course was already set. It would not help this man to tell him about the confusion in interpretation. I asked if he had any recent news of her and he grew even paler, looking more miserable.

I said that it was not my place to ask but he insisted on telling me. His client had been shocked by the decision. She had cried in his office, repeatedly asking why and how it was possible. She could not understand how the member could not know that she was a student from the north of her country. She had described the arrest. He had seen her medical report.

A friend had come along to interpret and appeared equally distraught. Her own English was weak and she had difficulty understanding much of the decision. The claimant returned to his office two days later without her friend, despondent and distracted, speaking without emotion in badly broken English. He suggested an appeal. She appeared disinterested. He would represent her for free at his own expense. She reluctantly agreed but then did not appear for her appointment to review the evidence. She had no telephone. He drove by her rooming house to ask about her, but no one had seen her. Her landlord said the rent had been paid; he minded his own business. The lawyer left a note. He passed by her home twice more before the notice period for the appeal expired. Finally he decided there was nothing further that he could do.

He did not hear from his client and assumed that she had drifted into the underground economy. He had been told that the Immigration Department rarely removed failed claimants, at least not for years. However just two months ago, he had received a letter from the Department saying that his client would be removed within 10 days. The post mark was two weeks old. He had changed law firms and the letter had lain around for several days before a secretary had sent it on. He called the Immigration Enforcement office to find that she had been put on a plane to her country two days before.

The immigration officer said the removal had been “one of the simple ones”. She had not changed residence and was working for a local janitorial service. Attempting to be kind, he told Nathan that she had made no objection to her removal, that she appeared disinterested. In his experience, that was a sign that it “had been a phoney claim from the start”.

Nathan pulled a notepad out of his briefcase. Here, he said, I wrote down his words. They were probably said with the best of intentions he said bitterly. Here is what he wrote.

“They go kicking and screaming if there is a ghost of chance of being persecuted. This one was a piece of cake. Don’t worry about it. Besides, she was such a quiet, mousy thing. You just can’t

see her as some political radical. Believe me. I read the file. This one was a no-brainer.”

He said with some bitterness, “Quiet and mousy, he found her to be quiet and mousy”.

There was little I could say. I wanted to confess, to share my own burden, possibly ease his guilt. It would not have been a kindness. I half-heartedly repeated my earlier assurance that little would have dissuaded the member, knowing it to be a half-truth. I soon mumbled my goodbyes, pleading another engagement. Nathan offered to send me a copy of the member’s reasons and I felt compelled to accept although I knew the reading would be unpleasant. We exchanged business cards, promising to inform the other if we heard any news. I received the reasons within a few days but have not seen him since.

The reasons became an obsession. I pored over every word although they were written with a cool, legalistic logic that would be impermeable to judicial review unless one understood the gross misinterpretation of the evidence. It all sounded so reasonable. The passion of the young woman, her brave manner, her strong hands, the smell of jasmine and violets, her broken fingernails, they had all evaporated. These were not the facts upon which the legal conclusions had been based.

For some time after that, I slept badly, constantly waking from a dream, a nightmare really. I was sitting next to the young woman in a dark room. There was someone else in the room, a dark presence, unseen, something cold and indifferent, but not hostile, not threatening. The young woman is looking at me expectantly. I am opening my mouth but nothing is coming out, my mouth moves without words and the woman is looking at me sorrowfully as she fades back into the darkness.

These symptoms did not last for too long a period. Time is the great, imperfect healer. I took more exercise and the occasional sleeping tablet. I stopped taking refugee cases. My career had already evolved to more prestigious work and I soon accepted a full time position with the Department of Foreign Affairs. I travelled a great deal and thought of her rarely.

And then two years ago, I was assigned to accompany the Minister to my home country, a place I had not visited in nearly twenty years. I had some trepidation having originally left to avoid my own uncomfortable relations with the security police. But my country had changed in the past dozen years. The state was less coercive and more respectful of human rights, at least in law and appearance, if not in practice. And I was travelling with a Canadian diplomatic mission so there were few concerns for my safety.

The diplomatic mission included a conference in the largest city in the north, less than a hundred kilometres from the Valley of X_____. It was also the home of the state university. After the conference, I unexpectedly received a free day. The Minister would be staying at the home of an old friend and colleague who spoke fluent English. I took the morning to visit the Registrars office at the university. I knew and feared that I might do. It was something more than impulse. I said that I was looking for the niece of a friend who had once been a student. An abrupt,

indifferent clerk instructed me to write the name on a piece of paper along with additional academic information if known. Twice I almost left, fearing that the clerk, or her superior, was calling the security police. This was still not a country of significant freedoms. My arrest would cause a small diplomatic stir but I was also a citizen of this country. Under their law, they still owned me, despite my Canadian citizenship.

Suddenly the clerk was gesturing for me to come to the counter. The walls of the Registry office were bare except for a faded photograph of the President. She read from scribbled notes which she was careful not to show me. The woman had attended the university as an agronomy student. She did not complete her second year. Addresses were only available to state authorities. I thanked her for her trouble and left.

Now acting on pure impulse, although I knew there was little choice, I rented a car, which was a great extravagance in that country, even allowing for the devalued currency. It was my intention to drive to the Valley of X_____ to learn what I could of the woman's family. Perhaps the first flowers would be in bloom but it proved to be a chilly day in early Spring. The buds on the branches of the trees and bushes were hard and tight, without a hint of opening. There was no perfume in the air. A woman in a roadside shop explained that it was a late Spring, as she directed me to the far end of the valley where people of the woman's family name lived.

The side roads were unpaved but dry. It would not be unusual to stop and ask my way of roadside pedestrians. Asking the local police would be unwise for me and possibly the woman, if she were alive. Despite my fluency, my accent marked me as a man of the south, a man with a shiny new car and western clothes.

Twice I was misdirected to the wrong road but I made progress, moving to the upper slopes of the north end of the valley, the poorer land, where the houses were not so well kept and the parcels of land were smaller, divided by low stone walls, stones pulled from the fields by human hands over many generations. Finally, I stopped beside a woman leading a cow who seemed pleased to pause and rest. The cow began to graze on the sparse grass in the ditch. Yes, she knew all of the families in the area. She had lived all of her life on her land. She gave me a sharp, inquisitive look when I told her the name of the family before she pointed to a dilapidated house part way up the slope. That was the family home she said, but it is now abandoned.

For how long?, I asked. For some time now. She used an expression that would have been rude in the city, suggesting that it was none of my business. I knew that here it simply expressed an inherent suspicion of strangers. Still she seemed to be uncomfortable with my questions. Finally, I asked about the claimant directly. What of her? Was she with the family? The woman shot me a more direct and suspicious look. She knew nothing of these things. These were private matters. As she spoke she was already taking up the rope halter of the cow, prodding it out of the ditch with her walking stick. Our interview was terminated.

After a few metres, she turned to say that the family was no longer in the region and these were not questions to be asked by strangers. She turned and moved on as the cow raised her tail to

propel a stream of green excrement onto the road and I thought of my friend and the difference between cow manure and horse manure. I watched the steam rise from the warm, green puddle, heavy with its own odour, watched it rise and dissipate into the cool, odourless spring air of this valley of flowers and I suddenly experienced the most desolate, unbearable sadness for this young confidant woman with the unruly hair who had been broken and destroyed, not only by them, but by us, by me. I looked up to the abandoned family home with its sagging roof and broken tiles and knew there was no point in going further.

So you see, I am no longer a go-between. I cannot convey the messages, cannot bear the weight of misunderstanding and I desperately wish for a world with better endings. But I must of course earn a living, so I still do translations. Here is my card. I charge fifty dollars a page which I believe is quite a modest fee.