

The Interpreter

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HE'D BEEN INTERPRETING AT DEPOSITIONS FOR YEARS, almost as long as he'd been in Austin, and it had been a long time since he'd heard anything new at the hundreds of civil suits he'd attended.

Today's deposition was at the law offices of Brewster, McGillicuddy & Brewster, in their seventeenth-floor conference room. As was his custom, he'd arrived a little early and was gazing out the huge windows overlooking the city when the court reporter walked in. They introduced themselves. "The court reporter and the interpreter are always the first to arrive," he said, breaking the ice. "I like to be all set up before everyone else gets here," she answered. She had a sudden anxiety attack when she realized that she'd have to swear in the interpreter before she could swear in the deponent. She hadn't done that for ages. "Omgod," she thought, "I hope I have the text of that oath somewhere in my bag!"

Ms. Christine Walker-Lexington was counsel for the defendant, an office cleaning service. She was a bright young attorney, a recent UT graduate, with pale cheeks and dark hair cut rather severely along her jaw line. Her eyes were sharp and sparkling as she worked through an interminable list of questions relating to an accident in which the plaintiff, a thirty-something lady from El Salvador who was sitting across from her at the conference table, had been injured. The interpreter sat to Sra. Lidia Dominguez de Salazar's right, and her attorney was on her left. Richard Henry Vargas had been representing Spanish-speaking clients for years. His parents were from Mexico and he spoke moderately good Spanish. He had once represented Sra. Dominguez's cousin, so Lidia called him the day she was injured, right after

she got home from the hospital, and they sued the cleaning company. Almost three years later the case was finally at the deposition stage, and after just over four hours of convoluted questions and answers Ms. Christine Walker-Lexington appeared to be at the end of her list. She was scrutinizing her sheaf of papers, all neatly stapled together.

The interpreter had not had a break at that stage and his mind was

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starting to wander. He was soon musing about how the court reporter and the interpreter are often the best dressed people at a deposition, though that was not entirely true today. He wore a blazer and a striped tie, a pair of tan slacks and polished brown loafers. The court reporter was stylish in a trim navy blue trouser suite over a cream colored turtleneck. Mr. Vargas, in jeans and a pale grey polo shirt, was in dressed-down-for-the-depo mode, looking even more relaxed than on casual Fridays. Ms. Christine Walker-Lexington, who was never casual

about anything, wore a tailored black suit over a white blouse with ruffles at the throat. She exuded precision and efficiency. If she'd had a pencil on the table in front of her it would have been a full length, yellow, number two pencil, freshly sharpened. She was the only one in the room who was taking the whole drama seriously. Even more seriously than Sra. Dominguez, who'd been skeptical from the beginning and only agreed to go through with it because her cousin got about twenty-five thousand dollars from his lawsuit, and he can walk pretty well these days. Ms. Christine Walker-Lexington felt proud to be representing Brewster, McGillicuddy & Brewster, one of the most prestigious law firms in the city. It's what all those years at college were about, she thought. All those long hours at the books, all that focus, all that money.

But her education had not taught her any Spanish, and she resented that today, feeling intimidated by her limited language skills. She admitted as much in her opening statement, saying almost apologetically that she'd learned some Spanish at school but none of it had stuck. The interpreter smiled and said, "Yes, it's like so many things: we use them or we lose them." She appreciated that and looked at him more closely. He seemed like a nice man. It was so weird to be talking through an interpreter. This was her first time and she was glad that he looked about her father's age. She hoped he'd make her look good on the record. She liked his smile and his accent. Where was he from, she wondered.

The court reporter, meanwhile, was thinking about how some interpreters take notes and others don't—like waiters. And how some arrive early and others make everyone

nervous by sliding in at the last minute. There seemed to be such a wide variety of types. Then she grinned inwardly and thought: like court reporters. "We all do it in our own way," she silently philosophized, "which is one of the great attractions of this kind of work." That freedom also ensured a level of eccentricity among interpreters that she'd always enjoyed observing. Like those movies with secondary characters that create fascinating cameo roles in a courtroom drama.

The interpreter was now fantasizing about his role in the grand pageant of history. If this were a famous trial, he thought, artists would want to paint them all sitting around this table, and he'd be one of those characters in the background of a painting that would hang for centuries on museum walls. It occurred to him that this ritual they were enacting today represented the litigious aspect of modern civilization, and now he imagined himself as a character in a scene carved into the smooth marble base of a monument of some kind.

He put his hand up to his mouth to cover a slight yawn, and noticed a vague aroma of fish on his fingers. His mind panned back to the previous evening at home, and the dinner he and his wife had prepared: a beautiful cut of Copper River salmon, pan-seared and served over garlic spinach and angel hair pasta. He had skinned the fish and was now impressed that the smell was potent enough to have survived substantial hand washing *and* a shower and still be there the next day. Just then Ms. Christine Walker-Lexington spoke. "Have you answered all my questions truthfully and honestly, to the best of your ability?"

Sra. Dominguez replied that she had and went on to say that in the

town she was from, lying was considered a sin. The interpreter repeated what Sra. Dominguez had said, but in English. He heard the word *pecado* but somehow confused it with *pescado* and informed the attorney that where the Sra. Dominguez was from, lying was considered a fish. There was a sudden silence in the room. Everyone looked at the interpreter. "A fish?" asked Ms. Christine Walker-Lexington.

Mr. Vargas leaned forward, smiling broadly. "I think the interpreter means that it was considered a sin. The two words are very similar in Spanish." He flashed a highly amused smile at the interpreter who simply nodded and mouthed, "Thank you." The deposition came to an end with no further incident, and the interpreter shook hands all round and left the room.

In the parking lot he started smiling. "It's a fish to tell a lie!" he sang as he got into his car. As he closed the door he burst out laughing, and it was several minutes before he was able to drive away. ★

