



# In Other Words

*(the interpreters' story)*

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# Introduction

The presence of an interpreter makes it possible for clients' voices to be heard. Their role is vital — sometimes life saving. Interpreters hear and relay often distressing and heart-rending stories, and how they do so can make a critical difference to clients' lives.

Yet they are overlooked, and have few outlets for the emotional impact this can have on them.

“The spoken transfer of meaning across languages.” This is one definition of the function of an interpreter. But any definition tends to be disputed and debated. Meaning is elusive and the transfer of meaning eludes definition.

Interpreters tend to work in freelance contexts for a variety of agencies in the private, statutory and not-for-profit sectors, attempting to transfer meaning between professionals in stressful situations and clients who are vulnerable. They may work in contexts such as criminal justice, immigration, child protection, physical and mental health. Workload is difficult to predict and there is seldom any support offered.

Interpreters often become deeply personally involved in the cases into which they are invited. Their own experience of bridging cultures, their understanding of the nuances of cultural experience and of the non-verbal cues that often speak more than words, contribute in many ways to their effectiveness. They have to hold professional boundaries while experiencing great personal pressure, which can come from both sides of the dialogue they are facilitating.

And yet in their role they have no opportunity to act to relieve this pressure. Working as an interpreter in a mental health context is particularly sensitive, and support is notably lacking in this context.

Their training can leave them feeling underprepared for the impact of this work: underprepared in terms of the support they may need to access; and underprepared for the intensity of the emotions experienced by the clients. Interpreters frequently refer to their codes of conduct which may prize neutrality and impartiality. In a mental health context interpreting relationships take place in emotionally charged settings. Although aspiring to neutrality,

the reality is that the interpreter becomes invested with feelings, albeit at an unconscious level. Unconscious processes do not disappear if we ignore them or if we attempt to override them. If we do not attend to them we can 'act out' on them unawares, often with damaging consequences.

As interpreters, supervision and training give a space and an opportunity for our unconscious processes to be explored safely so that we can act with awareness. This is not just an interesting and optional exercise. It must form an essential component of our preparation as practitioner or interpreter, if we are to provide the best possible environments for our clients to access the help they need, to heal and to thrive.

Mothertongue multi-ethnic counselling service ([www.mothertongue.org.uk](http://www.mothertongue.org.uk)) is a culturally and linguistically sensitive professional counselling service which provides professional counselling to people from black and ethnic minority backgrounds in their preferred language. In 2008, in response to the concerns of counsellors, patients and NHS professionals over agency interpreters who were not trained or supervised to work in a mental health context, we responded by creating this training in collaborative working, for interpreters and clinicians.

Since 2009 we have run a dedicated Mental Health Interpreting Service which is funded by the local CCG and Health Authority. We have a firm commitment to training and regular clinical supervision for all our interpreters who work in a mental health context.

But from our supervision sessions, it has become very clear that this support is very rarely available for interpreters elsewhere. They have no other outlet for the feelings and thoughts which they witness and experience, and without adequate support the burnout rate can be very high.

I met with our writing facilitator, Sheila Hayman, in the summer of 2014. She had the idea of a writing group for interpreters, to give them a safe outlet for their experiences. The interpreters wrote about their personal as well as their professional experiences: who they are as people (when they are not interpreting what other people want to say), what led them to becoming an interpreter, what impact the work has on them. Their stories echo one of the most important values upon which Mothertongue is based: to recognise and to accept help when it is needed and when the time comes, to pass on what you have received. With the help of Awards for All/The Big Lottery Fund, this anthology was created, which we are launching on June 4th 2015.

We have been faced with our own dilemma when deciding to publish. There may be some who feel we have betrayed confidence, or overstepped professional boundaries, in doing so. We feel we should not continue to be bystanders. If there is a risk that people feel disclosed, we think it is outweighed by the potential benefits of shining this light into places most of us never knew existed: clarity, learning and with luck, the transformation of the experiences of vulnerable people, who should be our primary concern. We hope that this anthology will help those in charge of interpreter services and others who employ interpreters better to understand their role, and how they can be best utilised.

We have done our best to anonymise where necessary, and to fictionalise in places so that no one is identifiable, We have taken the decision to go ahead and publish, as these stories concern clients who are otherwise doubly silenced — by having to speak through an interpreter’s voice, and by having no one who will tell their story, and listen to it fully and with compassion.

The interpreters in this collection present the dilemmas they face, every day. The stories we share are not presentations of models of excellent practice. They are real human stories from the interpreters’ own experiences. The interpreters have been courageous in sharing and reflecting on their dilemmas, the risks they take and the mistakes they can make. We hope that you will read this anthology in the spirit of understanding and compassion with which these pieces were written.

Beverley Costa

Chief Executive Officer and Clinical Director of Mothertongue multi-ethnic counselling service ([www.mothertongue.org.uk](http://www.mothertongue.org.uk))

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# Therapeutic Writing

Therapeutic writing is a magical, safe, non-invasive alternative to antidepressants. “You might as well say that about my glass of wine at the end of the day!” as one of my (less sympathetic) bosses once responded. Yes — but. Running, swimming, playing the guitar, even the odd glass of wine, may all relax, unwind and calm us. But only writing also helps us understand why we got depressed or stressed in the first place.

Writing anything is therapeutic anyway, as it immediately offers the prospect of an intangible, infinitely patient and interested listener; the person for whom, consciously or unconsciously, we write. “Getting it off your chest,” yes, but also “making it make sense” — where reading the work back, or, better perhaps, a real listener or reader can help. By asking questions they can fill in the gaps, factual or emotional. “Why did you need to be there?” can elicit thoughts about the writer’s role in the situation. More obliquely, “Can you remember what was on the radio?” can rekindle not just background music to a scene, but the emotions associated with it, the sense details that make it vivid to the reader but the writer also. Even the choice of one scenario, one story, to write about over another, points to that episode having had some significance that might otherwise have been lost.

As soon I started to hear from Beverley about the role of interpreters — what they really do — I was hooked. What an amazing job, to be at the same time a person from two cultures, and a bridge between them. What a privilege, but also responsibility, to have the task of pleading the case for a distraught mother, a confused grandfather or a lonely adolescent thousands of miles from home. How could they care enough to listen and watch intently for every nuance, and yet know that in the end, they have no power to help or decide, and have to go home at the end of the day and wipe it from their hearts?

It seemed to me that these women must have not just extraordinary stories to tell but also heavy burdens to unload and share. So when Beverley offered the chance, I jumped at it, with the story teller’s greedy appetite for new insights into other worlds. And what I heard, and read, was far more fascinating and moving than I could have imagined. From the first workshop, with its apologetic caveats all round (“I can talk all day, but I’m not good at writing,” or, “Why would

anybody else be interested in this stuff?") to the last polish on the last piece, it has been an unalloyed joy and privilege to work with this group.

Beverley and I have both been very aware of the risks to confidentiality inherent in publishing these writings. But in every case, as she has said, it seemed to us that the insights gained far outweighed the possible risks.

I have tried to arrange what follows in an order that to some extent follows the process we undertook, in the three workshops that produced this mass of wonderful stuff. I've explained it a bit, but for the most part I think these five women can speak, with wonderful eloquence and in several languages, for themselves.

Sheila Hayman  
Writing Facilitator



# Journeys

One of the most important elements of therapeutic writing, as opposed to other varieties, is going back and taking a second look. As every writer knows, and as has been memorably said, rewriting can be 'like scrubbing the basement with a toothbrush.' But it doesn't have to be so agonising. It can just be the opportunity to add an extra layer of meaning or understanding, the subtext to the text. After all, you don't mix a cake, and bake it, and ice it, all in one go. It has to be done in stages.

So, when we wrote these 'journey' pieces, I began by asking for a straightforward factual account of a journey — but it had to have been an important one, some sort of turning point. Then, we looked at why it had been important; the personal and symbolic, not just the factual. I think all three pieces demonstrate beautifully how the elements interweave.

## The Journey

SAN MAYA

It was a balmy, cloudy day in August 1972. Not very hot but very humid. There were four families, alongside ours, returning from Singapore to our country, Nepal. My two younger brothers, three other boys and I were on the top of a box in the lorry carrying all our stuff.

As I was the only girl among the older children and also the oldest, I was feeling very lonely and miserable in spite of all the noise around me. I missed my friends back in Singapore terribly, especially my four constant companions. "What are they doing now? Probably playing basketball with the boys and loving to make them lose," I mused to myself. "But do they think of me? How about Nasreen? She must be missing me very much." Though we lived quite far apart, Nasreen, my best friend and I used to keep in contact as much as possible.

Looking out into the landscape, I was wondering what kind of a life we were going to have in this strange country that was our actual homeland. The smell of dust, dirt and slime in Kathmandu was still in my nose, nothing like the sophisticated city I loved. "Will it be the same in our village? Are there any libraries there?" I so missed my books. More than games, I love books.

We were travelling from Kathmandu to Pokhara, on our way home to our villages. Three days ago we were all in Singapore, then on the plane to Kathmandu. Then, as there were not yet any buses running, the road being newly built, we hired a lorry. The boys were all very excited. It was a new place for them and an adventure as well. But for me, it was torture. Not only from the discomfort of having no seats to sit on but also the miserable feeling of queasiness from the jolting of the lorry.

After travelling for more than five hours, we reached Damauli, a quaint little town with lodges that had thatched roofs, by the side of the river Madi. Due to heavy monsoon and landslides, the bridge over the river had collapsed. I thought we would stop there for the night but father decided it would shorten our journey the next day if we spent the night on the other side of the river. So porters were hired to carry the cases and the bags as well as the children who were too young to walk. There was a rope bridge across the river further up. But we had to climb up a hilly path in order to reach it. Furthermore, a rope bridge cannot carry anything on wheels.

We started to walk along rice fields and then up a hill. It had been raining the day before, making the pathway slippery at some places, but rocky at others. After an ascent of about two hours, we came to a rope bridge. Once you stepped on it, it started to shake and wobble. I held onto the ropes on the sides and dragged myself slowly forward. Looking down made me dizzy and even more scared. I could see and hear the roar of the water below me. I closed my eyes and crept along. "Why can't people build proper bridges?" I thought. My middle brother passed me by and looked at me. "Are you scared, didi?" He asked. I just closed my eyes even harder and shouted, "Stop your nonsense." He laughed and frisked along, jumping up and down to make the bridge shake like a rattle. I cried out, "Ama, stop Karan at once. I'm going to fall."

Mother was right at the back of a row of people, adjusting my youngest sister on a porter's back. She did not hear me because of the river and the chattering of children.

After what seemed a very, very long time, I was across the bridge. Then the climb downwards began. Never before had I experienced climbing down a steep and slippery slope. I fell down several times and each time a porter had to help me up. And each time the boys from our group, my brothers included, would start to tease me.

“Look! Didi is falling.” Then they would all laugh hilariously. “Didi, you are the oldest among us. Can you teach us how to fall?” one cheeky boy said. I glared at him but could do nothing as it was impossible for me to run after him in order to punish him.

By the time we were on the roadside and by the shack lodges, my dress, arms and legs were all covered in red mud. “Did you have a swim in a red mud pool?” one of the boys teased. I gave him a push and walked to where my mother and my three youngest siblings were.

The next day was another tedious, dusty four hours on another lorry to the town of Pokhara. After saying our goodbyes, the families separated here as we all lived in different villages. Our family stayed the night at our aunty’s house.

Early the next morning, the final part of the journey started. We were told that the walk to our village would take about six to seven hours. Everyone who could carry had something to carry while four potters carried our suitcases. My three younger siblings were too small so they got away by carrying nothing. For my part, it was the transistor radio. We started walking along paddy fields and meadows to a small river. The path led upwards from then on. It seemed we had been climbing for hours, though it was only about an hour, before we stopped to take a rest. I was panting and perspiring from my head, down to my neck and to my legs.

Along the way, we passed many thatched houses and everywhere people stopped their work to stare at us. They were talking in a language that I did not understand. It was actually the Gurung language, my parents’ mother tongue, but which they never taught us or talked to us in. The villagers were mostly staring at me and many of the children were pointing at me, while laughing at the same time. Though I did not understand, I could feel they were talking about me. A sense of doom prickled my skin. “Why are they pointing their fingers at me?” I wondered.

After a short rest, we started climbing again. By the time we came to a village on the top of the hill, I was so exhausted I could not even speak. The sun was already very low and the clouds had started to gather. We rested for tea and snacks at a teahouse in the village, which was built in terraces on the side of a hill. Everyone there seems to know my parents.

While we were having snacks, more people started to gather around us. There were children everywhere, on the stone fence by the terrace field below and some on the terrace above us. They were all staring at us and chattering. I wanted us to be gone from that place as soon as possible because I could sense that it was me they were most interested in. But the adults around my father kept arriving. In the end father invited them to partake the local wine. I was feeling more desperate as the minute crept on. I could not approach mother as she was also busy talking.

After what felt like hours to me, we resumed our journey. It was getting dark by that time. We were told our village was the next one and not very far. Looking at the finger pointing to our village, it was on the hill opposite and did look very close. I could see the temple on top of the hill that my grandfather had built.

At first the path was narrow but not so bad but gradually started to slope downwards. We were in a kind of wood, with trees and bushes all around and I could hear water tripping far down on my right.

Suddenly lightning blazed and thunder boomed. The rain started to pour down rapidly. Father shouted from above me, "Hurry up!" All I could do scramble along on my hands and feet as it was too slippery and too steep for me.

All of a sudden, I slipped and started to slide down the slick stone steps on my back, screaming, "Ama! Ama!" Mother was saying something but I could not hear what, everyone was talking and shouting at the same time. I landed, slumped on my back, in a puddle of water in the middle of a stream. My bum was hurting like hell and I realised I no longer had the transistor with me. It was lying a little ahead of me on the other side of the stream. I was helped up and after checking my arms and legs were not broken, my mother sent me off with a, "Nothing serious happened, so stop moaning." I always get this kind of no nonsense treatment as I was the eldest of six children and my poor mother expected me to be more mature than the rest. How wrong she was! Despite being eighteen months younger, my oldest brother was the mature one whereas I had been behaving childishly since getting on the plane in Singapore.

We started to walk upwards in a zigzag sort pathway. Though it made me tired more quickly, I felt safer walking uphill rather than downhill.

Evening had settled to night by the time we reached our village. It was raining cats and dogs and we were all drenched through. When we reached our house, a group of people were gathered on the veranda. They were all talking excitedly and calling out to us. One woman grabbed hold of me and started to touch my legs. I moved away but another held me back. They were all talking together in Gurung. Mother told me to stop wriggling: "Look down! You have leeches all over your body!" Hearing the word 'leeches', I looked down and saw them on my legs and arms. In the flickering light of a kerosene lamp, they looked ghastly sucking on my blood. I started to screech and jump up and down. It took a long and torturous time for me to calm down and for all the leeches to be plucked off my body.

An old man on the other side of the veranda said, "You shameless girl! That happens if you don't dress properly. You have no clothes on your arms and legs!"

I realised then why I felt so uncomfortable as people stared and pointed at me. It was my beloved souvenir from Singapore; my favourite mini-dress.

## A Journey

SUMAYA

I couldn't swallow down how jittery I was feeling as I arrived at the airport with my parents. It was my 19th birthday and I was leaving to visit Yemen for the first time since I was five. I felt awkward in my long skirt and high heeled boots, not ideal for travelling but I needed to look smart for when my relatives came to collect me at the airport.

The vibrant activity of the airport just added to my anxiety, and I was distracted as I said a self-conscious goodbye to my parents. I'd tried to picture Yemen, my family, what I would see when I arrived, putting together things I'd read and stories I'd heard. But I couldn't quite believe that in a few hours I would finally know. I would know what I had wanted to know ever since I had started to think about the country my parents left behind, a few months ago — if it was there that I would finally feel a sense of belonging. Would the feeling that had

always made me not quite comfortable when I was out with my friends, that I had felt like a heavy cloud in my heart, would it lift?

It was an overnight flight, but nobody seemed interested in sleeping. The plane was full of Yemeni families, making themselves at home with loud chatter and more baggage than I thought would be permitted. I wouldn't have been able to rest if I had wanted to, my head was full of what and who I would see, how I would feel.

I had been bored at home up until now, my friends had left for university and I had been temping on my year out. But now the adventure I had been waiting for had started. My shyness lifted a little when the people on nearby seats included me in their conversations, asking me where in Yemen my family was from. Even though I had always understood Arabic, speaking it was new and a little frustrating, but they were patient and encouraging. I had always replied to my parents in English at home, never noticing that it was strange to be having a conversation in two languages. My parents weren't strict about installing a sense of a Yemeni identity in my brothers and I, which is maybe why I eventually decided to discover it myself. I had been worried when my mum had spoken to my uncle in Yemen a few days ago on the phone, and reported that he was concerned how I would communicate with my relatives as most of them didn't speak English. But talking to the other passengers made me a little less worried, even if I was still aware of my English accent.

I remember landing in Sana'a just before dawn, stepping off the plane to feel the heavy, still air of 4 a.m. in a hot country. Inside the bus from the runway to the airport, everyone apart from me seemed underwhelmed, bored by their surroundings. I looked around at them, trying to keep my excitement from showing on my face so that I could fit in.

We queued up inside the airport — a small, dusty, intimate place, full of men with Kalashnikovs and wearing the traditional *ma'waz* skirt. Absorbing how different everything was, the casually armed men were not alarming to me; they just seemed to fit into this entirely other world I was now in. I fixed my eyes on a window high up on one of the walls, a traditional Sana'a stained glass window, where I could see that the sun had started to rise. I knew that I would never forget that moment, my first dawn in Yemen.

The passengers whom I had been speaking to, knowing that I needed to catch a connecting flight to Aden, collected my luggage and rushed me through

barriers and on to other people with orders to look after me, while I tried to follow their conversations and keep up with them until I was on my flight.

By the time my short flight had arrived in Aden, the sun was beating down, making me uncomfortable in the clothes I had set out in, suited to England in December. This airport was even smaller, and there was barely anyone around, so I noticed the silhouette in the doorway waving at me. When I had decided to take a year out to visit Yemen, I had wondered if it was the right thing to do... but for now, I knew it was.

I drank in every detail around me, even though I hadn't slept all night. We entered my uncle's modest two-storey apartment building through a broken door, and on arriving at his first floor flat I greeted the first of a stream of smiling relatives. When I got a moment to myself, I looked out of the open bedroom window onto the street. I remember the burnt tinge in the air, the sound of people sauntering down the middle of the road; nobody seemed in a hurry to get anywhere. The prayer call brought a slow stream of men, some holding hands, heading to the mosque at the end of the street.

The days went by and the awe settled into an everyday excitement at how new yet reassuring things felt. Back in England, I had always been forced to use the greeting *assalam 'alaikom* with my parents' friends, and it was one of many things that made me feel different to my school friends. But here, everyone used it and it stopped being something that I mumbled in awkwardly formal situations. I was still shy but happy, and got used to feeling my face ache at the end of an evening spent in a room full of relatives, where I was still not confident enough to say very much, but would be smiling constantly at their genuine attempts to make me feel welcome.

I had been there for a couple of weeks when I started to sense the restrictions that my family had been careful not to impose on me straight away. I was encouraged to wear a black *abaya* cloak like my cousins, which I did willingly, happy to blend in and avoid the disapproving looks in the *souq*. But not being able to leave the house began to suffocate me. I was dismayed to learn that I couldn't step out of the building if I wasn't covered up and on my way somewhere reasonable — the *souq* or to visit relatives — or that I couldn't go to the small kiosk one block away to buy a drink. I had never been even slightly interested in football, but I found myself at the window watching the local boys playing on the beach, and longing to be with them. For the first time

in my life, I wished I was a boy. This thought brought me up sharply, making me realise how much I had taken for granted in my life in England. I had left England troubled and wanting to find answers; I just hadn't expected that while I connected with my roots here, I would also find a new appreciation of my life back at home.

Needing a change, I went to stay with relatives in Sana'a, a city that felt like it existed in its own space, untouched by the outside world, with the fact that it was so high up in the dry mountain air only adding to this feeling. I stayed in a house built in the traditional Sana'a way, a multi-storey building made of red earth with each window and storey edged in white, making the city look like it was made of gingerbread. The young boys from a neighbouring family took me out onto their roof, where I stood and turned all the way around to see that the city was encircled by mountains. My room was on the third floor, so close to the minaret of the neighbouring mosque that I could hear the muezzin's breath in the microphone as he performed the call to prayer at dawn. I loved waking up with that sound, I would spend those few minutes in a half asleep state taking in the feeling of being there in Sana'a, knowing how far I was from home and yet feeling comforted by the things I saw and heard.

Now Yemen is at war. With Houthi rebels taking over the country on the ground and air strikes by a coalition headed by Saudi Arabia to try and stop them, the country is being torn apart. Everything I read tells me Yemen is bleeding, and I know that the country I escaped to, that I struggled with and came to love deeply, will never be the same. The prayer call that I would lie awake listening to at dawn, happy knowing that the whole city was being woken up by the same sound, is now something to be claimed by one or another of the warring sides. The Houthis have taken over mosques and given the Shi'ite prayer call, opening eyes to sectarianism in a country where it didn't exist. The window where I had watched the sun rise in Yemen for the first time likely now no longer exists, Sana'a airport having been bombed by the coalition. And the local boys no longer play football on the beach in Aden — the last photo I saw of the beach opposite my uncle's apartment building was of Houthi rebels, children, no more than 13 or 14, walking along it with a confidence that said they felt safe knowing that the streets were empty in fear of them, but too young to know what or who they were fighting for.

Going when I did, I came to accept that the struggles I felt were not about belonging. It took a long time to be comfortable with the idea that I belong in Yemen as someone brought up in England, and in England as someone with a connection to my parents' country. My trip began a process that continues to this day. I began to realise that I was fortunate to be in a position to see and reconcile two worlds, and to be able to see connections between the two that I might otherwise have missed.

I found my way to *Mothertongue* in 2008, with still many more questions than I had answers. *Mothertongue* became a safe place for me to face up to questions I hadn't felt able to before, and to walk alongside others in the hope that they would feel less alone. And I was finally able to recognise the struggles that my parents faced as immigrants, as people and as parents, and to see that it was okay, I was okay, I wasn't broken.

And in letting go of what I had unwittingly imposed upon myself, I found another way of telling the stories of others, to enable them to have their voices heard, as a journalist. Language is a bridge between worlds, and I'm grateful that my experiences mean that I'm able to connect with others and move across that bridge.

## Life is a Journey

KAMALJIT

It began on a cold December morning. The first journey "took all night" according to Mum. "It's a girl", announced the old *dai* (midwife) with a sigh, expecting no reward for her labours. Now, had it been a boy she would have given *Vadaian* (congratulations) to every member of the family. There would have been *lados* (sweets) for the whole village, and she could have asked anything of the grandfather. "Born on our Guru's day, she will bring good luck," she continued, trying to lighten the mood. Grandfather was worried about how his daughter would be treated by the in-laws. But he soon cheered up at the sight of his first grandchild. "Everything will be fine," he reassured himself more than his daughter. "They are an educated family and the mother-in-law is a kind woman."

For the first couple of months we stayed there at the maternal grandparents' home, as women are allowed to go back for the first birth. Dad visited a few times during this period, always bringing fruit and pretty material for dresses for mother and baby. Then it was time to go to the real home, meaning Dad's.

The second journey, uneventful but significant, was taken aged 2 months. Dad was enamoured of the baby, so much so that he carried her all the way home — until, of course, they reached the outskirts of his village. He'd be teased by anyone who saw him showing so much care and attention to his wife and daughter, though had it been a son he'd be expected to be jumping with joy. He felt it better to appear indifferent, especially around his family. He needed them to accept the baby and not bother his wife too much.

He needn't have worried. The grandmother, and even the hard-to-please aunty, was soon won over by the baby. Years passed in a blink.

I remember the first day at the New Playschool. I hadn't seen Mum so happy for a long time as she dressed me in a brand new frock she had made from material Dad brought from town. The teacher at school looked like an angel, dressed in a beautiful suit and shoes, unlike any of the women in the village. Even my Mum, who always looked better dressed than the others, seemed shabby in front of this lady.

I was around seven, and it was my last day at school before the long summer holidays. I remember Mum reading a letter from my aunt, Dad's sister, saying, "I've had another girl." We were jumping with joy, thinking there'd be another girl to play with, not sure why the adults looked a bit glum. I was even more delighted when I heard that I'd be going to my aunt's with Grandma. She lived in Rajasthan, a magical place with sand dunes where men wore bright turbans and women wore swirling colourful skirts and chunky silver nose rings — or so I'd heard from my cousin. [no doubt she exaggerated]

The journey started with a walk to the station, which hardly took any time at all. I'd seen trains pass from my school but had never been on one. I felt the excitement rising within me as the train started to move. I looked out at the villages and green fields passing us by and must have fallen asleep. I remember being woken by Grandma to change trains. Once on the next train she brought out food Mum had packed and hot tea bought at the station. I was amazed at the change of landscape; there were fewer villages and much less greenery.

As we were getting ready to get off the train my excitement knew no bounds. I half expected my cousins to be waiting at the station. To my dismay we almost had to jump off, as the train only stopped for a minute or two at what seemed like the middle of nowhere. There was no station, no village and not a soul in sight. Little did I know that compared with the walk to the station, there was a much longer and harder walk to follow. I had to force myself to hold my tears back and walk as close to my grandmother as I could. I had seen fog in early winter mornings in Punjab, but the haze of the blistering desert frightened the hell out of me.

We walked on hot sand, carrying heavy bundles of food and clothes on our heads and in our hands. There was no path to follow and soon we were lost. A kindly lady allowed us to rest, gave us cold drinks and put us in the right direction.

I remember being greeted by my naughty cousin, coming out and throwing stones at us thinking we were strangers, as visitors here were so rare and unexpected. But it was that same cousin who helped me onto their camel for the first time ever, and then made it run while telling me stories of how it jumped over walls. Seeing my cousins soon made me forget the arduous journey. And the village lived up to my expectations and more; spending that couple of weeks with my cousins was the best holiday I'd ever had.

The next big trip came years later and had the most life-changing effect, not only on me but also the whole family. I was in my final year at high school studying hard for board exams. Dad had gone to England and was finally coming to get us. "Hooray!" we thought. It all seemed surreal: the travel to Delhi, the stay at a small hotel and a plane ride, all for the first time ever.

Finally we arrived at the airport in London and followed Dad, until Mum and I were unexpectedly told to go into a room with curtains, where someone told us to remove our clothes, except our underwear. We had never changed in front of each other, and felt embarrassed.

We sat curled up and waited for what seemed like forever, not knowing what happened to Dad and my brother and sister. Then, all of a sudden, someone told us to get dressed again. To this day I don't know what all that was about. There was no explanation given. Not being able to understand what was being said made me feel as if I was locked up in a box and every sound was obscured.

This feeling of being locked up in my head stayed with me for the first few months and perhaps years, of being in England. At school I couldn't understand what was being said, even if I tried hard. I didn't play or laugh until a friendly girl coaxed me into the school choir, where I could sing with the chorus and didn't have to worry about pronunciation. I remember a kindly teacher on her break time round spotted me sitting all alone and asked me questions. I am sure she was responsible for me being upgraded to a higher set/class. Otherwise, I might have left school without any qualifications, let alone going into further education.

It took me years to get over the differences of language, culture and climate but there were people who helped along the way. I moved countries several times after that, but there always seem to be people to help and fill the gaps. There were those who became surrogate mothers, sisters and friends.

How do I thank all those people who helped me but by helping those around me? Perhaps that's the biggest reason for me to be doing this work.

# Hard work

Every one of these pieces is an account of a job that for some reason had stayed with the interpreter.

One of the things that came up over and over again was the amount of “stuff” beyond the words that was there to be seen, or heard, or inferred, but because it didn’t take verbal form, was not “supposed” to be included in their job. As you will read, often this had heartbreaking consequences, with the interpreter desperately wanting, but not always having the opportunity, to explain cultural or linguistic or experiential matters that could have changed everything. Often, these were problems they themselves had had, as new arrivals to this country.

So one of the exercises we did was to imagine how things might have been if they had had the chance to stand their ground and insist on explaining and being heard. Some of the following pieces fall into this category.

But the other “unspoken” element they had all experienced, and very much enjoyed exploring, was the English way of saying one thing whilst meaning something altogether different. We all do this; to cover our tracks, to smooth over uncomfortable social situations, or to appear to say something whilst not actually saying anything at all. Writing out an imagined example of this was not only fun, but helped the interpreters look for the hidden meaning in the real situations they recalled. So you will find the ‘Said and Unsaid’ exercises before the remaining pieces here.

All of the exercises were designed to enhance the expressiveness of the writing. And all the resulting pieces illustrate very vividly not only why this is a really tough but vital job, but also why it’s important that people outside the private spaces where these encounters took place should understand the interpreters’ world.

## Said and unsaid

Being from abroad gives you a keen ear for British euphemism — and hypocrisy. Here are some common English phrases and their real meanings (and some unspoken responses). The pieces that follow are the interpreters' experiences of this genre.

Isn't the weather nice today?

(Translation: *Why are you wearing that thick coat? What are you hiding?*)

How nice to see you!

(Translation: *What are YOU doing here? Were you invited?*)

You look well today!

(Translation: *Unusually...* [Or] *You've lost weight.*)

You are so kind.

(Response: *Aren't I normally?* [Or] *Don't lie, I know you hate me.* [Or] *Of course I am – unlike some...*)

It's freezing outside, isn't it?

(Translation: *You're not wearing enough clothes!* [Or] *You're wasting a lot of electricity, keeping it this hot in here.*)

I love you, you're so lovely.

(Response: *What are you after? What are you hiding? What have you done now???* *I don't have time for this.* [And] *I'm NOT doing your washing!*)

You're welcome!

(Translation: *Next time, do it yourself.* [Or] *You ungrateful little so and so.*)

How are you all?

(Response: *All? It's just me and my husband, can't you remember two names?* [Or] *You don't really want to know how we are, do you?*)

Please, do go ahead.

(Translation: *Hurry up, I haven't got all day!*)

You know what I mean!

(Translation: *You may, but I haven't a clue what I'm talking about. [Or] I have no intention of explaining myself any further.*)

So nice to see you again!

(Translation: *I only saw you yesterday! [Or] Haven't you got any other friends?!*)

## Early morning, in our house

ZOE

Knocking on my son's bedroom door...

Me: Hello baby wake up, its time. (*Right, here we go again, wake up.*)

Son: Oook! I am!! (*Here she is again; I'm not getting up yet.*)

Five minutes later back in the room,

Me: Hey you need to get up! (*You're going to miss the bus if you don't.*)

Still half sleep in bed....

Son: Ok, I'm getting up. (*No I'm not, still got few minutes.*)

I get ready and go down. Still no sign of the son: shouting from downstairs...

Me: For goodness sake, will you get up. (*I'm getting very cross now, why won't you get up?!*)

Son: Ok, Ok, I am up! (*Please give it a rest, I know when to get up, I still have a few seconds.*)

Me: What are you doing now?! (*God, the breakfast is getting cold and I have to warm up it again, I mutter, now driven to mutter in my own language.*)

Son: Just coming!! (*What does she think I'm doing, I am up, aren't I? She can hear me using the bathroom.*)

## HARD WORK

Heavy footstep and eventually he is downstairs...

Me: Hey, good morning. (*You took your time.*)

Son: It's okay mum. (*When will she stop? I'm old enough to know what I have to do.*)

Me: Have you got all your stuff for school ready? (*I suppose you didn't get anything ready last night.*)

Son, constantly playing with his mobile and not even looking at what he is eating...

Son: Of course. (*As if I want to waste my time getting everything ready!*)

Me: Have you finished yet? (*Come on son, just pay attention.*)

Son: I'm eating! (*What is she like, oh my God.*) Finished. (*Happy now?*)

Me: Great, can you hurry up now and brush your teeth? (*Can't believe I still have to remind him.*)

Son: Of course. (*Can't believe she still thinks she has to remind me!!*)

A while later, at the door leaving for the bus...

Me: Okay baby, have you got bus money? (*I bet he left it somewhere again.*)

Son: Yes, Mummm. (*I really need to get out of here.*)

Me: Bye baby, have a good day.

Son: Bye mum, you too.

## A conversation with two meanings

### KAMALJIT

Clinician: How have you been over the last 2 weeks? (*Give me straight answers today.*)

- Client: I've been fine. (*She just wants to see me shout and cry.*)
- Clinician: Has anything changed since we last met? (*I wish you'd talk about your feelings.*)
- Client: No, everything is the same. (*Nothing ever changes anyway: she (the interpreter) knows what it's like in our families.*)
- Clinician: Explain it to me so that I can understand. (*Stop evading the question.*)
- Client: (*Starts crying.*) You've not been listening, just like everyone else.
- Clinician: It must be very painful for you to talk about these things. (*Get on with it; I'm running out of time and patience.*)
- Client: You don't understand what it's like. (*I wish you'd stop pretending that you care.*)
- Clinician: Help me understand. (*Now I'm really losing my patience.*)
- Client: Just looks away and says nothing. (*It's just a job for you.*)

## Dialogue

### GUIDA

At the Housing Department. The housing officer is here with the client. An application has been put in for the Deposit Guarantee Scheme. Initially the client was told that it would take two weeks to process.

Officer: I'm sorry I haven't contacted you sooner!

Client: Don't worry. I know how busy you must be. (*What with I haven't a clue, since nothing's been done...*)

Officer: But now that we're here, what did you want to know?

## HARD WORK

Client: It's just that four weeks have gone by and I have received no communication. I brought all the requested documents as soon as I was asked for them.

Officer: Yes, I'm sure everything is in order and they'll only need adding to your file. *(I have no idea where they are; I only hope you have copies.)*

Client: Well — could you please tell me how things are progressing? *(I hope you haven't lost them.)*

Officer: Well, it's all running as expected. There's not much to report. *(I really haven't a clue; I haven't had an update, but then nor have I asked for one.)*

Client: I see. *(You haven't bothered to check, so you could let me know.)*

Officer: It's all quite clear, there's nothing for you to worry about. *(I really must go and try and find those documents.)*

Client: Thank you. *(Now you've really got me worried.)*

Officer: Goodbye. See you soon.

Client: Goodbye, and thank you. *(For nothing.)*

## As the song goes

### GUIDA

As the song goes, 'Life is a rollercoaster'. And how true that is. One moment you're up, on top of the world, and the next, totally without warning, you come crashing down.

Sunday evening I had a look in my diary. The week ahead looked fairly good. Some work, some free time, allowing me time to catch up on all those other jobs I had been postponing, either through lack of time or motivation.

As you might have gathered from my ramblings, nothing panned out as expected.

The initial one appointment of possibly one hour in my diary became seven appointments totalling 16 hours of interpreting for the week. And that's not counting interpreting work over the phone, but we'll leave that because — that's another story.

All those extra appointments were booked at the last minute, and some went on for long starving hours; apparently the message had been for the interpreter (me) to come provided with sustenance, only that part never reached me.

I had been called in by the hospital. Social Services were coming in to help a mother and her newborn baby who were homeless. After the elation of having given birth, the mother was going to be faced with some difficult decisions. In order to be allowed to take her baby with her she would have to agree to be moved twenty miles away from all that was familiar to her and stay in a Bed and Breakfast for an indeterminate time. She would have to leave her friends who, so far, had been her only support, and move, on her own, with a newborn, to a strange area. And all of this made harder by the fact that she did not speak English.

Social Services told her this B and B was the only place with a vacancy at such short notice. They had tried everywhere else, starting closer to her friends, and had been told they'd be notified as soon as there was a vacancy. This did not seem to reassure the mother. The thought of being sent away so far from all that was familiar was petrifying her. She just couldn't take it in.

"What if I refuse to go?" Social Services looked at her and explained that their sole responsibility was to the baby, so the alternative would be foster parents — to take her baby away from her.

"You can't do this!" was her cry, of utter disbelief. As I interpreted what was being said I had to control my own emotions. This was going all wrong. Was there nothing I could do or say to help?

It was long and hard, especially emotionally. Would they keep them together? Or would they be separated? I felt tossed about like a ping-pong ball — and, as time went by, just as fragile. There was a certain sense of *déjà vu* about this new situation, and the same feeling of helplessness surrounding me. "Keep one foot definitely in and the other firmly out," I admonished myself. "You'll be of no use to anybody if you don't."

The ward was hot and stuffy as I sat and waited, in strange contrast to the outside elements as the wind howled and the rain crashed against the window. "Funny," I thought, "as we sit here in this quiet, warm environment, it's the outside which represents the drama happening in here."

For drama it was. At one point I was called out. They wanted my opinion, my 'take' on the situation. 'Take?'

I could feel my insides churning. I wanted to help, but what should I do? It was not fair on their part to play me as they were. I am the interpreter, which is all. They shouldn't have called me out by myself. As I sat there across from them I made the instant decision solely to repeat Mum's words. After all, that is all I am supposed to do. I am the instrument through which people can communicate; my opinions, my 'take' on a situation, should not be called into the game. I am not there to make assumptions on what other people think or feel.

Somehow I got the feeling that what I was about to tell them would not please them, but I had no choice. "I can only reiterate what Mum has been telling you. She's absolutely terrified of the thought of being sent so far away from all that is familiar to her." But I did add, "And the fact that she cannot speak English makes the situation all the more daunting. Also, your pointing out to her that if she does not comply, her baby could be put into Foster Care has jeopardised any trust she might have had in the offer of help and support on your part."

"Right." But I could tell that nothing was 'right', in fact, it was all going very wrong and I only hoped that they would have a flash of inspiration and would start looking at this situation from Mum's point of view as opposed to their own. Rather cynically I thought to myself "One lives in hope..."

At that point, maybe sensing that I was not going to say any more, they asked me to go back to the ward and ask Mum to join us.

Making my way back onto the ward I sensed a change in the atmosphere. "Why did they call you, without me?" There was an understandable edge of mistrust in her voice. In a way I was glad that no one else on the ward could understand what was going on. This is one advantage of dealing with a crisis in a foreign language. In a place of little privacy, speaking a different language provided it.

"I only told them what you had told me," was my shaky answer. I needed to hold on to that fast-disappearing thread of trust.

As an interpreter, it is important to build trust and confidence as the base of your work. If people cannot trust you, you cannot do your job effectively for them.

I added, "It wasn't my place to comment on the situation. I just repeated what you'd been saying all along." After all, that is what I am, I thought, a voice — her voice.

She sat there, staring at me; in every fibre of her body I could sense the struggle. Do I trust her? Should I trust her?

I calmed her down. "You need to keep calm, otherwise, you'll not be able to think clearly, and you need that to be able to make the correct decisions."

"They would like to talk to you now. I'll be with you and, remember, you must keep calm."

As we walked down the corridor, the silence was a marked contrast to the turmoil we were about to face.

The room was in dim light, the darkness outside adding a certain eeriness.

We sat across from each other; her and me on one side, the others on the other.

It felt a bit like a battle ground. "How appropriate," I thought. "Let the battle commence!"

Words went backwards and forwards, like bullets and with the same devastating effect. Some made time for me to do my job, and others didn't. On our side I could discreetly lay my hand on her arm to stem the flow, thereby allowing me to voice her fully. I had no control over the other side. But as it was mostly repetition of what had been said before, I could voice it all confidently.

"But why? Why so far away?" tears streaming down her cheeks she was trying to make sense of this impossible situation. "It can't be happening! It shouldn't be happening!" — I could imagine these thoughts going through her mind.

After what seemed like hours of emotionally charged discussions, one of the others stood up and with a decisive parting expression said. "Right, you now have the options. I have to go now but my colleague will sort out the rest for you. See you tomorrow." And left.

Fortunately, there was a reprieve. She could stay here one more night. The day was too far gone to send her anywhere. Maybe tomorrow in the light of a new day, things might not seem so dark, so scary.

Walking back together to the ward, I felt her miles away, her thoughts racing between decisions, options, or lack of them. Her face looked pale and strained. We reached her bed; she sat and looked up disconsolately. "I'm not going! I can't go!"

All I could do was smile reassuringly and say, "Try not to worry, things will work out. It is important that you rest now."

The nurse approached and thanked me, a sure sign that I was no longer needed. "I have to go now. Is there anything you'd like me to say for you before I go?"

She shook her head, all the fight gone out of her. "Thank you," was the barely audible whisper.

"Try not to worry," were my parting words.

Timesheet signed, I walked out, head pounding.

It was early evening and I had been there since mid morning. Breakfast was a distant memory.

As I reached the car park searching in my pocket for the parking ticket, I heard someone address me through the haze of my thoughts. "Excuse me. Do you happen to have a 10p coin in exchange for these two 5p, please?" I raised my eyes and tried to focus. "Yes, of course," and rummaged in my purse for the requested coin. I felt as if I were waking from a dream, or nightmare; someone else's nightmare.

Here I was, on my way home, trying to help someone whose biggest problem was having the right coins for the machine, whilst I had left behind total devastation.

Talk about living in parallel worlds!

# A situation

KAMALJIT

An appointment comes through at the last minute. It's a bright, but cold and windy, afternoon. I rush to get there and find the house; it's on the main road. There's parking in the drive, but since I don't know the situation in full, I decide to look for a side road where I can wait for the clinician. I have to look out for her and get the brief before going in.

When she arrives, she tells me: "I'm here to get parental consent for a 19-year-old young man who's being kept in hospital under Section 2 of the Mental Health Act. His section runs out tomorrow and we need the parent to consent to Section 5."

Someone diagnosed with a severe mental health condition but refusing treatment at home can be detained in hospital. They'll be kept under Section 2 for up to 28 days and if their mental health has not improved, under Section 5 for up to 6 months without the patient's consent. However, the nearest relative has to consent to it. So, for this relative, it's a big responsibility.

Having interpreted in such cases before, I ask no other questions.

The clinician rings the bell, the door opens and we are face-to-face with a well-dressed young woman around twenty. She introduces herself as the sister, and says: "We didn't know if you were going to come. And my dad's angry about the way you spoke to him on the phone."

The clinician responds: "As I said to him on the phone, since your mother's listed as the older parent, I need to speak to her. Since she doesn't speak English I've brought an interpreter." And she points towards me.

The father appears in the hallway of the house. He's of regular build and looks a pleasant and likeable sort of man with no menace, really not threatening at all. I expect him to say "Hello," and ask us to come in, but instead he goes directly into his complaint.

"So, my opinion is not important, even though I do everything else for the family!" He probably makes all major decisions regarding the family, as would be expected of a man from his community.

“You know, I can speak English and can tell you everything you need to know. But since you prefer to speak to my wife, she will tell you the same thing, She can speak English too.”

The clinician is likeable enough but slightly defensive; she could have tried to understand the family dynamics a bit better, but instead just repeats the purpose of her visit. He leaves, giving us both a cold hard stare that stays with me throughout the session. A look that says, “I don’t want you knowing my family’s business, and I certainly hope it doesn’t get into the community.” His fear is of being judged by me; the shame it would bring on the family if it got out, and worry about whom, if anybody would marry his children, would all be preying on him.

Clients from my culture find it hard to admit that they have any health issues. Mental health in particular has a real stigma attached to it. Not having met this family before in either a professional or social setting, I can only relate to the general difficulties the family must be facing. They appear to be a regular family, proud and self-sufficient.

The sister ushers us into the lounge. By now, the clinician is also becoming more defensive. She tries to enlist the support of the sister. “As I said to your father on the phone, since your mother is listed as the older parent, legally I must speak to her about her about your brother’s care.”

At that point, Mother comes sheepishly into the room and sits down. She doesn’t come across as a decision maker, and probably leaves that to the father. I would imagine her brought up to be a homemaker, a cook, a wife and good mother, shielded from English laws and even customs. It doesn’t mean she’s been physically locked up: a lot of immigrants from their culture, especially women, live fairly insular lives. Looking at the clinician, she says, in clear enough English: “My husband can speak for all family.”

She speaks quietly, perhaps worried that even though he’s not in the room her husband might be listening. The clinician looks relieved that the mother has finally appeared and repeats, this time a little more calmly, “Legally, I can only speak to you, who are listed as the older parent, about your son’s care.”

I feel stuck in the middle of this situation: the father is embarrassed by my presence; the mother, understanding enough English, doesn’t really need me.

But the sister wants an ally to help her to be heard, as they have been let down by other healthcare providers.

So, the sister now speaks at length about the brother's illness, diagnosis and treatment. The mother doesn't say much and leaves all the talking to her daughter. And the consent, to the extent it was given, came from her too: "My brother will only take his medicine if someone gives it to him. Unless he can get that help outside, he needs to stay in hospital."

As we were leaving, the clinician apologised to the father: "I'm sorry if you felt left out, but we have to follow procedures." But by then she had lost his respect.

I felt neither party got what they wanted. The family still needed reassurance that the son was where he should be, and getting the treatment and help he needed.

So, once we left the house, I tried telling the clinician some of what I thought. But she kept going back to legal reasons about how they had to have the mother's consent.

What do you do with all the emotion welling up inside, the helplessness you feel as a human being? I didn't go into this just to be an interpreter. And in this case, I definitely wasn't needed as an interpreter, as not a word of my language was spoken.

All I could do during the session was to observe and show empathy. I had to suppress those other feelings and take them with me. I came away feeling sad, and a failure.

## A round table

### GUIDA

A round table! Seven people sitting around the table. Seven different roles being played. Six people understanding what's going on. One...

"Your child has been put into care; you have failed your parental assessment. Not once, but twice. Do you understand? We have repeatedly told you not to bring sweet things to the contact sessions!"

“What can I bring? I only see him twice a week, for only an hour each time. How can I be ‘a parent’ then? I want to spoil him; I want to make it all better. You cannot do that with bread and water! Can you?! How then? You are the School, the Social Services, the Foster Parents. You have all read the same book, sung the same song. I don’t even know the words. He is my son, I love him, I want him back and I don’t know how to go about it.”

As I interpret, I try hard to convey the heartbreak. The feeling of helplessness.

We all sat around the large oval table in the big room, bare but for the table and chairs, the bright lights above making a mockery of the feelings inside. The room was warm but I felt myself shiver. A cold draught ran through my body. Outside the door the humming of voices could be heard, but it felt as if they belonged to another world, a world where everything works well and everyone is happy.

“Do you realise what will happen if we are given a Court Order?”

“Do you want to see me cry?”

“I need to know whether you understand what it means!”

“Yes! Adoption!” she cried, in her language, as she burst into tears.

As I sat next to her I could see the clenching and unclenching of her hands, nails bitten to the quick. If only I could soften the delivery of what was being said. Everything that is being said must be interpreted. How many times had I heard that, how many times had I repeated it? Knowing it is the right way does not make it any easier.

Words by themselves are easy to interpret, but it is what’s hidden behind them that is so very hard to convey. Like a football spectator, I am the only one who can see both sides of the field. I watch both teams playing their game and only I am in a position to understand both sides. Each side relies on me, but all I am translating are the words. There is so much more, unseen by them, that I have to bottle up.

Although what was being said came from other mouths, it was from mine that she heard it. It made me feel like the executioner on pulling the trigger. The words I was uttering were having the same deadly effect.

Meanwhile, another conversation, totally unrelated to what was going on, was taking place. Some bantering going around the table, a joke made, and they all laughed. I cringed as I saw they'd forgotten that she wouldn't know what was going on, she'd not understand the joke was not on her.

She cried. Quietly I turned to her and explain.

She nodded, whether to show that she had understood or just that she was listening, I couldn't tell.

"The library idea did not work. Mum can't read English," commented the Contact Lady. "We've tried several activities to help Mum to engage with her son, but language is still an issue."

In turn each member of the group gives feedback on what's been going on. The mother sits quietly next to me. I can tell she's made an effort. From what she's wearing you can see she realises the importance of appropriate appearance. She's young, oh, so young, 'playing' at being a grown-up. She so wants to be taken seriously. Her soft voice breaks as she says:

"I can't even speak with him; he's forgotten the language and I can't talk to him." It is not until I interpret that the others even realise Mother has spoken.

"You can speak English; your English is good enough."

"During contact you really must speak to your child in English. It is imperative that we understand what is being said," the social worker addresses Mum once more.

"It is not our language, he's forgetting our language. How can you talk about 'care'?" I can sense her tensing up; the shoulders have lifted, the stare is fixed on no one in particular and all in general.

As the meeting progresses she's asked about her solicitor. "At the last meeting, I gave you a list of Family Solicitors," adds the Chair.

"Yes, I have a solicitor."

"Maybe you should see her. She'll tell you what to do. Right, we re-convene in two months' time." They all stand up to leave. "We need to talk in private. Goodbye!"

As Mother makes for the door, without a backward glance, I can tell she cannot wait to get out of there. At the door she hesitates; this group of people is after all her only link with her child's future, with their future. "Has she got something to ask?" I wait, but as if changing her mind, she walks out of the room.

As I prepare to leave in turn, something is holding me back.

I feel I haven't been of much help. I feel frustrated and angry. What lack of sensitivity! How could they care so little? Did they not understand? Could they not 'read' her? She was so much out of her depth I could feel her drowning. Drowning before authority, drowning in pain, drowning in helplessness.

I wish I could do more, but my hands are tied. It's not fair! Can't they see what problems they're creating? In trying to 'solve' a problem here and now, they seem to be creating a future crisis.

Way, way back, during a training session we, new interpreters, had been told: "Remember, an interpreter is like a machine." I did not believe that then, and certainly was not going to act as one now. "Excuse me!"

I turned to the person chairing the meeting.

"Yes?" The look of impatience would have stopped the bravest in their tracks, but I was not going to be intimidated. Not now that I had managed to overcome my nervousness, my shaking hands and dry throat.

"Have you got a few minutes? I feel there's something you should know."

"I'm sorry, but I can't stop now. I have things to discuss, matters to clear, plans to draw up."

At this, I very nearly turned away. The silence surrounding me made me uncomfortable; I could feel all eyes on me.

But the sound of barely contained tears still rang in my ears. No, I could not stop now. "It won't take long, and I feel it's of importance to this case." For a second I wished I had not spoken up. In fact, I wished I wasn't there at all. "How cowardly can you be?" you are probably thinking now. Go on, say it, do something, make a difference!

This last thought spurred me on. I had nothing to lose. "I feel you're looking at all this through the wrong glasses."

"Pardon?" the look I was given showed a totally baffled expression. "Glasses?" I could practically hear her thinking. "Is this person serious?"

"You're looking at this whole sorry situation through British glasses. No, I know I'm not making sense yet, but please just hear me out. When you are born and brought up in a country where you do not question authority, where someone who is a professional must know better, you just go along with it. It is not that you don't care enough to fight for what you want. It's just that you don't know how to."

"I'm sorry, I don't follow you." At last, the merest look of interest was finally there. I plodded on, on what felt like unsteady feet on uneven ground.

At that moment it felt like role reversal. It was my information they needed. For a split second I was in their shoes, feeling their uncertainty. I could empathise and the knowledge made me more tolerant. After all, they were as much in the dark as she. They had not been brought up in the Mother's environment; they had no past experience to draw on. Maybe I was being unfair in my assumptions. The group listened.

"Well, you've been looking at this case as if the persons involved had been born and brought up in a British environment, British schooling, British society. It won't work, you know."

"Are you trying to tell me how to do my job?" The sense that I was overstepping the mark was back surrounding me, gripping all my senses as if forbidding me to go on. The struggle persisted as I added, "No, no, far from it."

"What then?" At this stage I felt time was of essence. I needed to find not just the right words, but the correct way in which to express myself. Holding my hands together against myself to stop them fidgeting, mirroring my internal feelings, I carried on: "As an interpreter, I'm here to facilitate the communication between all parties. I make it possible for everyone to be understood by expressing, in another language, all that is being said."

"Yes...". The way this was said made me feel like a child who's being humoured.

"Breathe!" I told myself. I had to remain calm. It would not do to lose control. Be empathetic but firm and most importantly, be clear. "The thing is, no one is interpreting what is not being said."

The silence into which this fell contrasted with the lunchtime noise outside. People milled about, chatting making their way for their lunch break. Finally I had their attention. No one made a move.

"I've come along to interpret all that is spoken aloud, but now I feel I should also interpret what was left unsaid."

"Well, she's had the opportunity to put her point across. We've asked countless times whether there were any doubts to clear, any points to be further explained, any questions that might need answering. And we've met with, mostly, silence."

"Don't you see? She doesn't know what the doubts are, what points to raise or questions to ask."

"Well, if she wants her child back, she should know."

"It's not that simple!" I needed to show we were not fighting them; we were not enemies at war on opposite sides of the field. A child's wellbeing was at stake and for that to be achieved the child needed the mother.

How could I get across that basic need? Need! It was more than that. It was a Right! It was the basis, the platform on which that small family would rebuild their fragile and much battered relationship.

I had to tread carefully. "I know you have been meeting with her." In my head the word 'occasionally, very occasionally' raised its head; with a pat on its back I sent it right back where it had come from. This was not a time for complete truths. Diplomacy, be diplomatic. The wrong word, the wrong implication can throw all this effort into disarray.

So, I carried on. "I appreciate it is not always possible, for one reason or another, to get an interpreter, but for everyone to work together, full understanding is paramount."

"But she understands..."

"She gets the gist."

"We always listen."

"I know you do, but she cannot express herself correctly and she's terrified, because of that, that it will make her situation worse. Therefore, she clams up."

The atmosphere was changing, it was palpable. Strange, isn't it? How something so invisible can be felt so physically.

They sat down again, and with great relief so did I. I didn't think my legs would have held me up for much longer. In fact, rather than graciously sitting down, I dropped onto the chair.

I didn't speak for long, they were already aware of what I was telling them. Mum's background had been gone over and over.

"Mum really wants to work with you, but all this is foreign to her. Social Services, foster parents, Parenting Assessment. She is struggling to get her head round all this as well as trying to hold a job down and find suitable accommodation," I add. "Mum has not lived in the UK long enough to know how things work. Please, be patient with her and, if it at all possible, support her more closely in these quests. I understand that your duty of care is towards the child and Mum does appreciate the fact that you have a very heavy work-load with sometimes what looks like impossible cases to sort out; but with your ongoing support she'll be able to provide a loving and safe home for both of them."

The sun was now low on the horizon, making the interior lighting all the brighter. I stood up and having thanked them for their attention, I left the room.

Another day, another case. I got into the car and switched the radio on. My latest audio-book sprang into action and I was glad of it. Concentrating on the latest story would stop me from going over the case in my head. "Did I do enough? Did I do too much?"

Only time will tell!

For us interpreters most appointments are left without closure and I'd say that is quite hard to deal with. You do not realise how much what happens over time has affected you until something else happens in your life, and it proves to be the drop that makes the bucket of your emotions overflow.

# Multi-care plan

ZOE

When is a care plan just a process, and not for the patient's benefit?

Trying to write about one of my experiences as an interpreter for the first time, I am very concerned whether I will be able to describe the situation accurately.

Whenever I start to read a new book, I always hate it when the author goes on about describing the scene rather than getting on with the story, but in this case, I think you should know what the situation was.

So, one day I get a request to attend a session, but because of confidentiality, I have very limited information regarding the nature of the request. All I know, it's in a psychiatric hospital at a mental care unit, requested by the Social Worker for a female client.

On a nice sunny day I leave home knowing where the hospital is, as I have been there before and it's not far from where I live.

It takes me some time to park my car and go to the main reception where I wait for a few people in front of me to sign their book. The lady at reception does not have any idea where the unit is and does not recognise the social worker's name. She has to ring round; eventually we find which unit I should be, but at this point I'm getting concerned that I'm running late.

Finally, going through lots of long empty, gloomy but clean corridors, I arrive at the unit and have to buzz to be let in. For a few more minutes nobody seems to come to the door and my anxiety is building up. Eventually a lady comes and opens the double doors and lets me into a dull, rundown corridor, saying: "Oh, you must be the interpreter, come, come, the lady is over here, can you ask her to get dressed for the meeting please?"

Okay!! This is not what I was expecting! As an interpreter, you should not have any prior contact with the client before the actual meeting. You are supposed to meet with the clinician, have a briefing, then go to session with the clinician, and there is a very good reason for this, as otherwise the client could divulge information which could jeopardise the impartiality of your role.

Right! What should I do!? I ask the lady if the social worker has arrived, to which she answers, "I'm not sure who's going to come." So I say, "May I ask: what is your position or can I talk to the person in charge?"

"But we have to get the lady ready and we are running late," she says. "Yes, I know but I cannot meet the client before the meeting and I have to talk to the person in charge first," I say.

I can see that she is not happy and I think she has her own schedule which is running late. She's not interested in my 'Code of Conduct' which they are supposed to have read and been trained to work with.

Reluctantly she takes me to their reception which is a small office with two females and a male working in a cramped space, with lots of desks and paper and files piled up everywhere.

This time, I get the chance to show my ID card and job request and explain why I am there. Thank God, one of the ladies knows what I am talking about and tells me that they had a phone call from social worker who is running late. Could I wait in the waiting room until they get here?

"Could I wait somewhere away from the client?" I ask, as I can see patients walking all over the corridor. The lady looks at me as if I have asked for the moon, but tells me I can wait in the kitchen if I want to! I don't have any other option and maybe I could get a drink of water or a cup of tea (if I'm lucky).

I look around and the kitchen is painted in usual magnolia, with last century's magazines on a low table, but it's a nice room as kitchens go. There is a window overlooking the back garden, where someone has tried to plant some shrubs but it lacks care. I drink my tea and pick up one of the magazines, but can't concentrate. I'm thinking, where is everybody!

I've been waiting for nearly twenty minutes, when the same lady comes and tells me they're here. She doesn't seem very happy about it and I'm not sure what it is I am sensing here, but just follow her back along the same corridor to the waiting room area.

There I realise that I do know the social worker and have interpreted for her before. We have a short briefing and she explains: it's a multi-agency meeting regarding an elderly female who has been going through psychiatric treatment for some time, and they are working towards the next stage of her care plan.

The social worker advises me that as we're running late, there's no time to go through all the details and I should just try to interpret to the best of my abilities; I assure her I have been in similar situations before.

They are still trying to locate a larger room to fit everyone in, though I'm not sure who 'everyone' is. While waiting in the corridor with the social worker gone again, I see some other people, a man and a woman, turning up. I can hear conversation in my language: "What's going on, why are they so disorganised, can't they do anything right?" I gather that they must be the patient's relatives, but since nobody is there to introduce us, I'm not sure what to say. I just keep quiet and wait while they carry on talking among themselves.

The woman is saying: "They are so useless in this country; I would never treat my patients like this. I need to talk to this doctor and see why he's not listening to me; I know what's best for our mum."

The man is rather anxious, and looking at his watch, says: "As if we don't have enough to cope with. I've just come all the way from abroad and have a very short time; they keep calling us for every single little thing. Why can't they just sort it, they know what Mum is like, so they must sort it out and stop getting me to come here all the time. We have to get them to agree that it's their responsibility to sort this out."

While hearing all this, minutes pass. I can see two other people coming down the corridor; one is carrying a thick folder. As I'm wondering if they could be the doctors, I see the woman (daughter?) who was speaking earlier, rush towards the two males, with the man (son?) following close by, saying: "Hello, doctor, we're so glad to see you, and that you've organised this meeting; we've been looking forward to seeing you!"

I am trying not to show any reaction, but notice that they do know each other, though the doctor is not very happy to see them and I detect some sort of annoyance on his part.

"Hello, Mrs Khan; of course we had to meet to plan the next step."

"Of course doctor, but you know what should happen, we've discussed this before, and the best option is to place mother in full time care since I am a doctor too and have lots of experience in these matters."

“Please let’s discuss this at the meeting. Is the room ready?” he asks, looking along the corridor without meeting her eye.

This time, the son says: “But I’ve come a long way doctor, and this has been going on for so long. It’s so difficult travelling from overseas, each time there’s some sort of meeting, and we never get the right result. As you’re aware, my sister knows what’s best for our mother.”

I can see that they are trying to bring him round to their own way of thinking; the daughter particularly is very forceful and repeatedly mentions that she’s also a doctor, but not saying in what field!

As we head for the room, I ask the social worker where she would like me to sit. She looks around and only now notices that the patient is not in the room yet. She asks the unit staff if they could bring her to the meeting. The staff rush out; perhaps in all the commotion, they have totally forgotten about the patient.

Eventually, the staff return with a very fragile looking old woman in pyjamas and slippers, so I gather they couldn’t talk her into getting dressed. There’s also a rather more robust healthy old man, and I particularly notice, that he is wearing a dark suit with large white running trainers.

The social worker gets up and gets the lady to come and sit next to me. I am placed at the top of the room, with the patient on my right and the social workers on her right; the doctors are on my left, with the family and the unit staff at the bottom of the room. I am not so sure about this seating arrangement. There is a large gap between me and the patient and the rest of the people in the room. It feels like they have left the patient entirely in my care. This happens a lot where the clinicians use the interpreters as a buffer to reduce their own role.

We start the meeting after some delay and there are all sorts of conversation and discussion already taking place. The daughter and son are talking in our language and greeting the old man, their father, but not saying anything to their mother. The doctor is asking if the assistant has the correct file, and the social worker is explaining the process to a trainee student.

After several attempts, the social worker gets everyone’s attention. She apologises for the delay, and asks everyone to introduce themselves and their role. Only now do I find out that, in this multi-agency care plan there are:

a psychiatrist and his assistant  
a Social Worker plus Trainee Student Nurse Practitioner  
two members of the Mental Health Unit staff  
the patient's husband, son, daughter  
— and finally the elderly female patient and me!

The social worker then explains that the meeting has been arranged to review the patient's treatment and the necessary care still required. She also explains that everyone needs to allow time, so I can interpret for the patient.

The meeting starts well, with the social worker asking the doctor to outline the care so far. Doctor Haman looks to his assistant and asks for a folder, then takes a few minutes, going back and forward, looking at some notes before finally saying: "We have been treating this lady for a few months with various methods and at this point, no further treatment is required, or available, for Mrs Khan. In my view, there is no need for the patient to remain at the hospital, and she can be cared in her family environment."

At once, even before I get a chance to interpret this, the patient's family start talking. The daughter says: "Doctor, you cannot mean this. Our mother is not capable of looking after herself; we don't detect any improvement since she has been here in all this time. And as you can see, my father is not capable of looking after himself and our mother. He is not very well himself."

"Please, it is not possible to interpret what is being said, I can only hear one person at the time." I say to the social worker. But it continues in this format, and while I interpret for the patient, there are lots of cross conversations taking place. The daughter is telling her brother in her own language; "I cannot believe this man, where did he get his education, at the back of some third world country?"

The doctor is saying something to his assistant, which I can't make out, and the social worker is asking the unit staff if the patient has had her medication today. Very soon, I find myself in the position of trying hard to interpret all of this and keeping the patient informed, as she is the only person that does not know the language. I feel so sorry for her.

The old lady is very silent and I am not even sure if she understands what I'm saying; I have to repeat everything several times to get any reaction from her. I have no idea if she is aware of what is going on, and she has only said a few words since coming to the room. As a result, it takes me even longer, to do the interpreting. I can sense everyone is getting impatient and they start talking among themselves again.

We plod along and what I understand, from fragments of what I hear and put together, while trying to do my job, is that the psychiatrist and the hospital staff are trying to release the patient since they believe no further hospital treatment is required, and they need the extra bed for the next patient.

The family are very reluctant to have the patient back home, as the elderly husband, who doesn't say much at the meeting is not able to look after the lady, and the children are very busy with their own lives, and live in different countries.

It comes down to the social team to find a care home for the lady. Of course there is a shortage of suitable accommodation but they say they will try their best to arrange a suitable plan.

Meanwhile the patient is getting restless and disoriented and she wants to leave the room. She just keeps repeating that she wants to go home, and trying to talk to her husband, asking him: "Why are we not going home?"

I'm sitting there, trying very hard to concentrate and keep interpreting while everyone is talking. Do I say anything? Can I say anything? We have been taught that we are there to interpret everything said; how is that possible?

I would like to stop the meeting, talk to each professional group and ask them: what is the benefit of this meeting? Would it not be better to have a smaller meeting with each party, and then inform the patient and the family of the outcome?

I would like to talk to the family and say: looking from the outside, all this lady needs is some care and love, and not this confusion of a meeting, where she is totally lost and not understanding what is going on. I feel sympathy for her, left with me, a total stranger, to explain the situation. I know that the organisation is obliged by law to have an independent interpreter, but how is this benefiting a patient who does not comprehend what I am saying?

And the old lady is still trying to get her husband's attention, repeating; "Why are we not going home?"

This leaves me with the feeling that this is much to do with cultural differences and the breakdown of the family unit. I'm thinking that if this lady was in her own country, and the country had not changed so much, she would have been looked after by her children in her own home, they would have lived close by and the family would have taken care of her.

As I sit here, I am reminded of my own old grandmother who was not all together at times; we just took it for granted that Grandma was a bit forgetful and we did what we could to help her.

At the end of meeting, I am left with a feeling of despair and frustration. I was thinking how a 'method of care' could be so perfect for one group of people and totally dysfunctional for another. Will it be like this when I am a similar age and unable to look after myself? Will my children act any differently?

Leaving the meeting, walking towards the car park, I decide, when I get old and am no longer able to look after myself, I will sell the family fortune, and book myself the best care home in some nice place like Hawaii!!

## A day like any other

JOANNA

It was a usual day, like any other. The memory is difficult to separate from the other days before and after it. The day was nice and warm. The sun was shining very brightly. The brightness of the morning seemed to be full of all kinds of promises and expectations, as with each time I enter new situations.

The assignment came from the Social Services. When I checked the appointment, it was to take place at someone's house. Finding the address wasn't an easy task. The street was hidden from the main road. I felt so happy that I was able to find the correct address and a good parking spot. After spending a few minutes in my car (and) patiently waiting for the social worker to arrive, I decided to go and wait on the street.

The interpreter's code of conduct states that whenever you enter somebody's house, you need to wait outside, in front of the house, for the other professional. On this occasion, I did not have to wait for a very long time. However, I remember some confusion with the house numbers and checking to see if I was waiting in the right place after all. Then, as I turned around to face the house, the green painted door slowly opened and a lady inside the house asked me, "Are you the interpreter?"

"Yes, I am," I answered, a bit surprised. I hadn't expected her, the social worker to be already in the house. "Please come in and go upstairs." She held the door open and allowed me to step in as we introduced ourselves.

My eyes adjusted to the dark hall which was narrow but very tidy and clean. It was obvious that the people who lived here cared a lot about their home. The room upstairs wasn't very large. The sunbeams coming through the window made it feel comfortable and cosy. A cat was dozing in a basket beside the sofa.

In the room another lady was waiting. My assumption was that she was the client though we weren't introduced properly. The young lady looked very innocent, with her shining eyes and long hair, although she seemed to be troubled, in some way unknown to me. Her glistening eyes were swollen and puffed as though she had been crying for quite some time. She appeared very fragile, timid and unsure of what to expect.

In this situation, she wasn't the only one. I wasn't sure what to expect either. In hindsight, I realise how helpful it would have been for me to have spent a few minutes with the social worker before the actual session, to be introduced to this case which I was supposed to interpret. However, it didn't happen this time.

After a quick exchange of names the social worker started her routine investigation. I sensed a strange atmosphere but wasn't sure what it was. Despite the fact that both women were acting very politely to each other, there was some evident disinclination and reluctance between them. I instantly knew that something really serious had happened.

I remember that the whole time I kept asking myself, "What I am supposed to expect from the session? What kind of incident has occurred to cause this meeting, and how will I be able to interpret it correctly, to convey all the meanings and feelings, not just the words?"

Too often we, as interpreters have to rely on our ability of reading body language which betrays small signs and insights of the client's thoughts, in order to gain a better understanding of the situation. Our work could be made so much easier if it became a routine for debriefs to be given before any session, and if our skills and knowledge of the cultural background were acknowledged and taken into consideration.

The social worker's opening questions were very factual, just a confirmation of the client's and her son's dates of birth, the address, school, family doctor, etc... Afterwards, she began to inquire a little deeper:

"Could you tell me what happened yesterday?"

I translated to the lady, "Could you tell me what happened yesterday?"

"I don't remember it exactly," she told me, apparently remorseful.

"I don't remember it exactly," I said to the social worker in English.

The social worker looked at the lady attentively. "Why don't you remember?"

I turned to the lady, "Why don't you remember?"

"I was under the influence of alcohol."

"I was under the influence of alcohol."

"How much alcohol did you drink? And what kind of alcohol was it?" I repeated the question to the lady in my language.

"I drank a few pints of beer; I didn't count how many. I have never had any problems with alcohol before. If I'd known what would result from it, I never would have touched it! I will never drink alcohol again, I know that now. I promise!"

This was the most I had ever heard the client say in the whole session. Her voice was straining, impassioned and fervent. I translated this quickly before she continued: "What will happen to my boy now? Can he come back to me again? I will never touch alcohol again. I promise. I know that what I did was wrong. It will never happen again. I promise!"

The social worker looked carefully at the client, with guarded yet knowing eyes as I communicated to her what the lady had just said.

"Did you harm your son?"

"Did you harm your son?" I repeated.

An uncomfortable silence ensued.

"Did you harm your son?" the social worker persisted, with the same level tone.

"Yes," the lady admitted, avoiding her gaze. "I beat him."

Remorselessly, the social worker carried on. "How did you do it? Do you remember the incident?"

"Not exactly, I beat him with a belt." The client's voice became contrite and quieter as she said this. "I love him so much! I promise I never will do it again."

I related all this back to the social worker.

The social worker leaned forward gently and the client looked to her suddenly, as if bracing herself for what the social worker had to say. "Do you know that he had numerous dark bruises and marks on his face? Do you know that both the police and the social services were called to the hospital yesterday?" As shocked as I felt, I relayed all this calmly to the lady, careful not to omit any part of the message.

"Yes, I know" — she responded miserably, closed her eyes slowly and looked at her feet.

The tension in the room became even more tangible and tears glistened in the client's eyes.

Following a few more questions, I became increasingly clear about what had happened. The night before, the Social Services had been called by the hospital because a patient had been admitted, a child, with several marks and terrible bruises on his skin.

Now I was sitting in front of the little boy's mother.

She seemed a very nice, young lady; very shy, fragile and quiet. It was difficult for me to comprehend the information I was given to translate. Throughout our meeting she was sitting on the edge of the sofa opposite the social worker, holding her white-knuckled hands between her tightly squeezed knees. Her whole body was rigid with apprehension. It was clear that she was deeply ashamed of the whole situation.

During the session she kept looking at me with her guilt-stricken, tearful eyes, searching for advice and reassurance. I need not say that she looked more to me than to the social worker. I knew that she was willing me to give her the reassurance that she would have her son back.

I found it difficult to see her as an abuser. I could hear the unmistakable love in her soft and trembling voice. It was her only child, her biggest treasure. As the social worker asked for more detailed questions, I noticed that she also struggled to believe the reality of what the lady had done.

Suddenly, I heard a soft child's voice coming from the hall.

"Can I come in and play with the cat?" To my surprise, her son had been there the whole time, waiting downstairs with a friend of the mother's.

"Please come in and play." The social worker smiled and let the child come in to play with his little animal friend.

I was very taken aback, seeing this little innocent child enter the room. I didn't want to look at him but couldn't help it. The face of this sweet little child was covered in bruises, with sore red and dark marks. I didn't know what to think.

I needed to keep my professional composure, while inside I felt like being torn apart. These ambivalent feelings raged inside me as the boy sat and played with his beloved pet. Even now, whenever I think about that harmed child I feel as though I was harmed myself. This unexpected confrontation was painful for me to come to terms with.

However, after what I had learned I was curious to observe the relationship between mother and the child after such a horrible incident. And I was surprised again. The relationship was full of care and thoughtfulness. The child didn't smile, but he wasn't crying either. I didn't notice any hate or anger in his attitude towards his mother.

The little boy was teasing the cat with a feather, like nothing appalling had ever happened. He cuddled the cat, and then embraced his mother on the sofa.

A mix of conflicting emotions overwhelmed me. I didn't know what should I feel myself, how should I understand things, how I should comprehend the entire situation I was looking at.

But, hearing the story and then looking at the mother and her child, I was contemplating what had caused a mother to do something so awful, something she completely regretted later.

The social worker began to question the little boy who was able to communicate in English very well. He didn't need my help in conveying his thoughts into articulate sentences, and he answered everything confidently. After a few minutes, when the social worker told him she had finished her questions, the boy picked up the cat and left the room.

I was in some way intrigued by the whole situation; I wanted to shout at the mother, "Why have you done this? Please explain to me what happened to you?" But the only thing I could do was to wait for the answers to the social worker's questions which I translated to the mother. The social worker wanted to learn more about the family's situation before the awful incident.

So the boy's mother began to explain her story; the story I have now heard so many times during my interpreting career. A story about loneliness and isolation, a story about separation from home, family, friends; and a story about the worst thing that can happen in an immigrant's life — a death in the family.

On this occasion, it was my client's mother who had passed away, about a year before the day that I met her for the first time. The mother whom she was very close to, who was her best friend, who was constantly there for her, the mother whom she left to emigrate to a far away country.

It is common knowledge that losing your parents — any loved one, for that matter — is always a very difficult process. Facing this process, which is not nearly an easy feat in itself, whilst living in a foreign country, far from the support provided by close family and friends, far from the comfort of your own culture and language, makes it feel that much more heartbreaking.

You are alone. You can feel anxious and stranded. Guilt and grief consume you. You are suddenly overwhelmed by the realisation of the extent to which your life has changed. The ground under your feet has slipped away. Those people who used to give you direction in your life are no longer with you.

And yet, you have no choice but to start a new life in a new country and learn to cope on your own. You want and need to talk to someone about these feelings; you need to confide your confusing thoughts; but there is nobody

around to listen. You know that you need help but you don't know how to find it; you don't know where to look for it.

The language remains just another barrier. How is it possible to talk about something so personal, in a language in which you struggle even to construct simple phrases! Your mind is overwhelmed by all these thoughts.

The simplest solution appears to be alcohol. It is the easiest way to forget. To forget all these consuming thoughts and gain a little respite, even if it is for a short time. In the beginning alcohol is your help, your rescuer. But that is only in the beginning.

Death does not exist in English culture. There are no signs, symbols or death memorabilia in public places. Cemeteries are hidden and abandoned and receive rare visits. Nobody seems to care or remembers them. People are not open to talking about death.

It is quite a contrast to my country of origin, where cemeteries are often found in the middle of villages or towns, where people visit the graves of their loved deceased ones whenever they want, even long after the actual death. The first of November is 'All Saints' Day' and crowds of people visit cemeteries and burn candles on the graves in memory of the people that they've loved and lost.

Can you imagine how difficult it is for a person who grew up in such a tradition to lose someone while living in the UK? Where it is most probable that they are not even able to attend their funeral?

In your country of origin you will probably find some people who can empathise with you, with your feeling, with your loss, people who will understand you. In a foreign land, in a distant culture, you need to learn how to struggle with your emotions yourself. Especially if you don't know the language of the country.

This woman was lost. She was suffering. She was deep in depression, but didn't know how and where to find help. She committed a brutal act on her child, but it was very difficult for me to believe that she did it in full consciousness of the immense harm she was bringing upon on someone whom she loved so much.

My personal feeling was that she did it as an act of desperation; nevertheless I couldn't share my personal views with anybody.

When she left the room for a while to check on her son, I found myself free to say something to the social worker. It was then that I told her that in my

opinion our client needed professional help, professional therapy concerning her alcohol addiction. I wasn't being asked my point of view, but I felt I needed to say something. I explained to her that the language barrier caused significant problems for our client in finding this kind of help. She needed more information about it. I remember asking the social worker if she knew of a service that could be of any help. The social worker confirmed to me that she was planning to pass on some information about where and when our client could look for help.

However, during this session she hadn't given any such information to the little boy's mother. I still don't completely understand why she didn't do it.

After the meeting the social worker decided to stay a bit longer in the house, to go through another series of questions with the friend of the mother's, who was supposed to have temporarily custody over the child.

The client took me to the front door. She kept asking me so many questions in our language. I tried to avoid them in every possible way. I wasn't allowed, and didn't feel entitled, to give her any answers.

The only thing I knew was that the mother urgently needed professional help with her alcohol problems. It happened that at this time I knew one very good voluntary service, actually only around the corner, five minutes from her house. I wasn't sure if I should give her the name of the service. Usually I wouldn't do this. However, after thoughtful consideration I decided to share the details with her. I know from our later encounters that the day after our meeting she decided to go there asking for help and she regularly attended the therapy sessions for a few months.

I interpreted for her few more times. I was astonished when it was brought to my attention that her therapy attendance was one of the crucial factors why she was able to have her son back.

After that meeting, I was asking myself what would have happened if I hadn't given her the name of the service. What would have happened to her child, to or the mother; to their family? Would they be still together? I am not sure. And yet it was only a tiny piece of information, that would have been so obvious and easy to find for any English speaking person.

I choose to write this story because I am sure there are many parents out there who may find themselves in a similar situation to my client's. The language

barrier hinders them from finding the proper help when they really need it. Even if the service is located next door, they are not aware that it is available to them; a place where they can knock the door and be warmly welcomed and helped. I know that this could sound strange to native people.

I still keep asking myself — if the woman from my story had found the help she well and truly needed after her mother's death, would the incident with her son have happened? But I know that it can only ever be a speculation...

## Light/tunnel

### GUIDA

Decisions, decisions. Everything in life seems to lead to decisions. What to do? When to do it? How to do it? We travel from one thing to another, tripping and stumbling, never quite knowing exactly how we got there, but there we arrived. This constant walking in the dark becomes quite draining.

Who was it that said that there's always light at the end of the tunnel?

Sometimes what you mistake for light is merely a reflection, letting you know you're not there yet. And you plod on!

Somehow you always seem to be the cox leading the rowers, the rudder directing everyone and everything. Whenever anything needs doing, any decision needs making; all eyes are on you — together with the knowledge that it will never be judged the right decision by them all.

The weight of that responsibility hangs heavy and you pull it along, tugging it here and there between the cooking, the telephone, the shopping, the telephone, the washing, the telephone.

"I'm tired," they say. "I've been at work, college, all day."

And I've been sitting with my legs up all day?!

This is left unsaid, of course; but maybe it shouldn't be. So much in life is left unsaid. I spend most of my working time hearing the unsaid, trying to explain the hidden meanings. So much hangs on your understanding of the unsaid.

What responsibility. Do I say it? Do I leave it? The implications of either.

More decisions. More travelling. What will happen if I do? What will happen if I don't? The guilt. The fear. The doubt. The responsibility. What if? When I hear what they say, and listen to what they mean, like two different sides of a coin. Which way will it flip? Which way should I flip?

The constant travel through the unknown terrain with its ups and downs, muddy patches and hard ground.

But at the end of the day it has been rewarding. All are grateful, your effort is appreciated.

You have made a difference!

# Unsent letters

We've all had the experience of coming away from a situation, or lying awake at night remembering one, and thinking what we should have said or done. Sometimes these feelings can stay with us for years, lacking the opportunity for what's sometimes called 'closure'. We don't often have the chance to say what we'd have liked to, and see the effect it would have. More often than not, it wouldn't be a very good idea. So the 'unsent letter' is a safe, soothing and revealing way to express all the stuff that's been stuck inside us, without the risk of waking any sleeping dogs.

Sometimes rereading these letters can help us see that perhaps things weren't exactly as we've remembered them, and perhaps it's as well we didn't speak out at the time. At other times, it can increase the sense of regret, but perhaps help us to know how to do better next time. These are some of the 'unsent letters' that came out of our workshops.

## The unsent letter

### GUIDA

Admin! It's always put down to admin. When in doubt, blame it on admin.

As I arrived at the hospital my feelings were so mixed. It was just after Christmas and I hadn't met with you for a while. It was while waiting for your last appointment that the conversation over Christmas decorations came about. You had been a bit down at the time, saying how you couldn't do what you normally did. I tried to reassure you, tried to help you to think more positively. "Of course, you might not be able to physically climb up into the loft to bring the decorations down but you can make it a family occasion and involve all your children and husband this time round. Instead of them coming home from school and work to a *fait accompli*, make it a family thing. It would be a lovely way of preparing for Christmas, all of you doing it together."

Half convinced you then changed the subject back to that of your appointment. "Things aren't working out, are they!?" It was hard to answer. "I'm not the doctor so I can't answer that, but I can certainly help you when the doctor sees you."

"But I feel so tired all the time," you added. I tried to be empathetic, but trying was all I could do. How could I put myself in your shoes without sounding patronising? I remember thinking that I had to constantly think things through before voicing them to you. A wrong word, a wrong statement could have caused lasting damage to you, and that was the last thing I wanted to do.

How I longed to reassure you that everything would be all right. That you were on the right path to health and a fulfilling life with your husband and children. "I worry about my children. What will become of them if I die?" you told me, tears in your eyes, that worry visibly etched on your face.

I could feel myself well up, but couldn't allow it to show. It wouldn't be fair. You could, and should, allow your emotions to show, I should not. What kind of support would I have been if I did not hold it together, if I did not keep my emotions in check?

"Don't worry, please. Worry is something you must avoid at present. Remember, it's said that during treatment you should avoid worry at all costs. It works better if you allow your body to think positively."

"But, my children..." This was your constant cry, because a cry it was. A cry for help, not for you but for your children.

Sometimes your husband was short with you but I could tell it wasn't with you he was angry. He was angry at this thing that had wormed its way into your well-ordered, happy lives. It had crept in quietly, unannounced and now it was showing itself to be far too well established to be dismissed without a fight.

All those appointments we shared, trying to reassure both of you as well as doing my job. Maybe I shouldn't have, maybe I should have stuck to what I was there to do. Officially I was there to attend your appointments and simply translate the dialogue. But I am not some kind of Google software; I have feelings and have to work hard at using them the right way. Life would have been so much easier if I had just acted like a robot. Easier for whom? For me, would have been the only answer [I could have given]. But it wasn't about me, was it?

I was okay, I had my health and my children knew their Mum was coming home. And you? I so wanted to be positive for you, I wanted to feed into you nice thoughts, safe thoughts, happy thoughts.

As I walked away after each appointment, I hoped I'd managed to instil enough hope in you too to last you through your next course of treatment, until your next appointment.

"There's not much that I fancy to eat, the only thing I seem able to stomach is something cool and sweet like yoghurt, but my husband won't let me have it," you complained. Crossly, he'd said he'd been told you couldn't have food at extreme temperatures. "But it's all I want, everything else turns my stomach." I tried to placate you both. I could sense the frustration.

The doctor came, and as you put all your concerns and questions through me, and as I voiced the answers, I felt you relax. Soon it was time to go. The doctor and the nurse both thanked me for my help; as we walked out you seemed more animated and the colour was back on your cheeks. You both wished me a Happy Christmas and after jokingly reminding you to delegate from a comfortable position on the sofa, I parted from you until early January, the date for the follow-up appointment.

After all the excitement of Christmas and the New Year, it was time to start over again. I wondered how you'd spent Christmas. Had you managed to let go of the reins and allow the rest of the family to help? Had you had a peaceful and enjoyable Christmas, albeit overshadowed by your illness?

As I walked through the hospital I couldn't help myself from smiling as I imagined you sitting at home, over Christmas, ordering everyone around.

To my surprise you weren't in the waiting room. I approached the reception desk and was told that you hadn't arrived yet. I sat down, ready to wait. The room was fairly quiet, which I was pleased about as a waiting room full of cancer patients is a bad sign. There were some magazines and I picked one up, leafed through it and found an interesting article to read.

Time ticked away. As I came to the end of the article, I suddenly realised I was on my own in the waiting room. Again, I went to the reception desk; a different nurse told me. "No, there are no more appointments for today." Was I sure of the date and time? I gave her my time sheet for her to check. Another nurse

was called. Time hung as they looked. Then one of the nurses looked onto the screen, gasped and uncertainly looked at me.

I knew then! You hadn't made it.

Kindly, the nurse took me into a side room. She could see I was upset and that this had come as a shock. I swallowed hard and looked at the ceiling, trying to stop the tears that threatened. It's funny, the things we think about in times of great sadness. All I could think of was that I'd once read somewhere that if you feel you're going to cry, raise your eyes to the ceiling without lifting your face, and that would stop it.

I tried and failed. The nurse brought me a box of tissues. All was quiet, as all the patients had left and so had most of the staff. The nurse was apologising for the fact that the request for an interpreter hadn't been cancelled. I shook my head and told her not to worry, I was sure they had more important things to deal with than that.

As I stood up and thanked her for her kindness, I could feel my legs still wobbly. I walked away, back along the corridors, towards the exit. I couldn't take it in. You had looked so well the last time I'd seen you. They were going to try you on a new treatment. But it was not to be. My heart ached for your husband, for the children you were so worried by leaving.

Now a year later, I think back on those conversations we had and hope that you're finally at peace and that your family has hopefully found a way to live their lives a day at the time, each day, week, month, a little less sad. That they can now think of you without too much pain but with a little smile when they think of all the happy memories you left.

For me there was no closure; but then, as an interpreter, there rarely is. I do my job to the best of my ability, trying to make difficult situations a little easier by giving people the opportunity to make themselves understood, as well as to understand. By being your voice, I hope I fulfilled that role.

# Unsent Letter

KAMALJIT

Dear Clinician and Interpreter,

I've been coming to these appointments for months, hoping you would help. Now you tell me that our therapy is finished and you can't see me any more. You hardly got to know about my difficulties. I've been let down by people all my life. How could I trust you two? God knows what you thought of me, talking about me after I'd gone. Perhaps you've had a laugh or two at my expense, especially over the time I cried. I was brought up to behave in a way that didn't bring any shame on the family name and honour. We had to keep our emotions and feelings hidden, but you kept asking me about them. I can't even name my feelings, so how could I tell them to you? The only way you'd know how I feel is to live my life.

You two, looking high and mighty and know-it-all, will never know me. You have made things worse for me by forcing me to remember my past. I had learned to keep my anger pushed down, until you forced it out of me the other day. I felt stupid and embarrassed, and that's why I cried and couldn't bring myself to come the next time. I only carried on because I hoped you'd be able to help cure my symptoms. I also needed you to tell others about my difficulties so they would believe me. Especially the authorities: Job Centre, Council, and Home Office. They think I'm lazy and don't want to work or help myself.

What am I going to do now that I can't see you any more? At least, coming here to see you, I could let off steam and talk about things I can't tell others. My life is still the same; the pains are still there and nothing else has changed. What have you done for me? You have referred me to others; some of them are nice. But I can't trust anyone and feel let down, again and again.

I don't want to sound ungrateful, but you haven't helped me as much as I expected. I feel you showed me the path but left me stranded half way. I can't go back to my old ways; I'm afraid to carry on ahead, now I'm alone again. I thought you, the interpreter, would have understood me better and explained it to the clinician on my behalf, as I wouldn't have been able to control my anger and frustration if I'd started on my feelings. But perhaps you needed to see it for yourselves. I guess it's too late now.

You talked about breaking the vicious cycle and confronting my fears I guess I'll have to learn to do that. Not sure if I'll come back again. Need time to think and reflect on things and perhaps try out some of the techniques you talked about. These are not my ways of doing things and sound so alien; putting them into practice is not going to be easy.

Yours Sincerely,

The Client

## Unsent Letter

ZOE

Hello young man. We met today when I was called by the Social Services to help them assess your age and plan how to care for you. You don't know me but I could see the relief on your face when you saw me. Relief of seeing a face from your own country, hearing someone talk your own language.

The social worker tells me that the police found you wondering along the motorway, looking lost and bewildered. The police told her they suspect you came to this country illegally on the back of a lorry; the police received a phone call from passing drivers. The police had taken you to their station and from your appearance decided you might be under age, so contacted Social Services.

It is Social Services' duty to care for children under the age of sixteen, and as they could not communicate with you, they called for me.

My role is to interpret lots of questions they need to ask you, to give them the necessary information to decide how to look after you.

My first impression of you is, "God, there is no way he's younger than my son!" I can tell you that my son is eighteen and I believe quite average build for his age. He also has lots of friends, who hang around our house on a regular basis so I think I am quite good at guessing age.

I can see you are very tired and anxious and maybe frightened too. I would like so much to help you, but I can see that you're much older than my son. From your manner, you look more like a young man than the child under sixteen which you're claiming to be.

I am called to this office many times a week and see so many young men like yourself going through this process; and I always wonder why you would want to leave your homeland, a place you grew up in, with all the advantages of knowing how everything works and what you can and can't do, for a place so unknown.

I admit, I haven't lived in our country for a long time and maybe don't have enough knowledge to judge your actions, but I wish you knew the consequences of your move and what is waiting for you.

I hear all these reasons why you had to leave the country and why your life was in danger, and wonder how much of it is true! Does having a different sexual preference or changing your religion, working as a hairdresser, really endanger your life? What if you kept your personal life private, like many people in this country?

While I am pondering all these thoughts, two social workers and a nurse practitioner enter the room and they start their questions. It is the usual story which I have heard so many times and I see that you are trying to answer as best as you can. It takes over an hour. One of the social workers is asking questions, while the other one is taking notes and the nurse is trying to find out about your health.

I don't envy the social workers their role. They have to assess how old you are with these set questions. Most of the time, I can see the doubt in their faces. It must be so difficult to be responsible for these young people's future.

At the end of the session, the workers ask you to wait in another room while they discuss all your answers and decide if you are really fifteen years old and how to plan your care. There are times when this is very easy as I have seen over the years how good social workers can make a decision straight away; but at other times it is very hard to reach that point.

Today is one of those days. The social workers are struggling to reach a conclusion. They even ask for my opinion which is difficult for me. Sometimes I even resent being put in this position. On the one hand I'd like to shout at the

social worker, “How is it possible that you can’t see, there is no way he can be fifteen? Can’t you see the way he talks and behaves?” On the other hand, I feel so responsible for a person from my own country, whether I believe your story or not.

What I don’t understand is what you really came here for. Do you have any idea what hardship is ahead? I have seen so many hopeful young persons like you, leaving family and friends behind, seeking a new life in this country and ending up homeless and depressed, even once at a mental health hospital.

What should I say to help you along this hard path you have chosen? I totally share your vision that you could have a better life in this country; so I wish you the strength to succeed.

# Points of view

Of all the silly things I give people new to writing as exercises, this is my favourite one. It has to be imposed by stealth, and in stages, or it could never happen.

It starts off innocuously enough. “Think of something that means a lot to you. It can’t be a person, and it can’t be intangible. But it can be a place, or any kind of thing. Even an evanescent thing,” (thinking here about a brilliant piece somebody once wrote about a cheesecake).

Well, that seems easy enough. They write happily about this thing, this place or object, why it matters to them, what their relationship is with it.

“Great! Now we’re going to write about the relationship again, but from its point of view.”

Blank — or horrified — stares. How can I write from the point of view of a rhubarb patch, a family Bible — or that cheesecake?

But once they start thinking about it, and more crucially, feeling it, they discover a whole world of risk-free daring and private entertainment. Everybody should try it at least once.

Of course, there’s a serious purpose here too (I was being paid to do this, and they were giving up precious time). Seeing both points of view is a vital part of the interpreter’s work. But it can be very hard for most of us to detach ourselves from our own vantage point, and all the prejudices it brings with it. Any exercise like this can serve to remind us that the more practice we get at seeing the other point of view, the better, and more useful, people we become.

# A library book

## GUIDA

It's so dusty here! So dark, so quiet. After having spent so many years on library shelves, being taken here and there by borrowers, I am now relegated to the Store Room at the Central Library.

It's quite scary here, like the end of the road, the end of a journey, the end of life!?

I hear the murmurs of other books on the shelves, of other cassettes in boxes. "When will we see the light of day again?" they ask the silence that surrounds us. No one, nothing can give an answer to that.

Oh, wait a minute. The door is opening. Who will be picked today? And what for? Has someone discovered we are here and at their disposal? Or...is one of us for the scrap heap?

Please, not me! Not today! I still have so much pleasure to give. I can still be the companion they wish for, the comfort they need.

The steps approach. A tense moment. We all hold our breath. Will it be a celebration or a commiseration? We'll never know. Once out, we might circulate for a while, but the final destination will never be revealed. If they're returned to the Store Room, the rest of us might not be here ourselves to welcome them back.

The steps stop. It's me! It's my turn! The trepidation I'm feeling is hard to describe, as I cannot tell the outcome.

I'm picked up, dusted down and taken out. Oh, the glare! I'd quite forgotten how bright it is out here. I'm carried to the desk. There's still no inkling of what will happen next.

"Put it into that box with the rest. They're to be sent to Caversham for that woman. You know the one." I hear the comment, amusement barely concealed in the croaky voice of the librarian.

"No, I don't!" I yearn to shout. Who? Where? I wish they'd take our feelings into consideration. After all where would they be without us? Jobless? Joyless?

But I'm quite excited at the prospect of travelling to pastures new.  
Will I have met her before? Will she enjoy me or discard me?  
But I'm out and going somewhere. Not my turn to be disposed of.  
I can hardly contain my excitement!

## The Story of a Desk and Chair

KAMALJIT

"We were commissioned by an English vicar, who was going to India to work in the mission in Bombay. You remember!! It was a warm summer as the carpenters worked on the final polish," reminisced the desk looking at the chair.

"They just wanted to sit in the sun. They took forever finishing our polish so they wouldn't have to go inside," replied the chair.

"I'm not surprised, it was cold and damp inside," reminded the desk.

Anyway, no sooner was the polish dried on our backs than we were wrapped to be sent on our way. I recall being loaded on a truck, and then a big ship. The journey across the ocean felt long as the ship rocked and we slid across the floor, bumping into each other. We heaved a sigh of relief when it finally docked and we were unloaded.

I can still remember the sounds and smells that were so different. It was a hot day and the men offloading us sang beautifully, even though they were sweating like pigs. We were loaded on a train and on our way to our final destination.

Finally we arrived at our home for the next 20 years. The vicar would write his sermons on Saturday while his wife sat with a gin and tonic in her hand. He also wrote his secret love letters, which weren't so secret when his wife found one of them in my drawer! And they wrote long letters to their parents and siblings, urging them to visit. Do you remember how they used to toss and turn and fidget while writing? They cried when they read the letters they received, even when the news was good.

Then came a period I'd rather forget. 'The riots for freedom', they called it. People were being killed and houses ransacked and looted. One day our owners packed up what they could in suitcases and left. They couldn't carry us.

Eventually a family moved in and the children did their homework on us. The poor dears were constantly told off or smacked for making any mistakes. "You will not get into any IS colleges if you don't work hard," Dad would tell the boy, though he was only 10. The kids grew up, the girls got married and the boys went away to work. Finally, they also took the parents with them. We were "too old fashioned," remarked the daughter-in-law, and were destined to be sold.

For the next few years we sat collecting dust in a dim and cluttered shop in Chor Bazaar. The owner did his accounts on us, until an odd-looking couple came in to browse. We caught the man's eye and he started asked the shopkeeper if we were for sale. They bartered over us for ages before agreeing on a price.

So we were to relocate again, this time to a small flat in downtown Bombay. It was a real palaver trying to get me up to the 15th floor. They couldn't fit me in the lift and those poor men had to carry me up the stairs. After that we were moved so often I feel dizzy even thinking about it. When I heard that the family was moving to England I felt as if we were going back home. That was the best news I had heard in a long time.

And now we sit in this little room upstairs overlooking the small garden. I love the rays of morning sun at the times she comes to write, but more often to do some alterations on her sewing machine. Since they bought that new desk for the computer we've been left redundant most of the time. She does come in to play the harmonium and the music reminds me of our life in India.

They keep changing things in the house but I hope they don't get rid of us. It feels just right and we don't want to move any more!"

# View of a Patio

ZOE

Here she is again! What is she doing now!! Not sure if I like her or not! She has been here for few years now and every day she is changing me.

Let me introduce myself: I am the patio at the back garden of this old house. I have raised walls on two sides and wide stairs leading to a very, very long lawn area. I have been through many changes, but nobody messes with my look as much as she does.

The house was left empty for quite a while; I was left unattended and wasn't looking my best before she came.

From day one, she is out here at all hours of the day and night, every season, and says good morning to all of us. I say 'us'; that's all the things she has put every where on my surfaces. There is a big metal table, which her husband built for her, a storage bench where she keeps all sorts of things there and sits on when she gets tired on sunny days, and all these large pots full of plants in bright colours.

She won't let us alone, needs to keep everything clean and tidy. So here she is today. It's so much easier now the weather is warming and spring is on its way. I do feel sorry for her when it's cold in the winter months. She still comes out in the morning, shivering, jumping up and down to keep warm or trying to find that sunny corner. She even comes outside when it's raining but keeps to the wall, trying to keep dry; but even then, I can see that she is enjoying the fresh air.

I like it much better in summer time when she is outside all the time and doing different things. She comes out every day, opens the kitchen door and puts on the latch so it stays open for a long time. I like it when I can see inside the house through the kitchen door and see what she is doing. They all come to me, her husband and children. Sometimes, her husband brings out this thing called a 'Barbecue' and makes lots of fuss putting coal on the top. He makes fire and smoke fills everywhere and then I know it must be a special occasion.

She makes sure everything is tidy. Her husband plays with the barbecue trying to get fire going and stop the smoke. I can smell the smoke and see her working

in the kitchen with her yellow gloves on. She keeps coming out and bringing trays of food and utensils for the barbecue. The husband is mostly playing with the fire. When the guests come, they cook foods on that barbecue which smell lovely. The atmosphere is very different on those days. Lots of people called 'her friends' come, and there are children and laughter, sometimes even a 'birthday cake'. There are children running up and down the stairs and sometimes they kick the ball at the flower pots. That upsets her and she tell the children to be careful and not to break the flowers.

Today, she is out quite early in the morning and is taking everything off the patio. We wonder what is going on. We are all whispering to each other and I ask the table, "Hey you table, do you know what is she doing?"

"Of course I know," she says, Miss Know It All! Let me tell you about the table. She thinks she is more important than any of us! Okay, I admit that the table does get lots of attention from her.

She has different cloths for the table for different tasks. Did I tell you that she does this thing called 'painting', when she puts this thick plastic tablecloth on the table and spreads out all her paints, brushes, large canvas, and sits there for hours? We all wonder what she is doing, but only the table can see and know the answer.

At other times, she puts another plastic sheet on the table and then brings out pots and plants and flowers and changes the pots or moves the plants to bigger pots. I think she calls it 'gardening'!

The pretty, colourful cloth only comes out when they have that Barbecue thing and she puts a beautiful vase of flowers in the middle. On these days, you can't even talk to the table. So yes, the table knows everything, and she makes sure everyone knows it too!!

"You are really getting old if you can't remember! It's spring time and each year she brings out that big yellow machine called the 'pressure washer' to clean everywhere," she says.

"Oh, yes, now I remember! It's that time again!" I respond to the table.

Every year, when it gets a bit warmer, I notice that when she comes out in the morning, there is something on her mind. She pushes the pots around or looks at my corners and I wonder what she is thinking. This goes on for a few

days. Then one day, she comes out and moves everything up the stairs on to the grass area. I mean everything, even the table which is heavy so she has to ask someone to help her. Then she brings out bleach and broom and the big yellow machine and here we go. This takes a long time, sometimes even a few days and she keeps stopping and starting again. She will shout at the kids not to come outside until she's finished.

She does this every year and I'm not sure how I feel about it. It is nice to have all the moss and dark winter debris cleaned from my surface but on the other hand, I like my winter coat. It has become familiar and like all old things, it's comforting — and so is she!

# Telephone interpreting

Before we began this work, I had no idea that there was such a thing as telephone interpreting. The idea that two people, geographically perhaps only a couple of miles apart — or even in the same room — could need, and benefit from, the intervention of a total stranger to both of them, thousands of miles away, sounded like fantasy.

Unfortunately, in a world where international travel is easy, and children leave their parents — or parents send their children away — without thinking much about the possible consequences, this support is all too often called for.

The following piece, while long and distressing to read, is also an absolutely compelling illustration not only of what the job is, but of the extraordinary patience, attentiveness and intuition the interpreter has to call on to do it properly. The knowledge that it can be done in slippers, in the emotional comfort of her own home, is reassuring; but it doesn't in any way diminish our respect.

## Handling grief as a telephone interpreter

ZOE

I work as a telephone interpreter every day from home.

I stumbled into this role by accident when a colleague asked for help. Having been educated and trained in computers, I worked as an 'IT Support Officer' for the local probation office for eighteen years before I took redundancy about ten years ago due to office relocation.

While still in my IT job, one day I had a call from a colleague, who was supposed to attend court with an offender from my country, but their interpreter was delayed and she knew that I spoke the same language. After discussing it with my manager, I was allowed to go to court as requested and for the first time used my mother tongue in a professional setting.

Of course, we have all interpreted for friends and family at one time or another. However, on that day, I was helping in a professional capacity and accuracy was very important; I had to really concentrate and interpret each word and sentence correctly, specially in a court environment. I believe that I managed to do a good job and I recall the offender got off with just a fine. My colleague was very grateful and joked that I was wasting my time with IT and should have been a professional interpreter.

In my culture you have to have a proper job, i.e. a doctor or an engineer, or for the girls, usually a teacher. But days later, her words were still playing on my mind.

So, some time after that incident, thinking about my colleague's suggestion, I contacted the local council to see if there were any opportunities for interpreting work. I was pleasantly surprised when I was told that the council was recruiting and they were going to send me an application. (Yes, the old days when you actually had a paper application to complete!!)

A while after I sent the application, I was invited for interview with oral and written tests. I remember that I was very anxious about the written test, specially writing in my own language. By that time, I had been in England over 25 years and did not have many reasons to read or write in my language.

So I went to the interview with lots of apprehension. However, it was a very simple process; a short initial chat, a general enquiry about my background and explaining how the unit works, followed by a written test. Despite my fears, the test was quite straightforward and relatively easy.

There was nothing about interpreting as a job. To be honest, at the time I was not aware of all the necessary skills required for an interpreter's role. In retrospect, I would have thought I might be asked about my experience, whether I knew that the job could at times be very stressful, whether I had the mentality to cope with all the emotional and cultural demands of the role.

All those discoveries were to come.

A few days later I got a phone call informing me that I had passed the test and the council were offering me employment. And that's how I became an interpreter.

At that point, I did not have any training or real understanding what the role involved. There was the job description of course; but when does a job description reflect the actual everyday work?

I started working as a telephone interpreter six years ago. As a telephone interpreter, I work from home and can choose when to work; usually every day, few hours in the morning and some time in the afternoon too.

The work is varied. I get called by GPs, police, social workers, utility services, insurance company, and paramedics, for mental health evaluations and by many other establishments. As a result, I have had to increase my vocabulary in both languages. In fact, before I started my interpreting job, I was more fluent in English than Farsi; I never needed to use my own language for so many different subjects before.

The company I work with is international, which means I also get calls from the USA and Canada. I have a dedicated phone line for this purpose, so when I am logged in, I get calls from professionals who either have their client on the line with them or can connect me to their client via my phone. This is called conferencing or three way communication.

First, the pros: I can work at any time with no fuss or getting ready. I have no overhead or expenses. But the cons are that you are working on your own, with no feedback or backup. It's not very well paid and you have to motivate yourself to log on; there is always something else you want to do (such as writing this story!!)

This particular day started like many others. I worked in the morning but did not have many calls so stopped for lunch and went shopping. When I get back, a call comes in.

It's a woman from a hospital in USA. It would have been first thing in the morning their time.

"Hello, this is Zoe, for Farsi, is your client with you or would you like a dial out?" I ask.

"Hello, my name is Susan and I am a specialist nurse practitioner, calling from St Joseph's Hospital from the Organ Donor Registration department."

"Good morning." (I always check their time on my screen for the right greeting).  
"How can I help?"

“We shall be calling a lady called Mrs Shah, whose son passed away early this morning, to discuss a possible organ donation process, as he was registered for organ donation. This is a very delicate issue and might take some time; I just want you to be prepared as it could get very emotional and take a long time.”

“Thank you for letting me know. I don’t have any previous experience in this field but will try my best to assist you; would you like me to connect you to your client?” I say.

“No, thank you, I will connect us. Could you please introduce me to the lady and then we will continue,” she adds.

“Thank you, I’m ready; please go ahead,” I say. While she is dialling, I quickly grab some water and make sure that I have pen and enough paper ready. As I hear the numbers been dialled and the dialling tone, I’m feeling slightly anxious.

I do get lots of calls everyday from all over the UK, USA and Canada and I always find it somewhat strange that I am sitting at home on my dining table, in my slippers, in the Home Counties of England, thousands of miles away; and there they are, these two ladies, who as far as I know live in the same city only a few miles from each other, and they are relying on me to help them to understand and communicate with each other.

When I’m connected, I hear a woman’s voice saying, “Hello. Hello,” I say in my language: “I am a Farsi interpreter and I have Susan from the hospital. She would like to talk to you and I’ll be helping you with the conversation.” Her voice is slightly hoarse; I can sense that she is upset. It’s early in the morning for her, so I feel I need to be even more alert.

“Thank you; what is this about?” she asks me.

“The lady is on the line,” I say in English to Susan, “Please go ahead.”

“Hello, my name is Susan. Firstly, may I express condolence for your sad loss? I am a specialist nurse practitioner, calling from the Hospital, from the Organ Donor Registration department.”

I interpret this back to Mrs Shah, while wondering if the lady has any understanding of the translated words ‘Organ Donor’. As far as I know, this is not a common practice in this country, let alone in ours. So I just wait for Mrs Shah’s response.

“Why are you calling? I really don’t want to talk to anyone and I don’t know what this Organ Donation is about,” she tells me. I’m not sure whether she is upset or annoyed, so I just repeat her words in English.

Susan perseveres: “I do apologise; I know it’s not a good time, but if you could spare me a few minutes I can explain the reason for my call.”

Mrs Shah replies, “I don’t really want to speak to anyone, we just came back from the hospital, and I’ve lost my dear son...”

By now I can hear that she’s crying. While I interpret this to Susan, I am at a loss what I should do. I am glad that we are only connected by phone and not the advanced technology of Skype. This would have been so much more emotional if it had been a face to face session. These two women are on the other side of the world, so close to each other and yet relying on me, sitting in my living room and so far away, to make the connection between them. It’s so hard not been able to speak the language of the community you live in. How much easier and more effective their conversation could have been. I feel so responsible, and determine to try to convey everything, not just the spoken words.

I relay the message; Susan and I wait for a few seconds to give her some time to settle.

Then Susan continues: “I am very sorry for your loss, Mrs Shah, and you have our sincere sympathy — but if you allow me, there is a very important issue I need to discuss with you and also it’s a matter of time, which we don’t have a lot of at the moment.”

“What is this all about? I told you I don’t want to speak to anyone!” and then she says to me very crossly, “You tell this foreign woman I will not talk to her!”

My job is to provide a service to best of my abilities. It’s my responsibility to interpret everything that is said, but as Susan can’t understand our language, I have to convey the message, while still somehow maintaining a polite tone. So I keep my voice very neutral as I do so.

“I totally understand, and I wouldn’t be troubling you if it was not a matter of urgency,” responds Susan calmly. I must hand it to her so far; she has a very soothing voice, I think she is middle-aged, as it’s not a young voice. She must have had lots of training and experience, to be able to continue in such a professional manner.

“Okay, but you have to be quick as there’s a lot to do, and I’m very tired.” Then addressing me, “They will not give up, these people, just tell her to get on with it!” I can hear the frustration and their total anguish in her voice.

“Thank you so much; I do understand your situation. As I mentioned, I am a specialist nurse practitioner, calling from the Organ Donor Registration at the hospital. When a patient passes away at our hospital, it’s my duty to check the patient’s name in the national database and find out if they are registered for organ donation.”

Trying to be as accurate as possible, I always take notes when the parties are talking, so I’m writing with one hand and holding the handset on loudspeaker with the other. I write each response in the language in which it’s said. However, it’s very difficult to convey long sentences or paragraphs. Sometimes the clients are aware of this fact, but I’m not sure if Susan knows about it. She has been talking for a few minutes without stopping, and I’m anxious if I should interrupt to translate. Also, in my experience it is not good for the other party to just sit there with no interaction for long periods. It’s my responsibility to manage the flow of the conversation.

So at this point I mention to Susan: “Would you mind pausing there?”

“Yes, of course,” says Susan, and then I relay the sentence to Mrs Shah.

“What has this got to do with us?” she replies impatiently, waiting for us to get to the point.

Susan continues, “I was just about to explain. Last night after the final assessment on your son, when his death was established and he was officially declared as deceased...” There is a pause, and I’m about to relay this, but Susan carries on, “...I was asked to search our database for his name, and that’s how I discovered that he had registered to be an organ donor — should anything ever happen to him.”

As I relay the message, I hear an intake of breath from Mrs Shah. Finally she replies: “I’m lost for words...” I can hear her crying now, and then she adds, “This is the first I’ve heard about this. How can you even be thinking of calling us at this time, talking about this kind of subject?” Then she adds to me: “Don’t these people have any compassion?”

Meanwhile I've been writing the whole time, taking notes and drinking my water. Even though I get many terrible phone calls every day, and most of the time my calls are from clients who are having difficulties, this one is affecting me more than usual. I can hear Mrs Shah crying, and hearing what she is saying in my own language is more upsetting than translating it into English. But I also empathise with Susan and the hard task she has been given.

Yet all I can do is to tell her what Mrs Shah has said.

Susan presses on. "I do understand that this may be the first time you are hearing about your son being an organ donor, and this is a very common..." She pauses and then, "I'm aware of the circumstances of your son's tragic death, and I know that he had been unwell for a long time. I can appreciate how hard it must have been for you and your family."

"Yes, my poor son..." says Mrs Shah, and she breaks down again. After a few seconds: "It's not fair that he should die at such age; you don't know what we've been through this last year," she adds in a tearful voice.

I start interpreting, just to give Mrs Shah few minutes to recover a bit; I can sense that my own voice is also a bit unsteady. I am a mother of three and keep thinking how hard this must be for anyone, let alone for a mother. I'm also wondering how old the son was. I'm sure Susan is also upset for the lady as she says; "I absolutely can understand; this is just an initial consultation, I'm only calling to ask for you to consider giving your permission for us to start the process of fulfilling your son's wish..."

"I really can't think about anything right now! We only came home early this morning. My husband is not very well himself. We shouldn't have to go through this situation at our age," Mrs Shah reiterates.

I can sense the suffering and the desperation in the poor woman's voice with the passing of each minute, but what can I do? I am only a vessel and don't have any real power to ease her pain or stop the conversation. So I carry on translating.

"Indeed, Mrs Shah," says Susan. "Sometimes we cannot understand all the sad things that happen in life. Your son must have been a wonderful person, and it would be best to concentrate on all the good things he did..." and she pauses here but I get the sense that there is more, and wait. "He must have been so kind to register for organ donation," continues Susan.

"He was such good boy, so helpful to everyone. He would take us to the doctor's and shopping. We're getting old and he was such a considerate child..." and her voice is gone again.

I sense that it's a good time to start interpreting to give Mrs Shah to recover.

"I am sure he must have been a great person; he must have loved you so much to be able to do all that for you. He wanted to help you... and I can only sympathise with your loss... So, wouldn't it be great if his kindness continued after his life with helping others? Do you think that would have been his purpose when he registered for organ donation?" Susan keeps on.

"You didn't know my son; he was so good to us. Even when he found he had cancer, he would carry on coming to our house, help his Dad who is not very well himself..." Then in a tearful voice, "What are we to do now? Who is going to look after us?"

While I am translating, I can't stop thinking that all this poor woman wants is to carry on talking about her loss; maybe she's not really hearing what Susan is saying and where this conversation is going.

"Can I ask if you have any other children or family near you? You need support at this time," replies Susan.

"No, he was our only child... What are we to do now? We don't have any family here; we only left our country because of my son, so we could be near him. We sent him to this country so he could have a good future. You know how much it costs to send your child abroad!" says Mrs Shah, this time to me. She is very upset again.

I do understand what she is saying, as it happens so often with people from my country. Parents sacrifice so much for their children to give them what they think will be a better life. It is a strain both financially, where they save hard for their children's education, and emotionally, all the sorrow of separation and then even perhaps uprooting from their own country to be with their children, often in old age.

I translate not this, but her words, to Susan and add Mrs Shah's comment addressing me. I am involved here but I'm not sure how to respond. I'm not allowed to express an opinion, but I also don't wish to ignore or upset Mrs Shah any further by not responding to her; so I'm hoping that Susan will pick up on that.

“Of course, Mrs Shah; I’m a mother myself and totally understand that we all do absolutely everything we can for our children. I know this is a very hard time for you.” And then she finally adds the thing I have been hoping to hear.

“Could I ask if you were planning to visit the hospital today? Then perhaps we could meet at some point. I would really like to be able to explain, and show you everything we do in person. And also to give you a chance to talk to your husband about it and consider fulfilling your son’s wish. Though I have to stress that time is very important, and we need to know your decision as soon as possible. I’ll leave my contact details with you and perhaps you could let me know when you’ll be coming to the hospital? I’ll make sure to come and visit you there.”

Again, it’s a long sentence but I don’t say anything as I sense that Susan is trying to conclude the conversation. So I translate to Mrs Shah.

“Thank you so much for your understanding; and yes, I think that would be best. I have to wait for my husband to wake up and see how we’re going to get to the hospital as we can’t drive. I hope to call you later today.”

Getting all the contact details and passing them to Mrs Shah takes a long time. Then we go through all the necessary greetings at the end of the conversation and wish them both a good day.

While I am asking Mrs Shah and Susan “if there is anything else I can help them with,” I wonder what else there could be, and who I am, even suggesting that I could even help with anything?

I am left with this sense of sadness for a mother’s loss and a woman in a distant country who may be doing this hard task every day. I just hope I was useful and did bring these two people, even for a very short time, together.

I will never know the outcome of this one hour’s conversation; all I can do is hope that I was able to help, and then...

...my phone rings again.

# Biographies

## SAN MAYA GURUNG

My husband and I arrived in England in November 2006 to visit our daughter. As my husband is a former British Gurkha soldier, who fought in the Indonesian conflict from 1960 to 1964, we applied for leave to remain. Fifteen months later, a rejection letter came. After appealing, we then waited for another two years to get leave to remain. During those waiting periods, since I could not work, I assisted the other Gurkha veterans by interpreting for them and filling up forms. In January 2010, I started working for RBC as a Nepali interpreter and with Mothertongue from March 2014.

## GUIDA SHIELDS

My name is Margarida (Guida) Shields and I was born and brought up in Lisbon, Portugal. From an early age communicating in more than one language was a familiar situation for me, as some of my visiting cousins could only speak in English. Having arrived in the UK after getting married, I went on to have four children with whom I only ever speak in Portuguese. Over the years I sporadically interpreted when needed. As time went by I found myself more and more drawn towards interpreting. I felt I could be of help to people who otherwise could not make their voices heard. Thirty years on I still get a great sense of achievement out of making a difference in people's lives.

## SUMAYA BAKSH

I started as a volunteer with Mothertongue and went on to become a mental health interpreter for the organisation. I now work as a journalist.

## KAMALJIT DOSANJH

I was born and brought up in an Indian Punjabi village. I came to England as a teenager with my family and settled in Leicester where I did my secondary and further education. I got married and followed my husband around the world as an expat. Finally coming back to England, I settled down in Reading with my husband and daughter.

Throughout my travels I did bits of voluntary work but only when I got to Reading did I really focus on working in the community. I have always enjoyed helping others, as I myself often needed help from others.

## JOANNA MUNGAI

I graduated as a Clinical Psychologist from the University of Warsaw. After graduation I worked as a Child Psychologist for a couple of years in public and non-government Polish institutions. I didn't plan to emigrate but traveling became a very significant part of my life. I lived and raised my family in Finland, in Canada and now in the UK. Every country I lived in has developed me spiritually and has given me a lot of experience. I love meeting new people from different cultures.

In 2011 I started my cooperation with Mothertongue as an interpreter and I am immensely proud to be a member of this organisation. I also work for other interpreting agencies including Reading Borough Council and Surrey County Council where I have an opportunity to help people who struggle to communicate in English and to provide support for them.

First and foremost, I am the proud mother of four delightful teenagers and every day I learn something new about what it is to raise my children in a society which is different from my culture of origin.

## ZOE ZALTASH

After leaving Iran at a young age nearly forty years ago and intending to go back after finishing higher education, I am still living in England! Working in IT for over two decades, I accidentally stumbled into interpreting. For the last ten years I have been working as a freelance interpreter with various organisations, covering all aspect of interpreting, in environments such as the NHS, mental health institutions, the police and courts, both as a face to face and telephone interpreter. Having first hand experience of the difficulties of living in a foreign country, I try to help others in the best way possible, and I enjoy all aspects of my role immensely.



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Mothertongue multi-ethnic counselling service was established in 2000. It is a culturally and linguistically sensitive professional counselling service which provides counselling to people from black and ethnic minority backgrounds in their preferred language. It has run a dedicated Mental Health Interpreting Service since 2009.

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