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A Short History of the Pause

The interpreter's booth at the Hallvard Summit was, by common consent, the only room in the building where anything of consequence happened, and Ilse Marquand had occupied it for eleven years without once being mentioned in a communiqué. This suited her. Interpreters, like good plumbing, are noticed only when they fail, and Ilse's professional vanity, such as it was, consisted entirely in never having been noticed.

She had, over those eleven years, developed a private taxonomy of silence. There was the silence of a delegate who has lost his place in his notes, which lasts roughly four seconds and is accompanied by the small percussive sound of paper. There was the silence of simultaneous translation itself, that half-second lag between a sentence being spoken and its arrival in another language, which laymen mistake for hesitation and professionals know to be the width of the world. And there was the third kind, the rarest, which Ilse had encountered perhaps a dozen times: the silence in which a speaker, having said something he cannot retract, discovers in real time what it means.

It was this third silence that fell at 14:52 on the second afternoon, when the Minister for Maritime Affairs of one delegation, a tall, courteous man with the slightly embattled dignity of someone whose portfolio nobody at home could define, concluded a lengthy intervention on fishing quotas with a sentence that, in his own language, was an idiom of mild exasperation, and in literal translation was an unambiguous threat.

Ilse heard it. She heard it in the original, with its shrug of weariness, and she heard, a fraction of a second later, its other possible life in the language she was about to speak. The two versions lay before her like a fork in a road she had a quarter of a second to choose between. Fidelity to the words would be a betrayal of the meaning; fidelity to the meaning would require her to say something the man had not, strictly, said. Either way, somebody would be entitled to feel deceived.

What she did instead has since been described, by the one colleague who understood what had happened, as the longest pause in the history of the booth. It lasted, by the recording, one and nine-tenths of a second. In that interval the Minister, hearing nothing in his earpiece and glancing up at the glass, caught the interpreter's eye, and saw in it not reproach, nor panic, but something closer to a question. He heard, perhaps for the first time, his own sentence as a stranger might hear it. He cleared his throat, and said, in his own language, "That is to say, we would find such an outcome deeply regrettable," which Ilse rendered at

once, with evident relief, into a phrase that nobody in the room would remember by dinner.

The summit concluded without incident. The communiqué, drafted at three in the morning by people who had stopped reading what they wrote, spoke of constructive dialogue. The Minister retired two years later and took up watercolours. Ilse continued in the booth for a further decade, and was never, to the end of her career, mentioned anywhere.

She did, however, keep one souvenir: a note, passed through the booth's hatch during the afternoon coffee break, in the Minister's angular handwriting. It consisted of a single word, in her language rather than his, with a small, careful drawing beside it of a fork in a road. The word was "Thank". He had, she assumed, run out of time before the "you". She found that she preferred it that way, and understood that he had known she would.