

The First Two Pages of “The Interpreter and the Killer” by Jeff Soloway
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An Essay by Jeff Soloway

In her introduction to my story, the editor of *Ellery Queen* notes that its heroine “has a job we’re surprised we have not seen in crime stories submitted to this magazine. She’s a court translator...” The better term for my heroine’s job is actually *court interpreter* (interpreters speak, translators write), but either way, the job is unusual. So right from the start of the story, I wanted to introduce both the heroine’s weird job and the weird kind of person she has to deal with. Here’s the opening:

I met Antonio, the trial’s star witness, in the proffer room of the Brooklyn courthouse. The prosecutor had prepared me beforehand. Before his arrest, Antonio had resorted to plastic surgery to try to disguise his identity, and apparently the cartel had trouble retaining the best medical talent. His face was now just wrong, the chin and cheekbones unnaturally heavy, the nose and brows jutting off-kilter. It was like a child’s drawing of a face, detailed but completely inaccurate.

The story is told in the first person, so it’s important to note that the observations are Maria’s, not the author’s (or not *just* the author’s). That Antonio had plastic surgery to disguise his identity highlights the seriousness of the crimes he committed and the dangers he faced and still faces, but that Maria sees the outcome as failed and shoddy—like “a child’s drawing”—suggests also that she also feels a little sorry for him.

This sense of Maria's empathy leads directly to the next two paragraphs, in which Maria names her job explicitly and then states what to her is the job's main requirement and what to me, as the writer, is the story's central idea:

I'm a licensed federal Spanish interpreter, and my skills are mostly needed on international drug-trafficking cases, like this one, though this one dwarfs them all. You could fill a soccer stadium with all the snitching drug mules, bagmen, message-boys, and enforcers I've interpreted for.

You probably think they're the scum of the earth. Not me. I feel for them. It's my job.

At this point, the reader has been introduced to the two main characters, a human monster and a woman whose work requires her to feel for the monster. Later she will explain why—but not quite yet, because I hope to keep the reader wondering about her odd declaration.

Throughout the next paragraphs, the prosecutor urges Antonio to talk, while Antonio refuses.

I waved at Antonio, knowing he was prohibited from shaking my hand. Sonia, the federal prosecutor who had hired me, asked him to give me a preview of his testimony. Like all prosecutors, Sonia believes in making both the witness and the interpreter practice beforehand. She wants the testimony delivered just so, and she never forgets that what the jury hears actually comes from the interpreter, not the witness, whom they can't understand.

Antonio shook his head.

Sonia leaned over the desk, flirty and menacing at the same time. She's half-Argentinian and speaks excellent Spanish. "Antonio, sweetheart! We had a deal. Ask your lawyer."

Antonio's lawyer leaned back against the wall and shrugged. The DEA guy just stared. He spoke only English.

Antonio stared down at hands that were scarred and swollen from incidents I could only imagine. “I told the last interpreter.”

According to Sonia, the last interpreter had suddenly quit, just after hearing Antonio’s story. In desperation, Sonia offered me three times my normal fee to take over. My father, over the phone, had advised against it. “This trial is in the *Times*,” he announced. “Keep away from it. The courthouse is located in Brooklyn. Do you live near Brooklyn? Avoid the entire borough. El Guiso is the vilest murderer in South American history, and I include Pizarro.”

The tension here is rising. The lawyer wants Antonio to tell his story, which is apparently gruesome enough that it convinced a previous interpreter to quit; Antonio refuses. The description of his “scarred and swollen” hands adds to the feeling of menace, as do the remembered warnings from Maria’s father about Antonio’s boss: “El Guiso is the vilest murderer in South American history, and I include Pizarro.”

At this point, I should note that, though this story was rather obviously inspired by the famous El Chapo case, which was tried in New York City in 2018, it makes only the vaguest references to its fictional kingpin’s origins. Here it’s suggested that El Guiso is from South America. In original drafts El Guiso, like El Chapo, was Mexican, but I felt that mirroring the real-life case too closely would distract the readers with a kind of roman à clef game I wasn’t interested in—and just an important, I read this in the author’s guidelines to *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*: “do not send us stories based on actual crimes, for instance, or other real-life events.” This persuaded me to work a little harder to distinguish El Guiso

from El Chapo. I ended up submitting the story to *Ellery Queen* instead of *Alfred Hitchcock*, but I figured other crime-fiction editors might have a similar preference.

And maybe here I should make another confession. The general background of the story—south-of-the-border drug lord tried in New York City—is not the only thing I stole from real life (author guidelines notwithstanding). My thefts got much more specific. In fact, the idea of empathy being an interpreter's defining characteristic—the idea that centers the story and even prodded me to write it in the first place—that wasn't mine either. It was my friend's. She's a court interpreter herself, of course, but beyond that, she's the very best kind of writer's friend, a charming and skillful talker who finds her job as fascinating as it really is. (She will, of course, only talk about court matters that have become public record.)

Many fine writers snag their best premises, plots, and ideas from interesting friends, family, colleagues, or drunken acquaintances. Or at least I hope so, because I do. My spouse once wrote a travel guide to Bolivia and Ecuador; I got three novels out of that. Now she investigates police misconduct, which is even better from my point of view. Writers like Ernest Hemingway and Graham Greene managed to lead exciting and interesting lives; the rest of us have to find inspiration and background where we can.

Back to the story. After one more fruitless threat/encouragement from the prosecutor, it's time for Maria, my main character, to step forward:

“Antonio,” I said. “Tell me. Only me. Those two tight-asses can go have a meeting with their phones. Right?”

Antonio's attorney gritted his teeth, but nodded. He had negotiated Antonio's deal.

Antonio squinted at me across the room. He'd been in protective custody for more than a year. Staring everyday at nothing but the blank wall five feet away ruins a lot of prisoners' eyesight. “No.”

I'd seen this before. Antonio was embarrassed not just by his crimes but by the disgust they provoked. I thought I could ease his self-consciousness. I sat down, lay my hand on the table, and brought it as close to his as I dared. The DEA guy stared; both lawyers turned away and backed off. They knew how I worked.

The detail about a prisoner's eyesight being ruined after years in a cell is another gift from my friend, one that perfectly (to my mind) heightens Antonio's grotesqueness and his vulnerability. Maria, who has until now simply observed the action, is now using all her skill to take control. She brings her hand close to his, though not quite touching, in a gesture meant to be both kind and manipulative. A court interpreter is rarely the most powerful person in the room, but if Maria is to be the center of a mystery story, she needs to make things happen. Antonio is unable to resist.

But just before we hear Antonio's long-delayed story, Maria finally answers the question set in the reader's mind in the previous page, as to why a good court interpreter needs above all to be empathetic:

Every decent interpreter has a nimble mind and effortless fluency in two languages, but what the best possess is empathy. An interpreter without a deep and intuitive understanding of her subject—without a sense of who her subject is and how he speaks and thinks—is like a driver navigating unfamiliar roads. She can't operate at speed. She can't anticipate speech patterns, word choices, verbal stumbles. She can't do her job.

But can Maria, or any of us, truly empathize with such a brutal murderer, whose crimes turn out to be every bit as bad as she (or the reader) could have imagined? We will see by the end of the story.

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Jeff Soloway is a recipient of the Robert L. Fish Memorial Award for Best First Mystery Story and the author of the Travel Writer mystery series. His short fiction has appeared in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, various Mystery Writers of America anthologies, and elsewhere. His latest novel, *The Ex-President: A Travel Writer Mystery* (Penguin/Random Alibi), is about a controversial rightwing ex-reality-television-star President who leaves office and then decides to make a comeback.