

The Case of the Missing Neckline

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He looked at the woman sitting in front of him, her head tilting this way and that, silently mouthing something that he almost, but did not quite recognize. Then suddenly, her chin dropped, her eyebrows popped up, her gaze directly at him. Aha! He was being asked a question. He knew it. But where was it coming from? What was it? His eyes moved down, down below her chin, or so he thought. That *was* the end of her chin, right? Her neck flowed down beneath, then a sea of skin-tone that spread out in all directions, as far as the eye could see. He sensed there was something going on, something of deep significance. Time seemed to stop. His eyes shot back up to her face. It had stopped moving. Her eyebrows were still raised. She looked back at him intently. He *was* being asked a question. He felt the eyes of everyone in the room staring at him, waiting for his answer. But what? What was the question?! He started to get desperate. Where, oh where were her hands? He knew they had to be attached to her body. How could they be so close, yet so far away? He looked down again, furtively searching for the background to meaning. For the neckline. The elusive neckline. The line of reasoning. The line of understanding. The line below which meaning transpired. The line that meant the shore upon which he could plant his feet, and above which was the ocean, the sea, that same sea of skin, swirling expanses of the same hue. If he could reach the shore, meaning would become clear. If...if the sand was of the right color. Would he know it when he saw it? Would the difference be so obvious that anything passing in front of it would stand out, beckoning him with meaning like the pulses of light from the lighthouse? He cast his eyes farther down, and suddenly it appeared. It was perhaps three, maybe four inches from where her chin appeared to end. He breathed a sigh of relief when he realized the marked contrast from what lay above. And then, not three inches below that, were the hands. The right index finger was crooked, showing that indeed, he had just been asked a question. It was frozen, waiting for his reply. What to do? Should he ask her to repeat the question? Should he ask the speaker to repeat the question? It was a yes/no question. Should he take a guess and have a 50/50 chance of getting it right? All of the sudden, he remembered the scarf his fiancé

had given him last week for his birthday. It was chilly that morning, and he had stuck it in his pocket before he left the house. It was just the right color. Should he give it to her and ask her to wrap it around her neck? Would that be too obvious? His mind was a swirl with the options as he pondered the consequences. Oh why couldn't she have just worn a top with a higher neckline, saving him the angst of not understanding, of not being able to see her signs and her grammar at the same time, of the consternation of having to weigh so many options just to answer a simple yes/no question, all of which could have been avoided if she had just chosen a different shirt that morning. He thought of how many times this scene had played itself out in his own life and in the lives of countless other deaf-blind people. What was the solution? Add a tenet to the Code of Professional Conduct stating that interpreters working with deaf-blind people must wear tops with high enough necklines in addition to being of a highly contrasting color? Add a course to interpreting programs on appropriate interpreting attire? Have the Office of Civil Rights issue a bag to all deaf-blind people containing scarves or shirts in a variety of colors so they may re-outfit their interpreters so they can see them? The thoughts raged on. His heart started to pound. The attendees in the room awaited his reply. He glanced down at his watch. The program had been underway for less than a minute. ■



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For more information on Deaf-Blind interpreting, see the Deaf-Blind member section page on the RID Web site, or check out the National Task Force on Deaf-Blind Interpreting at www.deafblindinterpreting.org.