We Have Always Spoken Panglish

by Suzette Haden Elgin

"Oh ha, Alyssa! You look like a flower blooming; you move over the land like a white sailboat over the sea; sweet fragrant grass springs up under your feet as you pass; you bring radiant light with you!"

"Oh ha, Bru," I said to him. "Oh ha, Fadrien," I said to his wife. And that was *all* I said. It was hard enough to have to listen to the Yegerrian expats' endless compliments-of-greeting with a straight face; I only tried to produce them myself when I was meeting a Yegerrian for the first time and in my official capacity. I had memorized one relatively brief example for that purpose: "You bring pleasant images to my mind; you distract me from my cares." I used it the way we've always used "It's a pleasure to meet you" in Panglish, and with an equal lack of commitment to honesty.

To be fair, the compliments didn't sound quite so bad when they were spoken in the Yegerrians' native language. In Beydini they had to rhyme, and that was at least pleasant for the ear. But in Panglish? What they remind me of most strongly is the flowery compliments ancient French used for closing personal letters, all about thousands of warm embraces and thousands of faithful vows and pretty little cabbages. They're a nuisance and a waste of time, but no one has had any luck convincing the Yegerrians to leave them out when they're speaking Panglish.

The Beydini language doesn't deserve U.S. Corps of Linguists fieldwork; there's no need for a detailed study of yet one more run-of-the-mill humanoid subject/verb/object language. We can all safely assume that USCOL's interest is linked not to linguistic theory but to the current administration's political agenda. But I'm not complaining—not when I have a luxury posting like this one. Seagarden, on the planet Estrada-Blair, is every linguist's dream assignment. (Well, every *lazy* linguist's dream assignment!) Seagarden is an elegant modern city, right on an ocean very much like Earth's Mediterranean Sea, but with pleasanter weather. Lovely restaurants and museums and shops and parks … broad streets lined with beautiful homes in the full range of galactic styles from Ancient Classical to Pseudo-Stochastic … Who could complain? If I'd been posted to the planet Yegerry, way out behind the end of nowhere, I would have complained nonstop. But USCOL isn't about to spend the money *that* would cost, not when they can so much more cheaply send me here to the expat district on Estrada-Blair. My only problem has been how to do my fieldwork with the Yegerrians slowly enough to extend my stay in this wonderful place, but not so slowly that I make them suspicious back in Washington. I've had a delightful two weeks, and I intend to keep my head down and drag this assignment out for just as long as I can.

This evening, Bru and Fadrien were taking me out to dinner. It would be my first opportunity to see the vast slum called Benedict's Gate, behind the high wall that separates it from the rest of Seagarden. I saw Benedict's Gate as I flew in, of course, just before landing; it seemed to go on forever, and I'm told that in fact it covers almost ten square miles. It's a rectangle, bounded on two sides by high white cliffs, on a third by the ocean, and on the other by the boundary wall. The people who live there look, physically, just like the people beyond the wall; the difference is that the Losheffas from the slum look (and are) desperately poor, and the Hisheffas from beyond the wall look (and are) pleasantly wealthy. (In Sheffa Panglish, "beyond the wall" is a phrase that means "expensive and highly valued," as in "That house is truly beyond the wall, but I plan to buy it anyway.") Sheff is divided only by a gulf of money and material things and privilege, and that suffices; every Sheffan city has its boundary wall in honor of that gulf. There are no Midsheffas, just the high and the low. I doubt that the system can be justified in any system of Terran morality; but then I don't know much about it. I'm here to work with Beydini, not with Sheffa

Panglish, and I give my full attention to the Yegerrians.

We got into Benedict's Gate by going through an *actual* gate built into the boundary wall. It was a windowless white-walled tunnel with barriers at each end, staffed by two hulking robots programmed to keep us moving briskly along.

"It takes a lot longer going the other direction," Fadrien told me. I liked Fadrien; I wouldn't have wanted to live the way she lived, with nothing to do but shop and go out for fancy lunches with her friends and follow Bru around on request, but I liked her all the same. She was good company, and she was always willing to answer yet one more silly question about Beydini verbs.

"Is Benedict's Gate worth the trouble?" I asked her. More importantly, I thought, is the restaurant worth the trouble? I was more interested in food than in slum architecture.

"Would we be taking you there if it wasn't?" she said, smiling at me. "You'll see. Any minute now, when the barrier goes up."

I wasn't prepared for what I saw then, in spite of having watched a long training threedy for Seagarden back on Earth. In the threedy the slum had looked colorful and busy and exotic—and slightly tacky. Up close and real, it was different; it took your breath away. I stood there staring at it, and then after a minute or two I realized that the Yegerrians were watching me the way I'd watch a giraffe at the zoo, amused by my totally unprofessional reaction, and I snapped out of it in a hurry. Linguists aren't supposed to be subject to trances of astonishment.

"That's amazing," I said. "How is it done? I seem to remember from the pre-post briefing that they use mud … But is that right? It doesn't seem likely, somehow."

"Well, it's a special *kind* of mud," Bru said. "Not Earth mud—not Yegerry mud either. The Losheffans mix it with different liquids, depending on the color they're after, and they stabilize it somehow—sorry, I don't remember the details—and then they spread it over the walls in all those patterns and borders. It goes on nonstop, I guess; no matter when you come here, even late at night, you'll see Losheffans working at it. I think their goal is for every vertical surface except the windows—they don't like to obstruct the view through the windows—to be a work of art. Whether they succeed, I'm not qualified to say; tastes differ. Fadrien thinks it's gorgeous, and I'm inclined to agree."

In all directions, the buildings and walls stretched away from us, covered with the glowing patterns of color. Sometimes the patterns were flowers or birds or ocean waves, sometimes they were simple geometric shapes, sometimes they were fractals; sometimes they looked like calligraphy, but not in any language I was familiar with. Sometimes they were truly alien and I wasn't at all sure how to classify them. Every detail seemed to me to be carefully chosen … nothing glaring, nothing shocking, nothing tawdry; always, the choices were subtle and harmonious.

"I've seen some of those patterns before," I said slowly, "but I don't remember where."

Fadrien laughed. "You've seen them on Hisheffan dishes and curtains and shirts and swimsuits," she said. "The Hisheffans are very fond of them."

I nodded, remembering. "Like the shirt I bought yesterday."

"Yes."

"Do they pay the Losheffan artists when they use the patterns?"

"Oh, no," she said. "*You* know how they are."

"Losheffans start working on this stuff when they're just toddlers," Bru told me. "They practice with plain mud on flat rocks until some adult says they're good enough to move on to the real thing."

"Everybody does this?"

He shrugged, and looked at Fadrien, who shook her head to tell him she didn't know either. "So far as I recall, it's everybody," he said. "If anybody is excluded … or maybe just doesn't want to be involved, and doesn't take part … I don't know about it. I never thought about it before, Alyssa. I'm afraid I'm not very interested in the Losheffans."

"Oh? Why not?"

"Well … It's interesting that they want to make the slum attractive to look at, I suppose, but it's still a slum. A ghetto, really. I'm not interested, basically, in people who don't care enough to try to get ahead in their world."

*How do you **know** they don't try?* I thought, but I kept still. When I was with Bru and Fadrien I was on duty, and the more shallow I kept our conversations, the better. Sightseeing. The weather. Food. And the words and grammar of Beydini, of course; in that one area, it was safe not to be shallow, as long as I was careful not to say anything about how ordinary and *typical* the language was.

"I hope you don't think Bru is a snob," Fadrien said then, sounding a little uneasy, which meant that my body language was giving me away in spite of my best intentions. I'd been finding it a little hard to maintain my professional persona with the Yegerrian expatriates, because I kept losing my awareness that they weren't Terrans. It's easy to stay "on duty" when the creatures you're interacting with have two heads or look like giant caterpillars or some such thing. When they're like the Yegerrians and the Sheffans, and they look and talk just like the people you know at home, it's not so simple. So Yegerrians have two appendixes instead of one, and their pancreas is located in their upper chest, and their hair is always curly … so the Sheffans are a bit taller than Terrans and have six toes instead of five … they both could still move right into any home or office on Earth and never be spotted as ETs.

"Of course I don't think he's a snob," I said, trying to sound entirely casual, no judgment of any kind implied. "He's a physicist—why should he be interested in the people of Benedict's Gate? Fortunately, however, even physicists are interested in *food.* Which way to the restaurant?"

It was close by, close enough that we decided to walk. The streets were narrow and twisting and crowded; the buildings that lined them were rarely separated from the sidewalks by more than a flat steppingstone under the front door. And calling the walkways "sidewalks" was using the term loosely, since they were so narrow that we had to walk in single file. I wasn't surprised. In any slum where the population keeps growing but the boundaries are fixed, so that space grows ever more precious, that happens, and is in no way unusual. There *was* something unusual, however, and it wasn't just the decoration: Benedict's Gate was the first *clean* slum I had ever seen. Since endangered languages ordinarily are spoken by *poor* people, I've worked in dozens of slums, and I'd never seen a truly clean one before. Benedict's Gate was grotesquely crowded, and in many ways very strange-looking, but the word "squalid" just didn't apply. Which meant that the word "slum" didn't apply either, strictly speaking, because "Squalid" is one of the defining semantic characteristics of "slum"…

Oops. That line of thought wouldn't do—I must *not* let myself get interested in Benedict's Gate or its inhabitants. That was always a danger when you did fieldwork; USCOL sent you to find out about the Whuffledinger verbs, but you found the Whuffledingers living among the Baffleclangers, and *their* verbs turned out to be far more interesting than the ones assigned to you, so you thought you'd just look at two or three of them, just gathering knowledge for the sake of knowledge, what could be more pure? And first thing you knew, you were deeply into the analysis of the Baffleclangers' language and far behind with the job you were being paid a very handsome salary to do. There was no quicker way to find yourself assigned—permanently—to a desk in Washington, D.C.

Focus on the restaurant, Alyssa.

The Lavender Lamp Cafe was a small square building with a tiny front courtyard and a door opening directly into the dining room. A lavender lamp hung over the door, justifying the name, and the decorative patterns were rows of white-tipped ocean waves in various shades from the palest lavender to deep purple. Not my favorite colors but pleasant enough.

"How do they make the mud-colors *glow* like that?" I asked Bru as we went inside.

He shrugged. "I have no idea," he said. "Something about the native soil, I suppose, or something they put in the liquids they mix it with. We can ask somebody while we're here, if you like. The family that runs this place is always willing to join a conversation."

"No," I said. "Thanks, but it's not necessary. It's not important."

I forgot my questions when the food came; I tend to forget everything when the food comes, if it's at all good. On the other side of the boundary wall we ate well, but we ate the things you eat everywhere in the cities of the Panglish-speaking worlds. The Lavender Lamp Cafe had food that was *different.* We kept calling the young waiter back to ask him what this was and what that was and how it was made. And then, as we were talking to him about a soup that he told us was made with three different kinds of *flowers,* I asked the wrong question. "I understand that in Panglish this is called Three-Flower Soup," I said. "But what do you call it in *your* language?"

The boy frowned at me, looking baffled; I was sure he couldn't be more than fifteen, and it was disgraceful that he was working. "Panglish *is* my language," he said.

"I'm not making myself clear," I said. "Look … Wait, what's your name?"

"I'm called Fyee," he said. One syllable. A good old Panglish name, never mind the fact that starting words with an FY cluster was totally unPanglish. "Fyee Bahron."

"Well, Mr. Bahron—"

He raised his hands. "I'm Fyee," he said quietly. "My *father* is Mr. Bahron."

"I'm sorry. Fyee, then. Fyee, what I meant was this: What is Three-Flower Soup called in your native language? The native language of the Losheffans?"

"Three-Flower Soup," he said.

I should have stopped then. I had no business whatsoever pursuing the matter, and it was obvious that I was embarrassing the boy. But I'm a linguist, and I really did think that Fyee and I were just involved in

one of those standard "What are your people called?"/"We're called The People" loops.

"Then could you tell me," I said, trying a different path to the information I wanted, "how you would translate 'Three-Flower Soup' into your own native language? If you were eating it at home, for example, with your family?"

"Excuse me," he said. "I will call my father." And the man who came back with Fyee from the kitchen to our table looked at me as if I were being the Ugly Terran—which I was; he was quite right—and said immediately, "Miss, Panglish *is* our native language. And we call this soup Three-Flower Soup."

I did shut up then, hoping I could salvage the situation and restore the sort of atmosphere that's appropriate for a pleasant evening out and a good dinner. I thanked him for his help, adding almost-Yegerrian compliments for his restaurant and his son and his food until he seemed to me to be mollified. But my mind was racing. Because Panglish isn't *anybody's* native language; Panglish is an artificial synthesis of the many different Englishes that spread over Earth in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Linguists had finally scrubbed the bugs out of it and written a thorough grammar, and it had been accepted as the international and interplanetary auxiliary language in the 2350s. Everywhere in the known universe, children learned their native language at home as they always had done, and then learned Panglish when they started school. If I hadn't completely misunderstood, the two Losheffan males were claiming that that wasn't true here; they were claiming that there was only Panglish here now, and that there had never been any other language. It had to be a misunderstanding; I had to be asking the wrong questions.

Fadrien was right about it taking longer to get back into Seagarden than it took to leave. The process was tiresome, and involved a lot of poking at touch screens and waiting around; I began to understand why I saw so few Losheffans on the other side of the wall. We'd already talked about the charms of the restaurant and how good the food was, and we were all three both tired and bored. So when the two expats asked me why I'd been so persistent about the Three-Flower Soup's name, making idle conversation to pass the time, I was willing enough. I explained, expecting them to say something like "How interesting," and move on to some other idle topic. But they looked at each other and then back at me, and Bru said, "But it's the same for the Hisheffans, you know."

"What do you mean, it's the same?"

"Well, if you ask them what their native language is, they'll say the same thing. They'll say it's Panglish."

"Meaning that they no longer speak their original native language."

"No. Meaning that they never *had* one."

I realized then that I was the one who was being a snob. I'd leaped to the obvious stereotyped conclusion: The impoverished and oppressed people of Benedict's Gate had lost all historical memory of their own language over the centuries and hadn't bothered to preserve any records of it, but the sophisticated and privileged Seagardeners beyond the wall would be different. They would have known better, done better, behaved better. It's easy to slip into that attitude, but I was ashamed of myself; I'm supposed to know what I'm doing.

In any case, the question wasn't one to take up with Bru and Fadrien; I'd check it myself, with the Hisheffans. I smiled at the expats and said, "That's interesting. I'll make a note of it."

It didn't take me long to learn that Bru and Fadrien had been right. Everyone I asked the next morning,

from the housekeeper who supervised the cleaning servomechanisms at my hotel to the Panglish Literature prof at the nearest university, told me the same thing. Panglish, they said, *was* their native language; no Sheffan, they told me, had ever spoken any language except Panglish. And none of them, not even the academics, seemed to realize that there was anything odd about what they were saying. They were in fact *proud* of it. When they said, "The other nations on this world do have other languages, of course, but *we* have always spoken *Pan*glish," you could hear the pride in their voices. They were unique among the nations of Estrada-Blair; others on the planet might speak Kowgani or Anbaq, for example, but not the Sheffans. They were trying not to brag, but they were proud of that difference.

We linguists have been complaining about the general public's ignorance of even the simplest and most basic information about language and linguistics for hundreds of years, but we've never made a dent in it. Not because it couldn't be done, but because we are too lazy to do the necessary work. The answers we get to the proposals we make when our consciences start bothering us are always the same. "Oh, we couldn't *possibly* add linguistics to the curriculum—there's just no *room* for it! And after all, everybody manages to use their languages well enough for their own purposes, right?" Just the thought of trying to break through the wall of indifference and beloved misconceptions is exhausting; the linguist always backs off and lets it pass, muttering something about "Well, at least I tried." And the result? Situations like this one, here on Estrada-Blair.

I reported it to USCOL as soon as I was sure of my facts, and for once they didn't give me the canned lecture about sticking to my assignment. "Check it more carefully," they said. "There has to be somebody—some specialist in Ancient History in a backwater university or museum somewhere—who can identify the original Sheffan language or languages for us. Even if there's nothing left but inscriptions—which would be a tragedy, of course. But there has to be something. Please check."

"I've checked," I said flatly. "I've done all that. I have explored every last comset resource on this entire planet, on the off chance that a specialist in some other country might know more than the Sheffans do. I've had the computers scanning every document remotely connected with Sheffan history and literature, in all of this planet's languages as well as in Panglish. I've checked the accounts of the 'discovery' of this planet and the landing in Sheff; they're very old, and very sparse, and they say nothing at all about languages, not one word. Nothing about libraries or newspapers or schools. Estrada and Blair filled out the *required* fields in the federal database, but there's nothing about the cultures on the planet; they left that all blank and moved on to another of their endless expeditions. I've done everything there is to do."

"Hmmmm."

Hmmmm indeed. I waited.

Eventually they told me to do some less conventional checking. "Take a couple of months off from Beydini," they said. "Tell the Yegerrians you need the break time to work on the data they've already given you; they won't care. Find a consultant—do some fieldwork with a Sheffan Panglish speaker. Talk language; see what happens."

"There has to be some very basic communication breakdown," I said slowly. "Something that we're filtering out without realizing it."

"Yes. Maybe. It's easy to forget that the Sheffans are truly ETs, with ET brains … Look into it, Dr. Miche. Take a couple of months, spend a little money keeping the consultant happy. Make *certain* that this really is what it looks like on the surface. Let's be sure there's nothing more to it."

"Beydini can wait?" I said.

"Oh, Beydini …" For economy's sake we were using only written language, but I could see the dismissive gestures as if I were looking right at them. "Never mind Beydini for now. Let's turn our attention to this new matter, Dr. Miche, and get it pinned down properly."

Because USCOL already had plenty of information about the Hisheffans and the Hisheffans already had plenty of money, I couldn't see any point in paying one of *them* to work with me. I went straight back to the restaurant in Benedict's Gate and made use of the toehold that my dinner there with Bru and Fadrien had given me. I talked to Fyee's father, who obviously had no objection to his son's working, and we quickly arrived at an agreement for two months' work. I could have an hour a day with Fyee in midafternoon, when business in the Lavender Lamp Cafe was always slow, Monday through Saturday—"The boy needs a day off once a week," Mr. Bahron said, and I agreed as vigorously as I dared—for a consultant fee of twenty galcredits an hour. Paid directly to the father. (I didn't like that part of it, but you don't start a fieldwork project by trying to reform the economy of the culture you're working with.) "Fine," I said. "I'll pay you every week on Friday afternoon, then." I handed him the standard USCOL contract form, and he signed it.

"When do you want to start?" he asked me.

"Today," I said. I glanced at the time and saw that it was almost three o'clock. "Right now, in fact, if it wouldn't be an inconvenience on such short notice."

He went away for a few minutes and came back with Fyee, and the boy and I sat down at a table near the kitchen and set to work.

Fyee was uneasy, and I would have liked to ask him whether he'd joined me willingly, but that would have been unwise. You assume nothing about a culture you're ignorant of; you try to start fieldwork with your mind free of judgments. Far too many linguists have laid the templates of their own cultures and languages over their fieldwork and then written stupid scholarly articles totally misrepresenting the cultures and languages they were supposed to be about. We have learned, I hope, not to do that anymore. Especially when the culture and language aren't Terran.

"USCOL has asked me," I began, and then I stopped. It was clear from his face that he had no idea what USCOL was. I started over. "I'm Dr. Alyssa Miche," I said, "and I'm a linguist—a scientist who specializes in language. I was here the other night for dinner, and you were kind enough to answer all my questions about the foods you serve. I work for the U.S. Corps of Linguists—USCOL, for short—back on Earth. And USCOL has asked me to spend a couple of months investigating Losheffan Panglish, with your help."

Fyee was frowning; I'd talked long enough. I stopped, and smiled at him encouragingly.

"What does that mean—*investigating* Losheffan Panglish?" he asked me. "How do you do that?"

There are many Panglish-speaking nations where the verb "investigate" has unpleasant connotations. So far as I know, Sheff isn't one of them; so far as I know, there are no cruel or oppressive governments on the entire world of Estrada-Blair. But that's just so far as I know. Maybe the economic gulf between Hisheffans and Losheffans isn't entirely the result of polite negotiations, hidebound traditions, and a lack of initiative in the people of the slums.

"Investigating the language," I said carefully, "just means that you and I will talk about it together. You're the expert—you're the one who knows the facts about Losheffan Panglish. I'll ask you questions, and

you'll explain things to me and help me understand, and my computer will record the things we say so that I can work with the information later. I may write down some notes too … I'm old-fashioned. Just for one hour in the afternoon, Monday through Saturday, for a couple of months. And you'll earn twenty galcredits for each of those hours. Does that sound all right to you?"

He hesitated, and then his face cleared and he rubbed the palms of his hands together and smiled at me. "Sure," he said. "It's okay. But just one thing."

I knew what was coming—unless Fyee was very unusual—but I pretended not to know. Everywhere in the "educated" universe, people who speak and understand their native languages wonderfully well are convinced that "bad grades" cancel out their language skills. They'll say, "I'm sorry, I don't know any grammar, I was never any good at it," as if they just open their mouths and make random noises when they talk.

"And that would be?"

"I'm not an expert about my language," he said. "I'm not very good at it, I always got really bad grades in my Panglish classes."

Got? Past tense?

"You're out of school?" I asked, keeping my face and voice neutral.

"Oh, yeah. Two years now, I've been out of school."

He was looking at me without concern, nothing wary about his expression. Which could mean a lot of things. Maybe he didn't know that on most Panglish-speaking worlds it was customary for youngsters to go to school at least until they were twenty-one. Maybe he knew but he didn't care. Maybe the Losheffans had a homeschooling system. Maybe lots of things, and none of them were my concern. Right now, I had just two goals. Establish trust. That always came first; until there was trust you couldn't really get any work done. And then, find the answer to the question USCOL was most interested in: Could it really be true that no record or memory of the native language(s) of Sheff existed?

I spent the first two weeks of my sessions with Fyee just doing routine checking for Losheffan Panglish. How questions and commands were formed; how propositions were made negative; how speakers marked a part of an utterance as the most important part; how Losheffan speakers indicated politeness and rudeness and hostility … that sort of thing. All of it on a checklist that every USCOL linguist memorized in the first month of training (along with examples from a dozen Terran languages, a dozen humanoid ET languages, and—to the extent that it was possible—a nonhumanoid language). I found nothing I hadn't expected to find, and that didn't surprise me, because USCOL updated the Panglish curriculum everywhere in the galaxy every two years. That didn't keep Panglish from changing, and it didn't keep dialects from forming, but it did *regulate* the process of change enough to maintain efficient communication. By the end of those two weeks, Fyee seemed to me to be comfortable and at ease, his parents and relatives had stopped inventing reasons to stop by the table and check on what we were doing, and I felt that I could safely move on toward my second goal.

"I was surprised, Fyee," I began, "when you said that Panglish was your native language."

"You were?"

"Yes, I was," I told him, and I explained why, watching him carefully for any sign that he was troubled by

what I was saying. I saw nothing like that, but it was very clear that I had his attention and that he was interested.

"Are you positive," he asked, leaning toward me, "that there was a Sheffan language once? Are you sure?"

"No," I said, "I can't be positive. I can't *swear* to you that Sheffans had a language before Panglish. For every people, there has to have been a time in their history when they had no language, and then—in a way that we have no records for and know almost nothing about—a time when that changed and they *did* have language. But Fyee, when Blair and Estrada and their crew landed on this planet, there were already cities and nations here, with complicated industries and some early technologies. No aviation, for example, but there were trains and groundcars. The idea that that could have happened without language …"

"It's impossible?"

"I can't *swear* to you that it's impossible, and if it were true it would be spectacularly interesting. It would have to mean that … oh, that your people always communicated by telepathy until Panglish was introduced here, or that they were visited in prehistory by ETs who already knew Panglish, or some such science fiction thing. But Fyee, I really do believe we can set that idea aside."

"Why, Dr. Miche?"

"Because over the centuries of exploring and learning about this galaxy we've run into many things we had previously thought were impossible, but not that one. Not ever, not even once. When we find a humanoid population without a language—which isn't often, by the way—the people are always in a very primitive stage of development."

"It's all so *obvious* once you've explained it," he said, sounding a bit cross.

"I know," I said. "Lots of things are like that—so obvious that they just never cross people's minds."

"But this is really important!" he said. "We need to be *sure* about it."

"Which is the reason USCOL asked me to work with you," I said. "To try to find a way to be sure. Are you interested in questions like this one, Fyee?"

He flushed, and looked down at the table to avoid my eyes. "If I were a Hisheffan," he said, "I'd be studying to be a historian—it's the thing I care about most."

Instead of waiting tables.

"That's good," I said. "This will be more interesting for you, then. Do you have any ideas about how we could begin? Have you ever heard anybody say anything about a language before Panglish?"

I expected an immediate no, but it didn't happen; he frowned, and his eyes narrowed. I watched him closely; I could see how hard he was thinking.

"Maybe it doesn't mean anything," he said. "Probably it's nothing."

I smiled at him. "Let's talk about it," I said.

"Well, there are some stories they tell to Losheffan kids. Really old stories, that you don't see in books or threedys, you just hear them sometimes from the eldresses."

"Eldresses?" That wasn't a word from "standard" Panglish.

"Eldresses. You don't know that word?"

"No, I don't, Fyee. What does it mean?"

"Old ladies—*really* old ladies, like my great-grandmother Tahnahk Bahron—are eldresses. You know how when we talk to them we call them 'Pashta'? That's what you call an eldress. My great-grandmother—Pashta Tahnahk Barhron—is ninety-three years old."

"Ah. I see." Later I'd want to find out where Losheffan Panglish draws the line for "eldress," exactly how old a woman has to be to get that title. I'd want to find out if there was a corresponding term for very old men. But not now. Now I needed to stay with what he'd said first.

"You were going to tell me about some old stories," I reminded him.

"That's right," he said, "I was. Because what you said made me think of something."

"Tell me, please. Even if you don't think it's important."

"The thing is, Dr. Miche, all of those stories the eldresses tell us start with the same words, the way a lot of Panglish stories start with 'Once upon a time'."

"And those words are?"

"'In the longest of long ago times, when the people still could talk …' And then the story goes on."

In the longest of long ago times, when the people still could talk. When the people still had a *real* language instead of Panglish, that could mean. Or it could mean something else entirely, or it could just be a coincidence. Fyee and I looked at each other, and he stood up abruptly, saying, "I have to go talk to my great-grandmother!"

"I want you to do that, Fyee," I said. "Absolutely. But we still have almost half an hour left to work."

"Oh! Sure." He sat down again, apologizing.

If I could have done whatever I wanted, I'd have sent him on to his great-grandmother that instant. I was desperately curious. Not as curious as Fyee, because it wasn't the history of *my* people that was at stake. But I had to take care. A consultant who's genuinely interested in what you're working on is one of the most useful things you can have in fieldwork—as long as you can keep a certain amount of order, so that the investigation doesn't head off in a dozen different directions at once. Making sure Fyee knew our work sessions were too important to be set aside casually was one way to maintain that certain amount of order.

"Now," I said, "Let's talk about that word *pashta*."

I tried not to get my hopes up, knowing that the chances of finding useful information quickly were slim.

Probably Fyee's great-grandmother would just say what everyone else said: "We have *always* spoken Panglish." But Fyee called me on the comset the very next morning, looking both pleased and worried.

"My guess was that you'd want to know right away," he said. "I hope that's right—I hope it was okay for me to call."

"Of course it's okay. What did your great-grandmother say?"

"When I first started talking to her she told me not to be silly. She said we've always talked Panglish, and all the rest of that. But I didn't just let it go, because I think it's so important; I kept on asking her questions. I kept on till she got mad."

"What did she say then, Fyee?"

"She said 'Okay, okay, so there *was* a real language once! So what?' And I explained to her, like you explained to me. But Dr. Miche …"

I waited, and when he didn't go on I said, "Yes?"

"I thought Pashta Tahnahk was going to throw her pillow at me … she didn't, but I could tell she wanted to. She told me to go away and stop bothering her, and of course I had to."

"I understand," I said. And I asked him, "Do you suppose she would be willing to work with me?"

"As a consultant, you mean?"

"Yes. And for a larger fee, of course, because she is an eldress."

"It's not like that," he said quickly. "Dr. Miche, Pashta Tahnahk doesn't know the language; she *says* she doesn't even know what it was called. 'I did know once, I think,' she says, '"but it's been so long—I've forgotten.' But she says there are three other eldresses in Benedict's Gate—much older than she is—who she thinks would still remember."

"Wonderful!" I said.

"Maybe; maybe not. Pashta Tahnahk says she doesn't know if any of them will talk to us. 'And if they *will* see you,' she says, 'I don't think they'll tell you anything.' But she is very good to me, my great-grandmother—she says that she will contact all of them herself, and vouch for us, and make whatever arrangements are possible."

"Please tell her that I am very grateful," I said and made a mental note that I must find out what would be a suitable gift for a Losheffan eldress who has done you a great service.

"I'll do that. And maybe by the time you get to the restaurant this afternoon I'll know something."

We went first to see a woman named Adee Barlet, one hundred and seventeen years old and now confined to a cupboard-bed in the corner of a great-nephews's kitchen, where she sat propped high on pillows, tiny like a child, with a bright red quilt drawn up almost to her chin. The pillow-coverings were sparkling white but so threadbare that you could see through them; I knew what I would buy as a gift for Pashta Barlet, as soon as I'd made sure that it wouldn't violate some Losheffan taboo about bed linens.

She peered at us through eyes that would barely open, and her great-nephew's wife brought us all mugs of strong tea. Fyee started to explain why we were there, but she interrupted him.

"Pashta Tahnahk told me all that already," she said. "No need to tell me again!"

"I'm sorry, Pashta," the boy said.

"We can take care of all this in a hurry," she snapped. "I remember our language, certainly I do, but it was very *inconsiderate* of Pashta Bahron to tell you so. I am disgusted with her for doing that; her *mind* must be going!" And she added a few detailed remarks about the flaws in his great-grandmother's character that had always annoyed her most.

"I'm sorry you are distressed, Pashta," he said, and I was proud of his good manners. "Remembering the language and keeping it safe was my assigned task," she went on, "given to me by my own grandmother. I learned the language from her; when we were alone together, we spoke nothing else. I taught my daughter and my granddaughter, but I've outlived them both, and there's no one now to take over the task for me."

"Not your nephew, Pashta?" I asked carefully, just checking.

"He's a man," she said, as I had expected. "And his wife's not related to me."

"Ah. Custom."

"Yes. It is our custom that the task goes from woman to woman, and always to a woman who is kin. I have no female relatives left anymore."

"Pashta Barlet," Fyee began, but she raised both her hands straight up beside her face, palms out, fingers spread wide, and cut him off again.

"It's no use you going on and on at me!" she said, ignoring the fact that neither Fyee nor I had had a chance to get in more than a word or two. "I won't talk about it."

"Could you tell us why not, Pashta?" I asked. "So that we would understand."

I thought from the expression on her face that she was going to order us to leave then, but she didn't; in a moment the network of delicate wrinkles relaxed to only a fierce scowl, and she answered me.

"Here's why not!" she said. "Anything I tell *you* would go to the Hisheffans!" She jerked her head in their direction. "They have everything else. They have all the money, all the land, all the beautiful possessions, all the education, all the freedom—everything. They have shut us up in these prison-slums for hundreds and hundreds of years …" She closed her eyes. "The language is the only thing we Losheffans *have* that's valuable; they've taken everything else to the other side of their cursed boundary walls. They are *not* going to get the language too! And it makes no difference how many of us you find who still know a thing or two—maybe there are a few others still, somewhere in Sheff, I don't know—but it makes no difference. *None* of us will betray our trust and tell you about our language!"

It had happened before. On Earth. A group would know that its language was dying, that when the handful of very old people who still knew it were gone, the language would be lost forever. Pashta Barlet was using the same words that had been used on Earth on those occasions. A First Nations elder on Earth would look at an Anglo linguist and say, "You've taken everything else we had. Everything that

belonged to us, you've taken. You're not going to get our language too." And that would be that. No Terran had ever broken a treaty with Losheffans, or taken their land or their property, or slaughtered their Estrada-Blair equivalent of the buffalo, or robbed them of their lawful profits on the substances on and under their property. But the situation, and the argument, were the same.

"Pashta Barlet," I said, "I am here as an official representative of the U.S. Corps of Linguists. I can speak for them, and I can promise you absolute secrecy. I can promise you that we would store the information you gave us in a secure location on Earth, and no one—not the Hisheffans, not anyone—would even know that it was there except me, and Fyee Bahron, and my superiors at USCOL."

The old woman made a rude noise, and waved one hand dismissingly at me.

"Then what's the point of telling you?" she demanded.

"The point—"

She cut me off, as she had Fyee.

"You're going to make noises at me about my obligation to science, the importance of adding to knowledge, all that blather," she said. "If the information is all locked away, nothing is added to science or to knowledge. And I am very old, Dr. Miche, but I am not foolish; I know what would happen. The day would come when someone at your USCOL would say 'The old lady has been dead a hundred years now, it's time to make the information known.' Either that would happen—and then the Hisheffans would have our last and only treasure—or there'd be no point at all in telling."

"Please, Pashta Barlet," Fyee said, his voice shaking, "please. If you won't tell Dr. Miche anything, I can understand that, but at least tell *me.* I hate the Hisheffans as much as you do! Pashta, I would never, never do or say anything that might give them the language."

She looked at him a long time, and I held my breath, hoping. But then she closed her eyes again. "We are Losheffans," she said. "We will always be poor, you and I, and all our relatives, and everyone we know, will always be poor. The day would come when you'd have a child crying with hunger at home, or a sick wife, and you'd remember that you knew something valuable enough to sell. Like any man, Fyee Bahron, when that day came you'd betray us. You'd be sorry, but you'd tell yourself you were only doing what you had to do."

"Pashta," the boy pleaded, "I give you my word, I *swear* to you that I wouldn't—"

"You'd watch your child die in your arms, you'd watch your wife suffer agony, and all the time knowing you had a way to get money to prevent that? Hush! You're a man, and like all men you are tenderhearted … you *would* betray us. I'm not going to tell you a thing," she said, and she set her lips in a firm line.

The only thing she said after that was "Please leave," and that's what we did.

Fyee and I met with the other two eldresses, because it was worth a try and he was every day more desperately determined, but Pashta Barlet had been right, it was no use. "Your language will die with you," we would say, and the answer would be immediate: "Then I will have done my duty. I'm not going to tell you a thing."

"Fyee," I said after our third failure, when we were sitting heartsick at our table, trying to force ourselves to concentrate on Losheffan Panglish, "you know the eldresses. Do you believe it would be worth trying

to find someone else, someone in another part of the country? There could be others; USCOL would let me spend the money to try to find them, with your help."

He shook his head. "No," he said, his voice rough with sadness. "It would be a waste of time. This is a holy task to the eldresses, and nothing means more to them than keeping the language safe from the Hisheffans. We could find a hundred more pashtas, but none of them would tell us anything about what the language was like, or answer questions about it."

"All right," I said. "I trust your judgment. It's a tragedy, because when a language dies, a culture dies too, and we are all made poorer by those deaths. But there it is, and we can't change it."

"I am going to do just one more thing," he said. "I've already spoken to my great-grandmother and to the pashtas, and everything is arranged. But I have to do it by myself, Dr. Miche—I can't take you with me. I'm sorry."

He did take me with him in the end, but only to the door of Pashta Barlet's house, where he went in to join the three eldresses over more strong tea, while I sat down on a flat rock outside and waited. He was gone perhaps ten minutes, and when he came out again tears were pouring down his cheeks. I stood up and waited for him to speak.

"It's done," he said finally. "I have heard the language of my people spoken. Not for long enough to let me learn even a few words—but I have heard it this one time. I know how it sounds, and I will be able to say 'I heard it with my own ears.' This much I know, and I will remember, and when all the pashtas have died and are safe from being pestered about it, I will see to it that my children and my grandchildren know, both the girls *and* the boys. This much, the pashtas said, was safe with me."

And that, as always in cases like this one, was that.

The End