The TRANSLATOR



It was just a job for Jess – but was she reading too much between the lines?

The first rule of translation, as I learnt at university, is this – you are not the author. As a translator, you're a pane of clear glass. The light passes through you. You do not add colour. And I believed it, more or less, for the first 14 years of my career.

Then the letters arrived, and all of a sudden the rule felt harder to keep.

The job came through from the university in February. A historian called Dr Gabriel Osei needed a French-to-English translator for a bundle of letters found during a house clearance in Lyon. The letters were correspondence between two lovers – a woman (Céleste Aubert) and a man (Édouard Renard) – and spanned 1923 to 1931. Dr Osei believed that they were of special importance, remnants of a literary friendship, possibly more, that would shed light on a neglected chapter of Parisian life in the early 20th century.

'I want them translated faithfully,' said Dr Osei, on our first phone call. His English had a slight transatlantic lilt. Canadian, I thought, or maybe an American who'd lived in England for many years. 'You mustn't add anything, or take anything away. Céleste repeats herself sometimes, and I want that kept. Édouard has a brisker style, and I want to keep that too.'

'Perfect,' I said. 'That's generally how I work.'

'Good. You'll start with Céleste's letters first. We have more of those. Édouard's are... fragmented. Some are quite badly damaged.'

'How many altogether?'

'Sixty-three. Perhaps 64, if the conservator can piece the final one together.'

'And what sort of deadline are we looking at?'

'Three months,' said Dr Osei.

My mind whirred with timelines and schedules. It would be a squeeze, but workable for the right money.

'And what's the budget?' I asked, overcoming my squeamishness over talking about money. It was the part of freelance life that I'd never got used to.

'The good news is, I've managed to secure some funding,' said Dr Osei. 'So we can offer €3,000. Half on signing the contract, half on delivering the work.'

I was glad he couldn't see the childish surprise that lifted my cheeks. I steadied my voice.

'That's fine. Thank you, Dr Osei.'

'Oh, please – call me Gabriel.'

'Gabriel. All right. Call me Jess.'

'I will.'

I felt the tug of a smile as I ended the call. He sounded so serious and polite, with just the faintest touch of awkwardness. I loved those qualities in a man.

The first thing I ought to have done when I put the phone down was look at the scanned documents he'd sent, with their slanted French handwriting, ink faded to brown. But what I did instead was click the link in his email signature that led to his university profile. Just to put a face to the name, I told myself. And what a face it was – symmetrical features, a superhero jaw, neatly clipped black curls.

'But, doctor,' I said in my head, in a ridiculous French accent. 'You are gorgeous.'

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The letters were strange. Céleste Aubert had an odd way of writing, as if she knew Édouard was paying such close attention that nothing needed spelling out. She reported on her days – the light in the mornings, the difficulty of a particular translation she was working on (Céleste had been an English-to-French translator, which made me feel weirdly uncomfortable at first, but soon became the thing I liked best about her).

'But, doctor, you are gorgeous'

She wrote about loneliness without complaint, as a plain fact. She wrote about Édouard with a precision that was clinical as well as tender. 'You are too careful with words in person,' she said in one letter. 'You save your best ones for the page. I am learning to read you that way.'

I sat with that sentence for a long time before I typed it.

By the end of March, I'd translated 22 of the letters. Gabriel rang me every Friday after lunch. We hadn't planned on a weekly catch-up, but there was always something to talk about – a question about a particular phrase, a request for a footnote, a point about a specific cultural reference. They were quick, efficient phone calls, never lasting more than 10 minutes, and never straying off topic. But as the weeks went by, I actually found myself looking forward to them.

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The call in early April went differently. Gabriel rang at 1pm as usual and we dealt with the queries (a question about a street name, one about a literary journal Céleste had mentioned). Then he said, 'How are you finding the letters? Not professionally. Just... how are you finding them?'

'Um...' I hedged, caught off guard and desperate not to sound stupid. 'They're growing on me.'

'I see. It's just... As I read your translations, I find myself wondering about your reaction.'

'My reaction?'



I looked at the letter that was currently taking up most of my computer screen. I had been mid-sentence when the phone rang... Céleste in the summer of 1926, describing a long argument with Édouard that had ended, she implied, in a kiss of reconciliation, though she was too discreet to say so plainly. I had been enjoying the implication.

'Well, to put it simply,' I said. 'I've come to like Céleste. A lot.'

'Oh?'

'I think she understands something about writing that most people don't.'

A pause. 'What does she understand?'

'That you can be closer to someone through letters than face to face.'

Another pause, slightly longer.

'Yes,' Gabriel said, and then something shifted in the texture of the call, a small change of pressure. 'I think that's exactly right. I've been reading their correspondence for two years and I still feel like an intruder.'

'You're not an intruder,' I said. 'You're the reason their words will be read.'

'But what if they never wanted them to be?'

'Then don't publish them. Keep them just for us.' Another shift in the air made me regret the intimacy of what I'd said. I added, 'As a purely academic exercise.'

'An academic exercise,' Dr Osei laughed. 'Is that what this is?'

'Well, yes,' I said. 'Isn't it?'

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In May, one of Céleste's letters stopped me in my tracks. It was dated June 1928, and Céleste described a period of silence. Édouard hadn't written for six weeks, with no explanation given. She described those six weeks as fields without fences – the particular quality of waiting, the replies she'd composed in her head to letters that hadn't arrived. And most painfully, the realisation that Édouard's absence had told her more about her own feelings than his presence had.

'When you're not here, when it is only your words that I have, I feel I know you more.'

I read that sentence three times. A shimmer of gooseflesh ran up my arms. Then I shook myself. I was not, I told myself firmly, in a comparable situation. I was working. Gabriel was a client. But we were speaking for longer each Friday, and occasionally on Tuesdays now, and some Thursday afternoons and Monday evenings.

I had learnt, incidentally, that he'd lived in England for 11 years, that he'd grown up in Accra, that he took his coffee without sugar and had opinions about biscuits.

These were incidental details. They were of no professional relevance. Right? So why did I feel a shiver down my spine as I typed... *When it is only your words that I have, I feel I know you more*?

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The call I had not been expecting came on a Wednesday in June, mid-morning.

'I want to tell you something before you finish,' Gabriel said, without preamble. 'Because you'll have the last of the letters soon and then the project ends, and I find I want to say it while I have a reason to call.'

I sat very still. 'Go on.'

'I requested you specifically. For this project.'

'I know. My agent told me.'

'What she may not have told you is that I'd read your translation of the Varda essays. Two years ago, before I found the letters. I thought... I thought that you understood something about what it means to be a careful reader. And so I hoped, when these letters came to light, that you would agree to take them on.'

I looked at my screen, at Céleste's looping handwriting.

'You really played the long game then,' I said.

'I'm a historian. I work slowly.'

I laughed, then he laughed, and the laugh was the most natural thing that had happened in the three months of carefully professional phone calls.

'Céleste would have something to say about this,' I said.

'What would she say?'

'She'd say that you were being careful with words. That you saved your real ones for the page.'

Silence for a moment. I heard him exhale.

'She would not be wrong,' he said. 'Will you... When the letters are done. Will you come to the archive? I'd like to show you the originals. The actual paper, her actual hand. I think you'd want to see them.'

'Yes,' I said. 'I would.'

'And after that we could... Well, there's a cafe near the archive. Nothing special.'

'Cafes don't have to be special,' I replied.

'No,' he said. 'They don't.'

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I translated the last letter on a Tuesday morning in July. It was from 1931, Céleste to Édouard, and it was short, just a page and a half, the handwriting a little messier than usual. She wrote about the project she was finishing, about the satisfaction of finding a word that was not quite the right one, but the nearest possible alternative. 'We are always reaching,' she wrote, 'and the reaching is the point.'

And then, at the end... 'Édo, you are still the person I most like to tell things to. I don't think that changes. I have stopped expecting it to.'

I spent a long time working on those sentences, but none of my attempts quite hit the mark. They flowed too well, not capturing the clumsiness of the original. So I did something I'd never done before – I translated word for word, to mimic Céleste's hurried confession.

Then I saved the document and sent it to Gabriel.

I sat for a while in the quiet of my study, with the summer light coming through the window, thinking about a cafe near an archive, and the originals, and the feeling of reaching. The reaching is the point.

When I reached for my phone to call him, I saw he was calling me already.

I saw he was calling me already

THE END

Susie Gordon

*** *A Monster in the Ash* by Susie Gordon (£12.99, PB, Claret Press) is out now.**

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