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STARTER STORY • ENGLISH • C1

A Note on the Text

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Nora Voss had translated eleven novels from French into English before the Aldous Press offered her the one she would come to think of, privately, as the one that undid her: a new, definitive translation of Élise Vasseur's *Les Lettres du Verger*, timed for the tenth anniversary of the author's death. The existing English version, done decades earlier by a translator long retired, was competent and flat, the kind of translation that carries a story's furniture into a new house without ever asking whether the rooms should be the same shape.

The novel, for readers who had never opened it, could be summarized in one sentence that would still miss everything that mattered: two sisters, Camille and Solange, estranged for thirty years over their father's orchard and the letter that divided it between them, reconcile at their dying mother's bedside in the novel's final pages. Readers wept over that scene in four languages. A prestige film adaptation had made an entire career out of the actress who delivered Solange's final line.

Nora's contract stipulated, in a clause she found almost comically earnest for a publishing document, that the new translation should honor "authorial intention wherever it can be established." She had signed it without much thought. She would spend the following winter discovering exactly how much a clause like that could cost.

The Vasseur estate granted her four weeks in the archive outside Lyon, a converted stable behind the house where the author had lived and died, now managed by a niece who clearly regarded translators as a mildly tolerable species of insect. Among the boxes of galley proofs, notebooks, and unanswered fan mail, Nora found the annotated set of page proofs from the novel's first printing, thick with Vasseur's handwriting, cramped and private in a way her published prose never was.

Beside the reconciliation scene, in the margin, Vasseur had written a single line in pencil, later gone over in ink as though she had wanted to make sure it survived: “Voilà ce que j’aurais voulu.” This is what I would have wanted. Not what happened. Nora read it three times before she let herself understand what it implied about a scene the whole reading world had taken, for two decades, as a memory rather than a wish.

Further into the folder, unfiled and undated, she found a letter addressed to “S.” in Vasseur’s hand, four drafts of the same paragraph, each one abandoned mid sentence. None of them had been sent. Each began warmly and ended, without exception, in the same clipped, unforgiving line, as though the author’s hand kept arriving at a conclusion her heart refused to revise.

It was the estate’s archivist, an elderly man named Béranger who had known Vasseur in her last years, who confirmed what Nora had already begun to suspect. The author’s own sister had not come to their mother’s deathbed. There had been no reconciliation, no final tender exchange, only a silence that lasted until both women died within a year of each other, neither one having crossed the distance the novel closed so beautifully on paper.

The discovery would have troubled Nora less if it had not lodged itself precisely in the line she was struggling hardest to translate: Solange’s last words to her sister, “Nous sommes quittes,” a phrase that means, depending entirely on the ear that receives it, either “we are even, the debt is settled” or “we are finished with each other, and free.” The earlier English translation had rendered it simply as “We’re even now,” warm and unambiguous, the line audiences quoted at weddings and funerals alike.

Nora’s editor, Marcus, wanted that warmth preserved for the anniversary edition, and said so without apology when she raised the question. “Readers don’t want ambiguity from that scene,” he told her over the phone. “They want the ending they’ve already grieved for. Give them a puzzle anywhere else in the book, not there.”

What Nora did not tell Marcus, because it belonged to no clause in any contract, was that she had a sister of her own, four years younger, from whom she had not heard directly since their mother's funeral, where an argument over a house neither of them particularly wanted had somehow become an argument about everything else instead.

She spent three weeks with the disputed line, filling a notebook with attempts that ranged between the two meanings without settling into either: "we owe each other nothing now," "there is nothing left between us," "we are quits." Each version she discarded felt like a small betrayal of someone, though she could no longer say clearly of whom.

It was on her second visit to the archive, examining later print runs Vasseur had corrected by hand, that Nora found the detail that changed her mind about what she was translating. Vasseur's German and Italian publishers had each, independently, asked her to clarify the line for their own editions. Both times, in the margin of the correspondence, Vasseur had refused, writing only that the sentence should stay "exactly as unsettled as it is."

The clue was not, then, a private wound the public text had merely failed to mention. It was a line the author had deliberately, repeatedly, protected from being resolved, even when resolving it would have made her more money and cost her nothing but a phone call to a foreign editor she would never meet. Whatever the reconciliation scene had once been for Vasseur, wish or memory or neither, its final words were meant to hold both meanings at once, forever, on purpose.

Nora brought this to Marcus not as a feeling but as evidence: the annotated galleys, the correspondence with the German and Italian houses, dates and signatures. He read it over twice, said nothing for a long moment, and then agreed, with visible reluctance, that a translation calling itself definitive could hardly overrule the one thing the author had gone out of her way to leave undefined.

The final English line read, in the end, "We owe each other nothing now," a phrase Nora chose because English, unlike French, could not hold both meanings inside one word, but could at least hold them inside one silence, the reader left to decide whether nothing meant forgiveness or its absence.

That same week, without telling herself in advance that this was what she was doing, Nora wrote a letter to her own sister. She did not begin it warmly, as Vasseur's four abandoned drafts had, and she did not end it in the clipped unforgiving line either. She wrote, instead, that she did not know yet what she wanted the ending to mean, and that she thought, for once, that admitting this might be less of a betrayal than pretending otherwise.

The translation was published that spring to the reception Marcus had feared and Nora had expected: reviewers were divided, one prominent critic mourning "a beloved scene stripped of its warmth," another praising the new edition for "finally trusting readers with the ambiguity Vasseur always intended." Nora read both reviews at her desk on the same grey morning and found she could no longer tell which of them she agreed with, which struck her as, in its own way, the correct response.

Her sister wrote back in June, three lines, neither warm nor cold, proposing only that they meet for coffee before deciding anything larger. Nora did not know, reading it, whether this counted as reconciliation or merely as its opening sentence, and for the first time in the whole long labor of the translation, she let herself believe that not knowing yet was not a failure of the ending, but its most honest possible shape.

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