

Synopsis/Sample of Translation

by

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DESCRIPTION

Helen Guild, a successful appraiser of theatre photography, must decide if she wants to trust a stranger to translate a journal that may contain revelations she is uncertain she wants to know. For his part, Oral Timmins, the translator, learns a lesson about the power of words to transform and the capacity of love to transcend time, place, gender, and language.

CHARACTERS

- ORAL TIMMINS, a free-lance translator
- HELEN GUILD, a buyer, appraiser, and curator of theatre photography
- PALLAS WORTE, a buyer, appraiser, and curator of photography
- JEFFREY MITCHELL, Oral's friend
- UTILITY 1 will play VOICE OVER INTERCOM, KARLA BAEDER, ROSA at the Goethe Institute, WOMAN WITH CHILD at the café, PIPER at Jeffrey's workplace -- late fifties/early sixties, in physically good shape
- UTILITY 2 will play GEORG BETHE, CUSTOMER at the Goethe Institute, WAITER at the café, SID at Jeffrey's workplace, MAN AT PHONE BOOTH - late fifties/early sixties, in physically good shape

Note: All the actors will have to speak some German.

Time: Mid-1980s, so that there are no cell phones and email and phone booths still exist

Setting: Any American city; Berlin

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Scene 1

A smartly furnished office, solid, without ostentation. Behind the desk the window is filled with the color of a late afternoon sky about 4 PM in late October after the clocks have been changed for the season. During the scene the color gradually changes as time passes until it is early evening.

Helen looks out the window. On the desk, sitting alone in the middle of the blotter, is a 1-inch thick manuscript in a three-ring binder, black and unlabeled. Helen should treat the following conversation more or less as an interrogation; it is clear she controls the discussion. A voice comes over the intercom.

VOICE
Ms. Guild? Ms. Guild?

HELEN
Yes?

VOICE
There's someone here to see you.

HELEN
Yes.

VOICE
He's from --
(whispered consultation)
-- from the translation agency.

HELEN
(overlapping)
-- from the translation agency -- yes, I know.
Tell him to wait a moment.

Helen takes the binder. She holds it so that the upper-right hand corner is in her right palm and lower-left hand corner is in her left palm. Then she spins the binder, getting as many revolutions out of it as she can. Then she slams the binder down on the desk, squares it, then calls the receptionist. It is her way of preparing for what is coming.

HELEN
Send him in.

Oral enters. Helen indicates for him to sit down. Oral sits down, clutching a small leather portfolio. He is dressed neatly but casually. Helen appraises him for a few beats.

HELEN
I need some German documents translated.

ORAL
(begins to unzip the portfolio)
I brought my résumé and samples --

HELEN
Actually, just one document.

ORAL
(begins to take out his résumé)
I can show you --

HELEN
What is your name?

ORAL
Timmins. Oral Timmins.

HELEN
Oral Timmins?

ORAL
Oral Timmins.

Oral laughs softly -- he knows what is coming.

HELEN
What a --

ORAL
Yes.

HELEN
-- singular name for a translator.

ORAL
Yes.

HELEN
I've only heard of -

ORAL
-- one man with that name --

HELEN
Yes.

ORAL
The "deeply sighing, always-dying, keeps on crying Oral Roberts." My namesake.

HELEN
I'm fascinated.

ORAL
My parents were big supporters, dollar- and Bible-wise. Hoping I'd follow Oral's path --

HELEN
So they named you --

ORAL
They had high hopes.

HELEN
But --

ORAL
(Shrugs)
But. They knew they'd pretty much lost the battle when around ten years old I was calling Richard "Dental" and his father "Hygiene."

HELEN

Hygiene.

ORAL

You know ten -- thought it was a great joke --
repeated it

(elongating the word)

-- everywhere.

HELEN

They "were" supporters?

ORAL

Still are.

(a look of "aghast")

I'm sorry -- are you --

HELEN

Not to worry. I actually hoped the Lord would
keep him when he threatened to die if he couldn't
raise money.

ORAL

(laughs)

I know -- "GOD TO ORAL: DROP DEAD."

HELEN

And your parents --

ORAL

Still Sunday-morning folks -- though I'm not sure
whom they're watching now.

HELEN

Do you ever -- well, resent --

ORAL

My parents weren't vicious. Just hopeful.

HELEN

And are you a sermonizer?

ORAL

Just a humble hack at heart. "Have tongue, will
translate."

HELEN

But you were raised on the Bible, yes? Words as
weapons.

ORAL

Words as flesh.

HELEN

I see.

ORAL

All right.

HELEN

My parents named me Helen because they wanted a goddess.

ORAL

Really?

HELEN

Daughter of Zeus and Leda, wife of Spartan Menelaus --

ORAL

Eloper with Paris to Troy -- destroyer of cities --

HELEN

"She moves a goddess -- "

ORAL

"-- and she looks a queen."

HELEN

I learned that one early on -- used it on the playground to confuse the attack dogs.

ORAL

And the Helenas: All's Well That Ends Well, St. Helena, mother of Constantine. And St. Helen's fire --

Helen gives him a quizzical look.

ORAL

Blue flames on the ship's masts: if one, bad weather; if two or more, it be fair.

HELEN

Their tuition was well spent -- but your German?

ORAL

Fluent. Since this high.

HELEN

First language?

ORAL

Third-generation parents, so I got English with my oatmeal. It was the older people in town, at the Turn Verein -- a kind of community center. Trouped there every day for German lessons --

HELEN

Show me.

ORAL
What?

HELEN
Show me a lesson.

ORAL
Really?

HELEN
Yes.

ORAL
You want me to do a German lesson?

HELEN
How else can I test the goods?

ORAL
All right.

Oral rises; Helen sits.

ORAL
Well, these crusty old Teutons worked us hard.

Takes the posture of a stern teacher, speaks English in a German accent.

ORAL
"Now, class, the numbers. Very important -- think of them as pennies, adding up, adding up.
(uses his fingers)
Repeat: eins, zwei, drei, vier, fuenf -- " I loved saying "fuenf"! Fuenf!
(sits down)
Cubic yards of irregular verbs. Getting all the glottals right --
(makes the proper hacking sound in his throat)
-- "machen."

HELEN
You hated it.

ORAL
Loved it --

HELEN
Thought so.

ORAL
-- you could make disgusting noises and get praised!

HELEN

The ten-year old heaven.

ORAL

It just took with me.

HELEN

Oral gratification.

ORAL

Well, yes. Perhaps we should --

HELEN

Help me remember something, Oral Timmins.

ORAL

All right.

HELEN

I memorized this once -- How does it begin?

(flat pronunciation)

"Und diese menschlichere Liebe" -- would that be right, "menschlichere"? [pronounces it as "mens-likker"]

ORAL

Mensch - the ssh sound, a little forceful, tongue behind the air. Mensch.

HELEN

Mensch.

ORAL

Menschlichere. Not "likker" -- let the air escape. Soft, not hard. Menschlichere.

HELEN

Menschlichere.

ORAL

(laughs)

Well, not native -- yet. Okay, "Und diese menschlichere Liebe" -- "And this more human love -- "

HELEN

"die unendlich rücksichtsvoll" -- is that right?

ORAL

"Rücksichtsvoll" -- don't know. Continue.

HELEN

"Rücksichtsvoll und leise" -

ORAL

Ah! -- "that will fulfill itself, infinitely" --

(continues on his own)
"Infinitely considerate and gentle" -- I know
this.

HELEN
"Und gut und klar in Binden und Lösen sich --"

ORAL
"Sich vollziehen wird" -- "and kind and clear in
binding and releasing."

(Oral continues)
"Wird jener ähneln, die wir ringend und mühsam
vorbereiten, der Liebe, die darin besteht, dass
zwei Einsamkeiten einander schützen, grenzen und
grüssen."

HELEN
Couldn't have said it better myself.

ORAL
"And this more human love -- "

HELEN
Wait.

Helen opens the drawer of her desk and opens a copy of Rilke.

HELEN
"And this more human love --

Helen indicates for him to continue.

ORAL
"And this more human love -- that will fulfill
itself, infinitely considerate and gentle, and
kind and clear in binding and releasing -- "

HELEN
(holding up a finger to stop him; she continues)
" -- will resemble that which we are preparing
with struggle and toil, the love which consists
in this, that two solitudes protect and touch and
greet each other." Thunderous applause.

ORAL
When did you have to memorize Rilke?

HELEN
Didn't "have to." I wanted to be the young poet.

Helen puts the book back in the drawer.

ORAL
So you memorized it --

HELEN

Many burned bridges ago.

Helen walks downstage.

HELEN

Mr. Oral Timmins, on that desk sits an unusual document.

ORAL

All right.

HELEN

It came to me -- unsolicited. I know who wrote it. Would you bring it over to me?

Oral takes the binder to Helen.

HELEN

Some of my background.

(points out photographs on "wall")

Please, look.

Oral walks along the "wall" looking at the photos, listening while Helen speaks. He finishes as she finishes.

HELEN

I deal in photography -- buy, sell, and appraise. This past May I went to Germany to evaluate a private collection taken during the Weimar period. A buyer here wanted photos of American blacks who went to Germany to perform -- especially some exquisite Josephine Baker images. He hired me to tell him their worth, agreed to pay all my expenses. So off I went. While there I met the person hired by the family to do their appraisal. We had much in common. I sent off the appraisal and decided to stay for a small vacation. This person made my stay delightful. After my return we wrote several letters, then lost contact -- until --

(holds up the binder)

I can pick out words here and there -- days of the week. Numbers. "Fuenf." Places. My name. Her name.

ORAL

(noticing, but "not-noticing,"
the reference to "her")

Work-related?

HELEN

No.

Helen looks directly at Oral, the binder clasped to her. Oral returns her gaze.

ORAL

May I see it --

Helen moves back to the desk, then to the window. Oral follows as far as the desk.

HELEN

(ignores his question)

Weimar Germany --

ORAL

All right.

HELEN

Full of -- the right word? -- ambiguity.

ORAL

Unsettled time.

HELEN

Many of the photographs I saw were full of ambiguity -- lines crossed in gender, dress, class. And soon the "facts" ground them out because their lines weren't neat. As a translator, Mr. Timmins, don't you always lie?

ORAL

That canard about the Italian for "translator" being the same as "traitor"?

HELEN

Did Rilke say what you said he said?

ORAL

It's a facsimile.

HELEN

A lie.

ORAL

The best way to say in English what's said in German.

HELEN

And how does that happen?

ORAL

A mix. A guess.

HELEN

Rummaging in the dark.

ORAL

Some words carry over directly but concepts -- estimates.

HELEN

How do you estimate?

ORAL

One gets taught --

HELEN

No -- not one. Not one. You. If you're not using the facts -- Mr. Timmins -- if the reference books don't tell you what you need -- where does it all come from?

ORAL

One develops -- I develop -- a feel --

HELEN

A feel.

ORAL

For what's underneath.

HELEN

Rummaging in the dark.

ORAL

No, not in the dark -- in life, life in general -
- in my own life, in my own heart. "Thoughts
come not from the head but from the heart."

Helen opens a desk drawer and takes out a Polaroid camera.

HELEN

Parry with a quote.

ORAL

Always quote to impress.

HELEN

It does not. Look at me.

Helen takes a picture of Oral, puts the camera on the desk but holds the picture.

HELEN

Do you trust your heart?

ORAL

Yes.

HELEN

Why should I?

ORAL

Actions speak louder -- you haven't sent me home yet.

HELEN
That just means I don't distrust.

ORAL
(taking his portfolio)
I can show you my own "pictures," if you want --

HELEN
Your words to action.

ORAL
Words made flesh.

HELEN
(pointing to the portfolio)
How would you estimate it?

ORAL
Done as well as anyone's.

HELEN
As well as anyone's.

ORAL
As well as yours.

HELEN
Should I be complimented or dismayed?

ORAL
Depends upon your own heart.

HELEN
Pass on that for the moment.
(looks at the Polaroid, shows it to him from a
distance)
And this portfolio -- full complement of human
virtue?

ORAL
And vice.

HELEN
That's good to know.

ORAL
And in-between.

HELEN
The ambiguities.

ORAL
I have never let a fact outshine the ambiguous.

Helen hands the Polaroid to Oral.

HELEN

Is this a face you would trust? Is this face a good translation?

ORAL

(using the word as if were a magic word, with a gesture)

Fuenf!

HELEN

I think I have danced enough.

ORAL

All right.

Helen spins the binder as before, then hands it to Oral. Oral takes it but does not open it.

HELEN

I need to know what this says and have to trust you to tell me. At least, I have to not distrust you to tell me. We need to make a contract.

ORAL

Spell out what needs to be spelled out.

HELEN

Not an agency contract --

ORAL

No -- not even a contract -- a -- covenant.

HELEN

Covenant. An "Oral Hygiene" word. Covenant, then. And your end?

ORAL

Simple -- what you've been testing here: the best my head and heart can offer.

HELEN

Three full dimensions --

ORAL

And 16 million colors.

HELEN

Wise in its imperfections.

Helen picks up Polaroid, looks at it and then at Oral; Oral looks straight back at her.

HELEN

Open it. Read the first paragraph.

ORAL

Now?

HELEN

"The world wants to be betrayed."

(smiles slightly)

Always quote to impress. Yes, now.

By this time the window has darkened considerably, indicating the light of an autumn evening. The room is also in semi-darkness. Oral opens the binder to the first page and reads silently, tracing his index finger under the lines. He looks at Helen, then back down to the page.

HELEN

Are you ready?

ORAL

Yes.

HELEN

Two blue flames, wasn't it, for good weather?

Helen holds up both hands and wiggles the fingers as if they were flames.

Fire away.

Transition music: The Threepenny Opera.