

Ruth-Maria Thomas

The Second Greatest Love

(OT: Die zweitgrößte Liebe)

Sample Translation

By Catherine Venner

Pages 7 to 15

Spring is in the air, Henry thinks, as he walks homeward down the street. Spring is in the air and the lilac is in bloom, just like every year in May. He takes a deep breath, the air smells like rain is coming. He's happy. Even after over two years, his heart still gently flutters just before seeing her. He takes the stairs, two at a time, almost jogging to the fourth floor and thinking how nice it is to share the special things in life. He pushes open the door. The air in the flat is close, so close he has to stop in the hall to allow his heartbeat to slow and the fine sweat on his neck and back to be soaked up by the fabric of his shirt. He hears the radio in the kitchen. She's left the balcony door open, he thinks, but it doesn't smell of smoke. He takes his shoes off and places them between her high heels and boots, the usual chaos.

"Hello?" he calls through the flat, the floorboards shift slightly under his feet.

There's nobody on the balcony or in any of the rooms; the windows are open, letting in a cool draft and giving him goosebumps. Strange, they had a date. The curtains sway backwards and forwards, while the sun hangs low in the sky, its yellow light reflecting in the floor to ceiling mirror that he got installed when she moved in.

"Michelle?" he calls and once again: no answer.

An uneasiness washes over him and he tries to listen to his intuition, just like she always advises him: "trust your gut feeling," he hears her voice, "unless you're drunk or being jealous." He

picks up his phone, pressing the wrong buttons twice before getting his passcode right, and selects Michelle's number. It rings. The automated mailbox message, his hand strokes the wood on her dressing table. The glittery mist of powder and rouge, which usually swirls around her, has settled on it and now sticks to his skin. She's probably just popped out somewhere, she'll be back soon, he tells himself and can already see her coming in the door, the first drops of rain clinging to her leather jacket. A feeling from his dreams comes over him now.

In these dreams he's alone in a dark room. As a child he'd call for his mother as he woke up, in more recent years he's called for Michelle, who'd wake him up, her hand on his forehead, "it's ok," she'd whisper, "I'm here."

He runs his hand through his thick hair, well cut and damp with sweat, and tells himself he should shower first. He can hear the rain on the rooftops outside. He closes all windows, unbuttons his shirt on the way to the bathroom and as he is about to throw it into the laundry basket beside the bathtub, he sees a bright red splash on the tiles.

For a second, he'll understand the horror flooding into the edge of his vision and making his heart race, for a second he'll think he's too young for whatever is unfolding here. He pulls his phone from his trouser pocket again, holds it to his ear, never taking his eyes from the blood, "Come on, Carlotta," he whispers, "answer," until finally he hears his sister's voice on the other end.

"What's up?" she sounds tired, probably jet-lagged.

"Is Michelle with you?"

"With me? No. Why?"

"She's gone."

He hears Carlotta sitting up. Most likely, she'd taken an afternoon nap on the plushy bed in her old bedroom, one of her ridiculous silk sleep masks pulled over her eyes.

"What do you mean, she's gone? Didn't she tell you where she was going?"

"No, we were supposed to meet at home, but she isn't here."

"Then she'll be along soon."

"I ... I think she is gone gone. Her phone's also off."

"'Gone gone'? Henry, don't be daft, she'll have just gone out for a drive. Have you checked

whether her Vespa is still there?”

“Carlotta,” his voice is now an octave higher, as if it had never broken. “There’s blood on the edge of the bath.”

“What?”

“There’s blood. On the edge of the bath. A dash of blood.”

“Maybe she cut herself shaving?”

The fact Carlotta is so calm, only makes him more nervous.

“There’s no razor. If she’d been shaving, the razor would still be lying around.”

He scans the room and he notices the small wooden box, from which a jumble of jewellery, knotted necklaces and lone earrings usually quells, is missing.

“Her jewellery is gone,” he says and his mouth is dry as he speaks.

“Anything else?” Carlotta no longer sounds so absent.

He glances around the bathroom, her make-up brushes sprawl over the drawers and the dress she was wearing a few days ago still hangs on the clothes horse. There’s something next to the pile of towels.

“There’s a broken vase here, Carlotta.”

He hears her stand up.

“Okay. Don’t panic. There’s bound to be a logical explanation. But ... I’ll tell mother. Best you don’t touch anything. And ask at the hotel if she might be covering someone’s shift?”

The friendly voice of one of her hotel colleagues answers the phone. He swallows and tries to sound calm as he asks if by any chance Michelle is at work today but the colleague is sorry to tell him she isn’t in today.

He falls to his knees, the floor doesn’t feel hard at all. An hour later, Carlotta and his mother are at the door in the company of Eda, who’s wearing a jacket over her shoulders and carrying files under her arm. Most likely his mother had picked her up straight from the chambers.

“Would you like a coffee?” Henry starts to ask. His mother quickly shakes her head and answers, “Don’t be silly.” At that, tears run down his cheeks, he takes his glasses off and keeps wiping his eyes, while his mother strokes his shoulder and pushes him towards the kitchen, where they sit at the table and Eda looks him in the eye and says, “So, Henry, tell me.”

September, two and a half years earlier

The windows of the restaurant next to the hotel were wet with drizzle. Michelle blew against the glass, wiped her breath away with her hand and peered in through the streaks. It was half full, a few groups of young people sat at the tables surrounded by stands with oysters on ice and lemons, and buckets with bottles of wine. Almost no free seats at the bar. A few guys in shirts sat on the leather stools. She considered going in and sitting next to them, crossing her legs and ordering a Martini. Her tight black skirt would just about cover her modesty. Maybe she'd like the taste of the Martini, at any rate it would look super sexy: the dash of alcohol in the high glass garnished with an olive. Why not see what could happen, it was Saturday night and she was alone, totally alone, in a big city. And while she thought about it, her eyes met someone else's. They were beautiful eyes set on a very beautiful face framed with thick well-cut hair. She turned away from the window, rooted in her bag through lip gloss, notebooks and tinfoil-wrapped food that she'd always swipe from the left-over room service in the corridor just before knocking off, and pulled out a Marlboro Gold that some guests had left in their room. She lit up, took three draws, looked at the crystal clear sky and heard a voice behind her. The bloke from the bar had come outside. Michelle needed a few seconds to register the small rider on his dark blue jumper and his worn-out leather shoes that looked like he'd been wearing them every day for years. She wasn't sure if he was a colleague who shared a liking for far too expensive cocktails at the end of his shift, someone like her. This uncertainty annoyed her. She still couldn't immediately distinguish between guests and colleagues. She'd thought she'd be quicker to adapt. But the guests didn't dress as she'd expected. More discrete. No brand names on their shirts, less bling and floaty, lint-free materials. Everything fitted perfectly. No missing buttons on sleeves, no patches. With the perfume that wafted through the lobby in the course of a day, she could probably pay a full year's rent.

"Hi," said the man, or rather boy. He wasn't yet thirty, probably two or three years younger than her. Delicious, she thought. No beard and a smooth forehead, he looked healthy and had great skin. He looked like he would smell really good.

"Hi," Michelle answered, breathed out smoke and pulled her leather jacket tighter around her. He smiled and said, "Oh, can I have a cigarette?" emphasising the "ette" so much that she

laughed.

“Of course.” She held the packet out and offered him a light.

He took a draw, inhaled, smiled at her again, pulled a face, coughed and patted himself on the chest. Amateur, Michelle thought, but a cute amateur.

“I don’t smoke very often,” he said.

“Oh, really?”

He laughed.

“What are you going to do with the rest of the evening?” he asked and brought the glowing butt back to his lips, but she called, “Oh God, please not again!”

He laughed again.

She briefly considered lying and saying her taxi was just about to arrive that would drive her out to a bar to see a couple of girlfriends, then maybe later head to a club, where she’d tie the ends of her blouse over her belly button. But then she thought, she’d be going against her principles by making her life more interesting for a stranger. He unsettled her, how he stood there so pure and open, and wasn’t intimidated at all. She also wanted to unsettle him.

“Aha. Not much. I’ll probably eat sour apple rings and masturbate to YouTube clips of Ryan Gosling.”

He coughed again, this time without first smoking.

“Cool, ok, yeah. Cool. Great. So... Oh man,” he smiled and she smiled too. Relaxing, she flicked the cigarette to the ground. He watched her stamp out the glow with the tip of her boot, glanced at the ashtray beside the restaurant door then back at her boot from which the synthetic leather was slightly coming away from the edge of the sole, and looked her in the face. She raised her eyebrows and asked him if he was going to lecture her now?

He grinned. “No, no, of course not, but I do want your number. If you want to give me it?”

Aha, she thought, shook her head and ran her hand through her hair; her curls were sitting perfectly today.

“No.”

She pulled her mobile out of her jacket pocket, unlocked it and held it under his chin.

“But you can give me yours.”

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The hourly rate in the hotel restaurant was ok and the atmosphere was better: dimmed lighting, metal counters in front of the open kitchen, hanging wine glasses. Her colleagues were nice, one even came from Lusatia too and they'd immediately got on. At the end of the shift, he'd mix her drinks with expensive ingredients from the bar and she'd share the left-over food. There were good shifts when sweet families celebrated birthdays, were thrilled by the sparklers and the grandmas would tell her how they used to wear their skirts as young women. But the majority of the guests treated her like part of the inventory, carried on speaking, just not to her, as she brought them drinks or cleared the table. When she placed the bill inside the leather case on the table and a guy in a suit or a woman in a blouse put down their credit card without saying a word, but adding a banknote and nodding at her, feeling generous even though the bill was usually at least twenty times that, she'd bite her tongue. However, when the group of men at the window table clicked their fingers after her a few times too many that evening, one of them had even whistled for her, she'd had enough. She took a deep breath, managing to not yell at them but was shaking when she got back to the kitchen.

She knew, she couldn't afford to loose her temper and tell them what she thought of them. But she also couldn't do nothing. And so, she secretly spat in the snaps she brought them on the house at the end of the evening.

Half an hour later, Alexander called her into the office; a colleague had told on her.

His face bright red and full of anger, he accused her of disgraceful behaviour, how could she have spat in the "digestif"? It'd be entirely her fault if they went bankrupt and did she have any idea what she'd done, after all they were regulars... He went on in that vein for ten minutes.

"Calm down and have a drink, Alexander."

He went silent, closed his eyes, his gelled hair shaking from anger. "You stupid thing, this isn't Disneyland!" he hissed.

She threw her apron in the corner, pulled the ridiculous bun maker from her curls and left the office without saying a word. Taking her bag from the hook in the cloakroom, she marched

through the restaurant and past the door where the group of men who'd just drunk her spit cocktail were smoking. Her head pounded as she showed them her middle finger and turned around the corner with her head held high, she was a warrior, a victor.

Back at home, she almost had a nervous breakdown as she pulled the money from the coffee tin, counted out the notes and checked her banking app, biting her knuckles. She thought of her debt. She didn't feel like the beautiful strong woman she usually was but rather lonely, old and pathetic as she sat on the floor and counted up her means of existence with shaking hands. She wondered if everything, the move and the new start, had been a crazy mistake.

Soon after Alexander called her, she feigned disinterest, answered shortly when he apologised, telling her he understood the job is sometimes ... well at some point you hate these people. His voice sounded heavy, and she was sure he had an Old Fashioned on his desk in front of him. She knew how hard it was to find good staff, Alexander always binged on about it. She just needed to stay cool and not let on that the notes on the floor were all she had, just enough for a month and after that nothing, not a penny. That she needed a new job immediately, but what job, or she had to go on benefits, and how was she to pay her debt, she'd have to declare herself bankrupt, then the whole running around would start again. The outlook was bleak, she just mustn't show how desperate she was. She counted to three in her head, then she answered, her voice: like ice, her pulse: racing.

“What do you want Alexander?”

“For you to stay with me.”

“You just fired me.”

Alexander complained into the telephone, saying he knew how hard it is in the restaurant but he needed her, she was quick and good, he could schedule her in the reception and take her off the temp contract, the pay wouldn't be much more but still, and on reception the potential for conflict is lower, he'd noticed her English was quite good and who knows maybe one day she could be “front desk manager”. She silently thanked her trainer who'd sent her on the business English course back then, and folded the fifty euro note from the tin, the paper rustled.

“Alexander, it's fine. Before you drown yourself in tears, I'll come back. But I'll need a travel card, we'll still need to talk about that.”

She heard a sharp intake of breath and was glad he couldn't hear her heart thudding. It was risky, he was hot-tempered and she was, well, still young and needed the money. She heard him take another sip.

“Fine,” he said finally.

“Good.” She answered him just as slowly.

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Henry looked around her flat, her own little world. Tried to see her in her belongings, in the laundry basket spilling over with a mix of black lace and white blouse sleeves, her leather boots, worn-out sneakers and a pair of high heels. A dusty piece of luggage in the corner, the green painted frog on the floor in front of her bed and next to it a pile of magazines, *Spektrum Geschichte* on top. Michelle sat in a baggy T-shirt at the table beside the basin. Next to her a UV light, similar to those in the nail salons where he sometimes picked Carlotta up. Around her glittering jewellery bursting from simple paper boxes. Lots of silver, some gold, lengthy cords, pearls, chips of mother of pearl and a ring set with gems.

“The jewellery is very beautiful,” he said because he couldn't stop looking. The room was so small and then all the sparkling things.

“Yes,” she said, “do you think so?”

“Of course,” he said, his trousers were now dry enough to put on.

“My sister and her friends would love it.”

Michelle looked at him thoughtfully. Her make-up was slightly smudged around her eyes. His ex-girlfriend had never got into bed with him without removing her make-up first.

“What's in the luggage?”

He pointed to the dusty corner.

“Don't ask.”

He could hear a slight change in her voice, she blew on her coffee, which must have cooled by now. He also took a sip of coffee, his lips had been kissed red raw.

“Please tell me.”

“Hmm.”

“Is it something illegal?” he laughed and hoped it sounded like a joke. He noticed he was really nervous and tried to relax.

She stared at him, her frown lines burying deeper into her forehead and told him it was the rest of her tools she used to make jewellery. Soldering torch, casting moulds, files, that kind of stuff.

“Why don’t you make jewellery any more?” he asked because he couldn’t understand it. She had talent, clearly so much talent that she’d had her own shop, more talent than that designer who Carlotta always wanted jewellery from. He could tell immediately, her pieces showed great attention to detail and somehow shone.

She could no longer see any chance for it in her town. Beside her jewellery shop had been a nail salon, which could do the most artful designs but the customers were mainly older people who just wanted dry skin scrubbed off their feet.

Was that why she moved here? To try again?

Michelle looked into her mug, Henry leaned against the sloping roof, looked at Michelle’s hands. They had very gently rested on his shoulders yesterday, but the memory appeared almost absurd to him today as she spoke about the sale of her shop and that afterwards, she’d had to leave the town, get out. That’s why she’s here now. As she explained all that, she didn’t lift her eyes from the mug a single time. He almost hit his head on the roof slope as he bent over the jewellery, touching it with his fingers. Her work was really chic, he said, why not open a new shop here?

“I think what you make is amazing. You shouldn’t just give it up.”

“Hmmm. If you know how I can get hold of 100,000 euro, let me know, then I’ll open another shop and quit the hotel.”

She turned her head towards him and smiled. And he also smiled, outside a bus drove around the building. It screeched, but Michelle didn’t appear to hear it, looked as if she was thinking of something and finished her coffee.

As he put on his shoes, he hit his knee against the door frame. He didn’t take the lift. Holding tight to the railings, he ran, no, jumped down the stairs to the lower floors. The staircase was

narrow and a man came towards him, brushing shoulders. The touch of this stranger felt very intimate.

He walked around two corners before calling himself a taxi. The streets were full of honking cars and smelled of exhaust fumes, people pushed past him and bakeries sold borek and coffee out of hatches. Once he'd told the driver his work address, he thought how interesting it was that he met her in front of the hotel. The way she spoke, apparently without filter, almost a little vulgar, and how she looked at him, so directly. But she wasn't a secretive stranger on a secret mission in the city, no: she was staff. Staff with pearl earrings. What could she possibly want from him, he briefly wondered. What did he want from her actually, but then the taxi stopped outside the office building where Aram stood, smoking. The sun reflected in the glazed window front.

Where had he come from, Aram asked as they walked up the stairs together, saying the occasional hello, and why was he wearing a crumpled shirt, Aram grinned.

“Didn't go home last night, did you?”

Henry almost wanted to tell him what district he'd just come from and about Michelle, but he hesitated, something held him back, and when they got to his office, he pretended his mobile phone was ringing and mouthed the word “later”. Aram tapped his finger to his forehead and Henry waved, pulling the door closed behind him and breathing out. The taste of instant coffee still in his mouth, her smell still in his nose and wearing the same pants as yesterday, he felt wild and alive, but he preferred to keep that to himself.

She was ovulating and wanted him immediately, she wrote to him as she was still in the hotel cloakroom before her energy dropped. Could she come to his, she wanted strawberries and sex, could bring both of them with her, but where did he live?

It's not so comfortable at mine right now, but we could go to yours, or is room 407 free ;)?

She imagined a room in a house share or a small studio with no window in the bathroom and tiles on the floor, maybe he never cleaned, although he always looked clean. She knew from the hotel, the best dressed ones were often the ones who left the rooms in the worst state. She'd helped Ewa and Brigitte a few times with the cleaning, the memory made her retch, but she

Sample Translation „The Second Greatest Love” (Ruth-Maria Thomas)

didn't want to retch, she wanted Henry.

Room is free, she wrote to him, could he bring the strawberries then?

He could.

She was looking forward to him almost a little too much.

They were only going to have sex, she told herself, maybe just today, maybe for a week, but at some point Henry would get on with his life and she with hers, and she had to, absolutely had to concentrate on her life, on her job, on paying off the debt, otherwise it would be the end of it, thought Michelle. And so they had sex as if there was no tomorrow.