

***Je suis quelqu'un* [I Am Someone] by Aminata Aidara**

Translated from the French by Eve Anderson and Charlotte Coombe

Prologue: A Day in June

Part I

Somewhere in Paris, a girl named Estelle is meeting her father. As he walks towards her, face closed, she knows she won't be getting a birthday present. A single thought crosses her mind, it's crystal clear: so be it.

Before going into the bar they barely exchange a smile. They greet each other with a kiss on the cheek. Her father takes a deep breath and without so much as a 'How are you?' or an 'I'm fine thanks,' he blurts out: 'Your mother dared to have a child behind my back. With another man. And you've probably...'

He clears his throat, making the sound of a derailed train.

'Yes...as I was saying, you've probably always known about it.'

'What? What am I supposed to know?' she asks, alarmed.

'You've always known about this relationship,' her father replies. He looks at her, a puffed face lit by a ray of sunset. She looks worried. Quivering, he adds: 'But you never told me!'

Those are his first words. It's Estelle who chose the meeting place. The young woman studies the cigar her father is holding. She should answer those tobacco stained lips, or at least reach out and clasp those yellow stained fingers. To make peace. And then never talk again. About anything. What's the point in talking? Her father turns his sweaty face away. Estelle seeks out the tiny, close-set eyes shifting behind his glasses. But he doesn't return her gaze.

They find a table in the bar. The girl contemplates his hands. She remembers when she was little, how she used to pretend his index finger was the long neck of a brontosaurus and the nail its head. Estelle would move his hand, making the dinosaur walk across a napkin.

She closes her eyes. Let it come back, the brimming world of her childhood. A dangerous world for sure, but one she's learnt to tame. And yet, the way she saw things back then, when she cherished what seemed to be simple yet also profound mysteries, is

now just a memory. Since arriving in France fifteen years ago, her nights are devoid of dreams and on the map of her life there is no trace of where she is right now: “lost” is the sole co-ordinate.

Her father looks at her for a moment. Then, still sitting remarkably calmly in the low armchair across the table from her, he picks up where he left off. ‘I didn’t want any of this,’ he says, ‘but your mother’s torn our family apart.’ He raises a hand to summon someone he thinks is the waiter and adds, ‘She’s totally destroyed it.’

Estelle looks out of the window and feels useless. A random person, born at random, living a random life. What is the point of her, actually? And would there be any point in telling her father that this bar doesn’t do table service? She lets him wait. A hostile feeling is warming her chest. Gradually. She frowns.

‘There’s no need to pull that face. If only you’d said something, things would’ve probably been different,’ her father continues, assertively. ‘But you kept quiet Estelle, and I’m convinced you attended your mother’s secret rendezvous. All those times you went out with her, just with her, you were always with her ... You’ve been her alibi for years, haven’t you?’ Estelle thinks back to those afternoons spent at Cindy’s, her mother’s Afro-American friend, the one waiting for her “on the beach”, over the sea, on an island formerly inhabited by slaves: Gorée Island. While her mother disappeared off, she played endlessly with Cindy, listening to her stories. She should never say anything about it to anyone. That was the rule.

Confronted with the girl’s silence, the man shrugs, arms spread, powerless. Then he rests his hands on the table and says, ‘And if you didn’t know, it’s time you knew about this illegitimate son. In any case, he wasn’t a well child, and he died a few days after he was born. Your grandmother, mamie Ichir, is the only one who knows about this business. And now you’re old enough to know about it too. You’re the same age your mother was when she had him. You’re an adult. This is my gift to you on your twenty-sixth birthday, Estelle: a truth you didn’t know. This will teach you that every choice we make has consequences.’

Is she really unaware of this birth? Hadn’t she actually seen this child a long time ago? Or could it have been a dream?

She wonders why she suggested meeting her father in this bar. Why she chose to meet him in a place so close to her heart. She’s partied hard with her friends at the Pères Populaires. She’s tasted happiness, she’s run wild, flayed the nights, gutted loves. Here,

the forever-burning fire inside her can crackle peacefully, flare up furiously, go out and spark up again in a flash.

There aren't many places like this bar, where it isn't illicit to flirt with the boundaries of the unspeakable. When fuelled with various substances, even the slightest sideways glance from the staff can unveil the underlying abyss that consumes us all. Estelle always finds it comforting. Why is it then that these savvy mixologists who've seen her in all kinds of states, now refuse to come anywhere near her table and take the order her father thinks he's called for? They've seen her but they ignore her. Maybe alerted by the look on Estelle's face, the girl behind the counter lets her know, with a discreet shake of the head, that they can't make any exceptions. Estelle interrupts her father:

'Hang on a second, I'll get the drinks. What you having?'

'A double malt beer,' he replies abruptly. His beady eyes scan the bar, outraged by the lack of table service.

Returning from the bar, Estelle notices her father has pulled out an envelope from his briefcase. 'Here's some money your sister Florette wants to give Virginie, for her child. Don't tell Sonia.' Estelle takes the envelope and shoves it into her backpack. Accomplice, scapegoat, double agent. This is what her family has reduced her to. A fluttering in her heart reveals anger held back yet again. Then the normal rhythm returns: of the heart, the breath. Of life.

'Don't you have anything to say?' her father asks, crossing his arms, probing.

'No,' she replies, feeling the stab of guilt always awaiting her on the threshold of any expected answer.

She hesitates briefly, then adds:

'Actually, yes ... Thanks for this revelation. I really need it to live.'

'To live?' he asks half sarcastically, half surprised, cheeks wobbling as he shakes his head.

'Yes. To live better. Thank you. I mean it.'

Estelle pushes her untouched Diabolo away, but the glass topples, spilling all over her. Retching, she runs out of the Pères Populaires. Once outside, at the crossroads by Buzenval metro station, she breathes in huge lungfuls of polluted air. She is free. She won't go back in. Meetings with her father can end like this sometimes. Nothing new.

Hadn't he told her once, 'You're someone who throws life's details in the bin, you're a superficial person, you've got no manners, no discipline. You don't know how to greet

people – or how to end a conversation!?” He was right. Estelle meticulously rids herself of life’s meaningless niceties.

As she jumps over the metro turnstile, she thinks that in fact, it’s time to take a leap backwards. Towards her mother. Towards herself.

[...]

Part II

Somewhere in Clichy, a woman is mopping the floor of an I.T. room. This woman's name is Penda and the place where she is right now is a technical college, currently deserted. Lessons ended about three weeks ago and the baccalauréat final exams have just finished.

Running a cloth over the windows, Penda sees the last days of school flash before her; it started with the students chucking paper aeroplanes and bits of rubber around, and squirting jets of cola and other sugary drinks, the ones that leave sticky stains and attract insects. Eventually, the stink bombs splattering on the floor at the end of lessons became the constant smell of the end of term. Of course, the usual "animal cries" hollered by the students to let off steam between exams could not be ignored. There were all sorts: lions with sore throats, soprano nightingales, golden-voiced monkeys, killjoy cats, plagued dogs.

In these moments, when Penda closes her eyes, she imagines herself in a zoo condemned for animal abuse. And yet she can also feel the genuine shared happiness of the final days of school. Less than a month ago, in a cloud of vape and roll ups, the kids with their absurd hairstyles, lounging over their scooters, talked about everything but the final tests they had to pass in order to move up to the baccalauréat. A little like herself today: thinking about everything but the thing she should really be worrying about.

Such are Penda's thoughts as she scrubs at the semi-permanent writing adorning the desks. She then starts reading about the musical legends of the year: 'Booba fucks Rohff'; 'Mac Tyser versus Kery James'; '50 Cent power'; 'La Milice 4ever'; 'Ol Kainry you're the king of Évry'; 'Respect for Kaaris'; 'Lacrim the Boss'.

Penda looks at her watch hooked on the end of her necklace; it's almost eleven: time for lunch. She's really hungry. The five a.m. wakeups make her belly complain all day long. She goes down the stairs, leaves her cleaning trolley on the second floor and descends to the canteen, in the basement, to warm up the food she's brought from home. The other cleaning ladies eat later. Three more hours and she can go home.

Her meal finished, Penda retrieves the trolley and goes to the ground floor to focus on the least disagreeable task of her job: sweeping the floor in the study room.

The last time she did this with a teenage audience observing her was two weeks ago, when she found four students in there who'd been excluded from lessons.

‘Why did you get excluded?’ Penda asked, tapping the floor gently with her broom to make them lift their feet in turn, so she could sweep. Dylan, a boy who is working at growing his hair from tiny vanilla pods into thick dreads, answered, ‘I was making my book do sit-ups. Look at him Miss: he’s broken his spine. Proper athlete though. But he’s all messed up now. I’m giving him a bit of a rest.’

Laughing, she turned to one of the students always high on some substance or other, ‘What about you, Thibault?’

‘I had some tobacco in my pencil case. A few papers. I did roll one, but I swear Miss, I was listening! On my mother’s life!’

Penda wondered why teachers end up losing their sense of humour. But all became clear a few minutes later when she heard two other kids talking about their coursework. The topic was, “You are the new French President: what reforms will you implement during your term of office?” One spoke, the other wrote. It went like this: “So, write down that women have to work while men stay at home.” “Yes, brilliant!” “Then add that gay marriage is prohibited, and divorce is illegal.” “But my parents are separated,” said the scribe, stunned. “We don’t care, we’re writing about the future; what’s done is done.” “Oh yeah, you’re right. What should we put about healthcare?” “Write that I allow doping so that everyone can fulfil their full physical potential.” “And about immigration?” “So ... foreigners can come to France, but they’ve only got four months to learn to speak, read and write French. Otherwise they’ll be sent back to their homeland.” “But my mother’s been here for twenty years and she still doesn’t speak very good French,” protested the clerk, who was clearly of Asian origin. “Right, then put down twenty years max. And then write that there’ll be a monthly lottery to take in ten immigrants. The winners get to host! Illegals will be sent to jail, which basically means a paid work centre...” Penda shuddered and walked away.

As she’s thinking back to these scenes from the previous weeks, a supervisor enters the room with a young man fresh out of lower school who has come to register for the coming year. Accompanied by his exhausted mother, the boy looks awkward, like a little hunched old man. But he turns out to be quite controversial: right off the bat he says he doesn’t want his picture taken for the yearbook.

When asked, ‘Why do you want to come to this school?’ he replies, ‘Because I didn’t know what else to do. Is that good enough for you?’

Penda goes up to the second floor and carries on with the cleaning. At two o’clock she goes back down to the changing rooms in the basement, next to the canteen.

The building is so deserted. Every summer, the emptiness of the place unsettles her.

And the kids, so far away right now, have no doubt forgotten everything they've learned during the last nine months of school. She takes off her tabard and sits by the window. Her Caribbean friends talk amongst themselves in Creole. She understands it perfectly now, but she's chosen not to speak it until she feels brave enough to say at least one sentence out loud in Bassari, the language of her grandmother's native region, the language of her heart.

Penda examines herself in the small mirror she always keeps in her bag. Even though she knows the crude light from the windows doesn't help, she still thinks she looks terrible. There is sorrow running through her wrinkles. But she won't see any change until she accomplishes what's been on her mind for a while now. The Final Letter.

[...]

Once back at home, Penda opens the French windows onto the balcony and sits down. Faced with the sky and her blank sheet of paper, she writes:

Éric. Sometimes I remember a time when I could fall asleep as if it were natural, and not a fight. But we can't turn back time. And if I am never able to sleep again, that means it is my destiny.

She lifts her pen, then lowers it and in one stream writes:

When I walk this city's streets, I sometimes think it could have all been so different. Then I'd rather believe that you've always seen me differently from who I really am. Because if I'm to assume the compliments you use to spice up your rare letters, and the kindness you've shown in them over the last two years, are really meant for me, me alone, Penda ... you'd break my heart again. If they are, then why haven't you done anything to fix this situation, to keep me close to you?

Penda mops the sweat from her brow. It's so hard to keep going. However, pressing the pen against the paper, she continues:

I want you, therefore, to imagine me as an insensitive woman, focused only on trivial family goals, a person who refused to understand you and who, despite wanting to, hasn't gone beyond her own limits. I want

you to think of me as a selfish being who thinks only of her own feelings, someone who, in protecting herself, is forever hurting others. I want you to look at me as you would look at a child who, despite time passing and despite a desire to change, has stayed the same.

Isn't she, perhaps, going down the pathetic route? Penda is tempted to scrunch up the paper. But she's done that too many times. And if the urge to write to Éric persists, it's because she's never let the missive go. She keeps going:

And I ask myself: who will recognize, the way I do, the sudden opaqueness that clouds your green eyes when you get angry? Who will understand that your relationship with your family is fraught with guilt which you meticulously try to atone for? Oh Éric! I've loved everything about you. Your funny way of photographing me, the sweaty smell sometimes seeping out of your vests, your quiet yet expressive laughter, your heart-shaped mouth betraying a tenderness instantly refuted by your stormy eyebrows. Who will know, as I do, how much self-love, self-adoration you have?

The memory of Éric's episodes inhabits her with the same violence as before, a violence that was palpable. She adds:

And who will discover your self-destructive drive?

She imagines him frowning and offers the only compliment she has left on the tip of her pen:

Who will know the pleasure you find in the words in books, or in the words you manage to weave into your emphatic and rigorous writing? You've managed to understand so many things about life.

But he understood nothing about her. Or maybe he did, maybe he has understood her. And that's why he rightly kept away from her everyday life as much as he could. Overwhelmed by the return of a familiar bitterness, she writes:

And I think about the fact that I came to France for you. And that here you rediscovered me in a new light, but you also drove me away.

Blood rushes to her head, making her dizzy. Anger comes back like that sometimes, without warning:

I've always been the one people call on when they don't feel well. The gentle and understanding woman who brightens up the dark times. The one who, during times of euphoria and excitement, must step aside, because someone who strives for transparency at all costs, in the end, spoils the party. Transparency and kisses are the kind of things reserved for evenings drinking tea and watching the snow fall outside. It's always with other women that the thrills of life have earned the right to be plucked by your hands, and shared. Who are these women exactly? I'd like to know. Please. Tell me – finally.

Feeling a warm breeze, she closes the shutters and is struck by a sudden need to end this piece of writing. She concludes:

And now, now that I'm older, I don't let myself go with men before listening to what they have to say. What they've done, what their plans are for the future. I coldly examine their moves, the symbols they wear, the flags they claim to fly. With you everything was simpler: I accepted you without knowing what you had done, or what you would have done. Without tomorrow, and without certitudes, I simply revelled in what you were. You were your own symbol. But I don't believe you saw mine, my symbols: did you really know me? I can teach you to love me. If you want to. It wouldn't take long you know. A lifetime!

Her timely sarcasm surprises her sometimes.

You made many promises to me, Éric, all of them terrible. But there's one last one, the fifth one – do you remember? I'd like to close this chapter of my life.

Help me do it. If you can.

Penda

She takes the stamped addressed envelope and, pulling on the first coat she finds hanging in the hallway, she heads down the stairs and out into the street. The letter slides, surrendering without a fight, into the box labelled “Paris and Suburbs”.

Penda feels much better already.

Back indoors, she gets ready to do what she's been doing every day for the past sixteen years. She goes to the bedroom, opens the wardrobe, and takes out a small wooden box. Inside there is a sachet of *Agnogu*, an herb powder that Penda keeps because she'd used it to wash the child. There is also a bracelet made from vegetable bark – *Rafia* – the kind that Bassari people put on new-borns to protect them from illness and all sorts of other evils. As always, Penda takes it in her hands extremely gently. Even if the object had not fulfilled its purpose, she caresses it tenderly for the simple reason that the child had touched it himself. Next from the small box, she more casually takes out a knotted bead necklace, never used; an adornment which would have helped the child, if he'd reached six months old, with the pain of teething.

A few minutes later, pacified, she puts everything away. And just as she lifts the back of the box and presses it against her forehead, as if blessing herself – and blessing him – the doorbell rings. Who could that be? In the hall, Penda peers through the viewer. It's the youngest of her four daughters, Estelle, who brings her face right up to the door and whispers, 'Mum. It's me.'