

INBOX

CARE SANTOS

Excerpt translated from Catalan into English by Julie Wark

**Translation made with the Grant to carry out promotional activities focused on Catalan and
Aranese literature**

 **institut
ramon llull**
Catalan Language and Culture

JANUARY

From : Alèxia

To: Woodward

Subject: My New Year's resolution

Date: 1 January

Most dear, most admired Mr Benedict Woodward,

I hope this is still your email address. And I also hope you read your mail yourself. I've been told that lots of famous people never look at their mail, or they have a secretary (or someone) who does it for them.

I've been thinking for a while about how I should start this message. I've written the first sentence several times, erased it, written it again, erased it again ...

Then I wondered: how many ways are there of starting a message? A thousand? A hundred? Is there some manual that teaches this? Do you know? I'm sure you do because you know everything (or nearly everything) about writing.

Well, I'll start at the beginning: a greeting.

Hello! Happy New Year!

I know I can do better than this.

Hello. How are you? I wish you all the best for the coming year.

Too cold, maybe?

Third try:

Hello. How are you? I hope you're well and that this new year will be fantastic. The best.

OK, I know that hasn't turned out very well. I'm going to try something else. Writing this message was one of my new year's resolutions, right? The clock was still striking midnight when I promised myself that, this time, I had to do it (I'd thought about it many times before but then never dared to). So, here I am. I hope I'm brave enough, this time, yes, to send it to you. I have to do it because it's a new year's resolution and new year's resolutions can be left unfulfilled.

To stick with the normal order of things, I think I should now introduce myself.

Good afternoon, or good evening, or good morning (delete what doesn't suit). My name is Alèxia. I'm sixteen, I want to be a writer, and I'm your biggest fan on planet Earth. Your books have completely changed my life, or changed me, or changed everything. Without your work, I'd be another person, more boring, or simpler, or maybe I wouldn't be anything at all. I mean, for me, you've really—and I mean really—been an influential (or something like that) person. I'm sure you've often been told the same thing, but my story isn't like the others.

I'll tell you a tiny little part (please don't stop reading, because now it's getting to the most interesting bit).

The relationship I have with your books goes back a few years to when my mother gave me *The Transparent Dragon*. I didn't know anything about you then, and hardly anything about your books. I was a lonely kid, a bit strange, and living in her own world, exactly like the main character in your story, Gulliver the dragon, and I also felt as if I was transparent in the eyes of everyone so my mum thought I'd identify with your character.

She was dead right. Actually, I wasn't such a little girl. I was thirteen. But I had lots of problems. For example, I didn't have any friends. None, not a single one, a total void. I didn't like reading much either. That's why Mum thought a kids' book might help me, and she chose one especially for me, which is how Gulliver the dragon became my first real friend, and also the only one. Isn't that incredible? Then Mum died, and your dragon and I were alone for quite a long time. I think we kept each other company and helped each other quite a lot. I keep this book like a treasure and read it again every time I feel sad. I mean, recently, I've been reading it over and over again. Though I've read all your novels and have seen all the films based on your books, and I'm a total fan of some of them, like *Distant Star* and *The Purple Horizon*, Gulliver the dragon is still my best friend, the one who understands me most. I don't know what I would have done without him. Or without you, who invented him.

I think I loved Gulliver because he reminded me of me: his shyness, his insecurity, and his sadness were like mine. He also wanted to be left alone, like me. Thanks to him—and to you—I understood that being alone isn't the worst thing that can happen to you. And it isn't the worst precisely because there are people like you in the world who write stories like this. Then, I read in an interview that, in fact, you invented the character of the dragon with your son Benjamin in mind, and I liked it even more. And I realised that Benjamin and I must be more or less the same age. I thought he'd be a little bit older than me. I liked that. It was as if you understood me better, me and all the kids of my age because we were the same age as your son. I wondered if Benjamin and I had anything in common. Some feature of character, perhaps? Or favourite food, or TV programme. A song we both liked? Silly fixations like the way I touch my ear when I'm going to sleep? I realised I'd never seen

your son's face in any magazine and decided to investigate a little. It seemed both strange and normal. It's strange because I don't know how he could be the son of someone so famous, live in the most exclusive zone of Miami, and not appear anywhere. It's normal because I know that lots of famous people make sure that their kids don't appear in the media when they're still under age, precisely because of that: wanting to spare them the hassles of being famous. Or maybe he doesn't like being famous. I don't know. Each to his own. I even wondered if your son might have a Twitter account (I know you don't like the social media), and I was looking for him for several days. Benjamin Woodward. Nothing. There's no one by that name in the social media. Or photos. Or videos. Or anything at all. I gave up. I still have the feeling that your son and I could be good friends, so I'd like to meet him and tell him how lucky he is to have you close to him every day of his life. Anyway, I'm sure he already knows that.

Ah, and by the way, I know Benedict Woodward isn't your real name but a pseudonym you adopted when you started publishing stories in the United States, and that you were only trying to cover up your Catalan origins because it doesn't happen very often that a Catalan writer publishes stories in certain American magazines. Later on, you thought it sounded interesting and you decided to use the name for your meteoric career as a writer, which was just then taking off like a rocket, and blah, blah, blah ... I've read the interview where you talk about all that. A thousand times! And I've asked myself a thousand times if I should do the same when I'm a writer. I mean take a false name. Or maybe I could be world famous with my name. Alèxia López? What do you think? Too ordinary? Would it be better to use my mum's surname? Alèxia Bordó? Alèxia L. Bordó?

Alèxia L. B.? Initials always sound mysterious. What do you think? Can you give me your opinion, please?

Anyway, as I was saying, I decided that, for writing to you, I was going to use your literary pseudonym instead of your real name, for two reasons: a) because I hope you'll like me: and b) because I'm not totally sure what your real name is and I don't want to put my foot in it with my first message.

You're still not tired of reading? Yay! That's much more than I hoped for! And a great honour because I'm sure you've got loads of commitments. Your phones must be ringing nonstop, and people in a thousand different places want your attention. I'll only steal a few more seconds of your time to ask a very important question.

When's your new novel coming out?

A year ago (more or less), you said in an interview that you were near the end, so it must be finished now, right? You should know (though I'm sure you do know) that your fans are dying to read it. Please let me know when it will be in the bookshops and I'll run and tell Delmira, my bookseller, who'll be mad with joy. Delmira's not only my bookseller but she's also a friend of mine. She's been going through a bad patch recently and that's why I'd like to cheer her up with some really fabulous news, like a new book of yours.

It'd be fantastic if you'd agree to launch the novel in Delmira's bookshop—the most beautiful one in the world—where you've got heaps of fans and you'll be able to taste the truly mar-vel-lous chocolate cherry cake, which is the specialty of the house. Delmira always makes it for special events, and also when she's sad because she often says it's a cake that soothes the sorrows of the soul. Isn't that beautiful? Delmira's like that. A special person. Have you ever tasted chocolate cherry cake? Do you remember the last time you

did? Ah, and I haven't told you, Delmira's bookshop is called Gulliver, in homage to the dragon in your story, of course. You see that you must come and visit her? One day I might tell you about how I met Delmira. It's a story that's also related with you and my beloved transparent dragon, so you should know about it.

I hope you'll accept this invitation. Yes, yes, I know that famous writers like you tend to launch your books in these huge and horrible bookstore chains, those places with no personality and where all the book sellers look the same. For this very reason, wouldn't it be great if, for once, you made an exception for a good cause? You'd make a lot of people very happy, and maybe even you'd be very happy. I'm not wrong, am I?

I hope you didn't give up reading a while ago. If you got this far, you'd do well to invest a little bit more time and patience to think hard about my suggestion. Promise me you'll do that, even if it's only for five seconds, and that you won't start shaking your head now, very seriously, thinking you're going to say no. That wouldn't be like you. I know better than anyone (because I've been a reader of yours for a long time and I've read all the interviews I could get my hands on) that you're a person of enormous sensibility.

Alright, that's it. This is all I had to tell you. If only this message were the beginning of a good friendship. That'd be the most incredible thing that's ever happened to me.

If you have some spare time and can give me some special advice for my future career as a writer, I'd be very grateful.

To conclude, I'll now write a very original word that no one's ever used for a farewell: goodbye.

Alèxia

PS: I look forward to your reply, long or short. Better long.

From : Woodward

To: Alèxia

Subject: Received

Date: 5 January

Miss Bordó,

Thank you for writing such a spontaneous message.

Could you tell me where you managed to find my personal email address? I appreciate your attention and wish you good luck.

B. Woodward

From : Alèxia

To: Woodward

Subject: Wow!

Date: 6 January

Dear Mr Woodward,

I can't believe it! My favourite writer has written to me! After I sent you my message on Saturday afternoon, I must have checked my inbox a thousand times. I looked before going to sleep. And several times as soon as I woke up in the morning. I kept hoping till Monday. Today I was starting to lose hope. The cheeky voice that lives in my head was telling me, "You're just a dreamer. He won't answer. He's got much more important things to do. What you're hoping for is impossible." But I kept looking. Checking for mail... Updating mailbox ... Updated. No new message in the inbox.

When I saw your name in the column that says "Today" and "Received", my heart nearly exploded. I was so excited! I read your email a dozen times to make sure I wasn't dreaming! It was your name! And the message was addressed to me, to Alèxia! Yes, I know, your message isn't exactly one of those long confessions that are sometimes spilled by characters in old novels. It only has one hundred and ninety-three characters, counting spaces, which isn't a lot, to be honest. And it also sounds a bit cold, as if you wrote it in the fridge. But it doesn't matter because it's very important for me to imagine you tapping the keys one hundred and ninety-three times, just for me. Exactly the same keys you tap to write your novels. It's amazing!

By the way, I see that you answered me at 3.28 in the morning. However eccentric you writers might be, don't you think that's a crazy time to be answering emails? Or that's what I was thinking until I suddenly remembered something you once said in an interview, which touched me a lot. You said that, when you're about to finish a novel, you work day and night, often in the early hours of the morning because that's the bit of time when you make best use of the hours, not only because the world's quiet and calm but also because it's the time of day when you're assailed by your obsessions (and you said that you have more and more as the years go by but you don't care because obsessions are good for writing, though I must confess I don't quite understand this).

Then I realised ... Of course! You're finishing the new novel! Right then I forgave you for writing me such a brief message. I understood that you've got more interesting things to do than writing to me. I felt embarrassed because I interrupted you at such a time. But I was so thrilled to have discovered this! It's like knowing a very important secret. Couldn't you tell me in advance the title of the new book? Delmira would be so happy if she knew (and me too).

So, I'll forgive you for writing me only a hundred and ninety-three characters (counting spaces too) if you'll tell me something about the novel. It would also be nice if you told me something about Benjamin, as I asked in my first message. I'm very curious about him.

I won't steal any more of your time.

Your admirer (and future writer),

Alèxia, the spontaneous

PS: I forgot! I see you addressed me by my mother's name, Bordó. Alèxia Bordó. Is that because you believe I should sign with that name when I publish my first novel? Is that what you wanted to tell me?

From: Woodward

To: Alèxia

Subject: Message number 2

Date: 7 January

Miss Bordó,

In my message I asked you a question and you have not answered. I ask you to do so as soon as possible, and preferably in the first line of your response.

Thank you very much.

B. Woodward

PS: There is no new novel.

From: Alèxia

To: Woodward

Subject: Questions without answers

Date: 7 January

Mr Woodward,

I see that you aren't very good at answering my questions either. Let me remind you of the most important one: when was the last time you tasted a truly delicious chocolate cherry cake?

And the others:

Don't you have any advice for a future writer?

Is Alèxia Bordó the name I should use to sign when I publish my first book, or do you recommend another one?

What's Benjamin, your son, like?

Please answer, if you don't mind, in the first line and as soon as possible. How strange it is to be writing these things, don't you think?

Your admirer,

Miss Bordó (yuck)

PS: What do you mean by "There is no new novel"? You don't mean that you're not writing any new book, do you? That would be terrible! Please, tell me it's not true.

From: Woodward

To: Alèxia

Subject: Message number 3

Date: 9 January

Miss Bordó,

I beg you not to waste any more of my time. Please, answer my question, as I have requested more than once.

B. Woodward

From: Alèxia

To: Woodward

Subject: Answers to questions

Date: 12 January

Dear Mr Woodward,

To tell the truth, I'm not really sure how I managed to get your email address. Maybe online, but I don't recall. Or some book page, perhaps. Or some publisher's website. I'm not at all certain. In fact, I don't think it's such an important question.

I've answered your question in the first line, as you requested. Now, it's my right to ask you to respond to my doubts. In fact, what interests me most is your new novel. Why do you say there's no new novel? Is it written but you don't want to publish it yet? Did you fall out with the publisher? I've read that these things happen. Is it finished but all of a sudden you don't like it? I could read it and give you my most sincere opinion if you like. It can't be true that there's no new novel coming. Do you know how many people are waiting for it? Haven't you checked the online forums lately? Do you realise how jittery your readers are after waiting four years for a new book? Can you imagine what they'd feel like if they found out that this book doesn't exist? That would be terrible! That would make a whole lot of people unhappy. Starting with me (and I hope that matters to you).

As for time, all those people who think that time's a precious commodity because it escapes are very mistaken. Yes, yes, I know what Virgil said all those centuries ago: "*Tempus fugit*", time flies, and all that. And that, later, Horace came along and added

“*Carpe diem*”, seize the day. That’s all very lovely and very classical but it isn’t true. Time doesn’t exist. It can’t be measured. It’s nothing. So, it can’t be wasted either. It might seem that I have more time than you because I’m young and you’re getting old, but that’s another error. No one knows how much time we have left—neither me nor you—and, in part, that’s where the fun is. If we knew how many hours we have, life would have no suspense. And it’s a good thing that life, like novels, has a bit of suspense, wouldn’t you say?

An important matter: would you mind not calling me “Miss Bordó”? It sounds like a character from an old novel. My name is Alèxia. And could you stop addressing me so formally, so I don’t get the giggles every time I open one of your emails. I’m sure that, if you do that, you’ll feel better! All these formalities are a pain in the neck.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Your admirer (still),

Alèxia

From: Woodward

To: Alèxia

Subject: I don't believe you

Date: 14 January

Miss Bordó,

Thank you for the lesson on literature, future writer.

Do you know what? I do not believe a word you say.

What do you mean when you say you do not remember how you got my address? Or that you found it online? You need to give me a more convincing answer, and the sooner you do so the better. If you found it on some online page, you must send me the address immediately. What they are doing is illegal and I plan to report it. Of course, this would not be the first time. The Internet is a source of problems for creators, especially because there are people like you who do not understand where the limits lie. It is obvious that you have not been able to find it on the web page of any publishing house. Publishers are not in the habit of giving out private information about their authors and especially without their consent. I therefore urge you, once again, to be honest and tell me how you obtained my personal address, which is information that only my most trusted friends and a few family members have. I am not joking. This is not a game. It is a very serious matter, related to privacy, data protection, and the law. I beg you to make the effort to see it in this way. I await your explanations so that we can put an end to this disagreeable situation for once and for all.

B. Woodward

From: Alèxia

To: Woodward

Subject: I was thinking...

Date: 15 January

Mr Disagreeable,

Writing in the wee hours of the morning again? You sent the last email at 4.17 a.m. Now I know you're not finishing any novel, I'm starting to think you're depressed or have insomnia. No doubt depression and lack of sleep explain why you're always in such a bad mood.

I think I'm getting angry. In your message, I'm not sure whether you're treating me like a thief or an idiot. Both things bother me because I'm neither. I know very well what the limits of the Internet are. I'd never dream, for example of downloading books illegally, let alone those by authors I admire. I know that the best way of admiring a writer is paying for his or her work (precisely so that he or she can get on with it). And I know well enough that you've made a lot of public statements about this matter and I strongly agree that you should defend your rights (and those of your colleagues). As for your suspicion that you might be talking to an idiot, you can get that idea out of your head. I'm quite a lot smarter than most people my age. Maybe even smarter than you, Mr Susceptible. I think that doing some yoga and listening to classical music would do you good. They say it's great for dealing with stress. I think you're stressed Mr Woodward.

And now that we're being sincere, I admit I cheated a bit. I do know who gave me your email address. It was Delmira, my bookseller, my friend, your reader. She warned me that maybe you wouldn't reply or that someone else would do it for you, but I think she never imagined you could say such nasty, horrible things like "as soon as possible" or "this disagreeable situation". Luckily you don't write this stuff in your novels because nobody would read them.

By the way, I haven't said a word to Delmira about the proposal I made to you about launching the new book in her bookshop. I thought you were another kind of person and that I could get you to think about it at least. I also hoped you'd answer my question about the chocolate cherry cake, and that you'd give me some helpful advice about starting a novel, but I'd say you don't care about anything that's not money or fame or your grumpy way of being in the world. I thought I could organise for Delmira the biggest surprise of her life and that you'd be happy to be part of it. I thought the launch would be a big success, and we'd all be happy. I thought ...

I like to think that sometimes dreams come true. Do you believe I should stop thinking that? I hope not.

Alèxia

PS: And you're not thinking about being a bit less formal either?

From: Woodward

To: Alèxia

Subject: Delmira

Date: 16 January

Hello again, Alèxia,

Give me the email address or phone number of your friend Delmira so I can ask her myself where she got my address and why she's giving it to everyone. I believe it will be the only way to end this matter. I realise now that, with you, it's impossible.

B. Woodward

From: Alèxia

To: Woodward

Subject: The wrong person?

Date: 17 January

Mr Mistaken,

I have no intention of giving you Delmira's email address because I'm not going to help you to say nasty things to her. She's not in good shape right now and I don't want you to upset her. If you want to parade your bad temper, I offer myself as a volunteer. It won't affect me as I'm starting to get used to it.

I never thought I could say this to you, but I believe I've been very wrong about you for years. The writer I admired isn't at all like the one who's answering my emails. This spineless, resentful version of you makes me feel quite sad. In just seventeen days, you've gone from being my favourite author, the one I so admired, to one of the most loathsome people I've ever met.

Come to think of it, there's also some merit in that.

Alèxia

PS: Congratulations. Your attempt at informality sounds quite good. Pity the tone's so disagreeable. Do you think you could do a little better in this regard?

From Woodward

To: Alèxia

Subject: New requirement (urgent)

Date: 18 January

Alèxia,

If you don't give me the information I'm asking for, I'll have to put this matter in the hands of my lawyers, however disagreeable this may seem to you.

You'd do well to be a little reasonable.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Woodward

From: Alèxia

To: Woodward

Subject: Maybe...

Date: 20 January

Mr Woodward,

Now you're hearing from me. No.

I'm not going to give you anything.

I'm not going to get Delmira involved in this. She doesn't deserve it. She's one of the best people I know.

Tell your lawyers whatever you like. I have no experience in these things, but when I think about lawyers and about me, I have this image of a tank firing at a mosquito.

I've been thinking about it a bit. Maybe, deep down, you're not as vain and selfish as you seem. Maybe you're just having a rough time. I read in some online newspaper that your wife's death was a hard blow for you. Maybe it's just that I showed up in your life at the wrong time. If that's the case, please accept my apologies.

I think the best thing would be for me to disappear from your life forever and leave you alone. In my family, we're very good at disappearing. Both my dad and my mum were great disappearing artists. I'm sure I'll be good at it too.

Do you perceive a certain existentialist tone? You're right! I love thinking about the limits of our existence.

I hope you'll miss me some day.

And here's some friendly advice: next time you receive an email from an admirer, treat her a little better. Even if you're sad. There's no study that says that nasty words are any use in curing sadness.

Your friend (or not),

Alèxia

INBOX by [Care Santos](#)

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