

Las Cartas

Triggered by Eduardo Galeano in Bocas Del Tiempo

by

Michael Bettencourt

67 Highwood Terrace #2, Weehawken NJ 07086
201-770-0550 • 347-564-9998 • michaelbettencourt@outlook.com
<http://www.m-bettencourt.com>

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DESCRIPTION

Friends of the Peruvian poet Juan Ramón Jiménez, to speed his recovery in a sanatorium on the outskirts of Spain, compose “fan” letters from one Georgina Hübner, which have the desired remedial effect. But when Juan decides to travel to Lima to meet Georgina, the friends decide to let Georgina “pass away” instead of revealing their well-intentioned hoax to their friend.

CHARACTERS

- Pablo Bracho
- Mateo Menotti
- Osvaldo Reyes

SET

- Table littered with writing materials and other stuff
- Chairs
- Bottles of wine
- Pitcher of water
- A clothes rack
- Radio

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In a pool of light sit PABLO, MATEO, and OSVALDO at a table, with wine bottles and glasses nestled among boxes of colored paper and envelopes, along with pens, salt-and-pepper shakers, etc. Perhaps also music from a radio in the background, say, Susana Baca.

Nearby stands a coat rack with coats and hats and other paraphernalia hanging from it.

PABLO reads through a three-page letter while the other two look on.

PABLO

Ah—he liked that phrase we came up with—

OSVALDO raises a glass.

OSVALDO

To Georgina—

OSVALDO drinks.

PABLO

And that other one at the end of the second page—

MATEO

He is always one for sugar.

PABLO

Not always—and, in any case, the man is sick, and he is far from home—

OSVALDO

From his cherished Peru and his cherished Peruvian friends.

OSVALDO raises his glass again and drinks.

OSVALDO

To our cherished Peru! And its Peruvian friends!

PABLO

So what does it matter if such sugar betters his condition? Don't drink so much.

OSVALDO

It betters my condition.

MATEO

Does he say anything about his condition?

OSVALDO

You know him—in his mind, ever the youth with the capable lungs—

PABLO

Only hints, as usual—he's right about that—

MATEO

Well, then, the hints, please, at least.

PABLO

He says—he says he's breathing better, not feeling so weak, went for a walk among the geese by the lake—

OSVALDO

I wish he would stop trying to make us feel better—he has rotten lungs, he's always had rotten lungs.

MATEO

This is to his love, don't forget, not us! To his Georgina! He does not want his Georgina to worry about his mortal soul—

OSVALDO

He pictures her—he pictures her gazing from the Bridge of Sighs near her home in Barranco, gazing east to Spain, to Madrid, to his sanatorium nestled in its suburbs!

MATEO

With each letter, his heart arcs back to his beloved Lima—

OSVALDO

Now you're getting the spirit!

MATEO

To his treasured Georgina walking along the Bajada de los Baños to the sea.

PABLO

The ever-restless sea—

OSVALDO

Good! Like the tides of my heart.

PABLO

He felt pleased when he came up with that one for her.

OSVALDO pours each of them more wine.

OSVALDO

I think it gave us all heart when we heard him say that—write that,
I mean—hope in our heart that he will return to us.

The three raise their glasses in salute.

PABLO

To the safe and happy return of our beloved poet and friend Juan
Ramón Jiménez.

They drink. They muse. They fidget.

MATEO

Well, not really, you know. We can't really have him come back.

OSVALDO laughs.

OSVALDO

How ripe is the world with irony.

MATEO

Well, can you imagine us telling him?

OSVALDO

Oh, I have drunk enough to imagine it!

MATEO

So what do you we do if our Georgina's letters heal him enough
to—to—well, you know!

OSVALDO nods toward PABLO.

OSVALDO

Ask him—he kickstarted it all. El escritor. El activador.

MATEO

I don't even want to think about it.

PABLO

We do have to think about it.

OSVALDO

Entertain the idea.

PABLO

We knew it would come to this, at some point, my fellow Georginas—she was ours to begin with but is not now ours—our spirited admirer of the poet Juan Ramón Jiménez is, well, alive. He's got the same letters we have to prove her mutability.

MATEO

But those letters, we wrote them—how stupid it sounds to say that now.

PABLO

Not stupid at all.

OSVALDO

Not at all. They've had the desired medicinal effect, yes? Georgina helped save our friend in exile, our dying friend. That's all we ever wanted to do. And we did it. Will he return? I don't know. But he is alive. Today.

MATEO

But he also loves her—it's clear, clearly written. And we've sent her love back to him—God, it now really does sound stupid for us to have—

OSVALDO

You squirm too much. Wrestle with angels too much. You need more wine.

Which OSVALDO pours for him, and which MATEO drinks.

OSVALDO

How does he end this letter? We didn't get to the ending.

PABLO holds out his glass, into which OSVALDO pours wine. PABLO picks up the letter he had been reading, goes to the third page.

MATEO

Hah, I can see it on your face.

PABLO

It's not what you think, it's not that. The doctors say that he still needs to remain where he is.

MATEO

But for how long?

PABLO quotes from the letter.

PABLO

“They, of course, do not allow themselves to nibble at optimism—ambiguity suits their scientific temperaments. But I can read behind it—at the least, I am not sentenced here forever. At the least, Peru is within reach. At the least, you are what I reach for—and what I will reach.”

OSVALDO

Our medicines have medicated well, if I do say so myself—which I just did.

MATEO

And how shall Georgina respond to this small, but straight, ray of sunlight shining westward from the east? If—when—

OSVALDO

When—

PABLO

It will be “when”—

MATEO

So, when he returns, we will have to tell him the lie.

OSVALDO

Unless we hire a Georgina.

MATEO

Oh, and for how long?

OSVALDO

I'm only spinning out possibilities.

MATEO

Impossibilities.

OSVALDO

No stone should stay unturned when one wrestles with the angel
of conscience.

OSVALDO raises his glass and laughs.

OSVALDO

Sayeth the lover of Bacchus and the grape!

PABLO

We can't hire a Georgina.

OSVALDO

Let us figure out exactly why.

PABLO gives OSVALDO a "look" that is loving and chiding at the same time.

PABLO

Even Bacchus can see that it is an impossibility.

OSVALDO

Why?

MATEO

Why?

OSVALDO

We'd just have to find a woman—luckily we sent him no photos,
so no need to match one for one—a woman willing to sacrifice
herself forever for a certain sum of, say, monthly money and who
would have to memorize every jot and tittle of every word she had
ever written to the poet and who would have to fall in love with him
in some real and depthful way and who would—

MATEO

The grape-lover speaks madness.

OSVALDO

So, possible, yes, of course—probable, no. I can see that through
my lens of wine.

MATEO

Why are you not worried about this?

OSVALDO just grins stupidly. MATEO turns to PABLO.

MATEO

Why is he so flippant and—and—

OSVALDO

And—and—

MATEO

Well, why?!

OSVALDO both roars and guffaws at the same time.

OSVALDO

Because I fucking love the great loving joke of it all—we've screwed things up like life itself in the most interesting of ways!!

OSVALDO goes for another bottle of wine but can't find any wine in any of them.

OSVALDO

¡Que lastima! Where shall I find my poetry? How shall I find my way home?

PABLO reaches under the table and pulls out a bottle. He pops out the cork and pours some into OSVALDO's glass, who sips.

OSVALDO

Ahhhh! You start with the best intention in your in your heart, and the spider of that intention spins and spins, and the warp spools out our friend's health and the weft leaves us both ass-faced and the most super-duper-terrific friends anyone could ever have, and then pain will follow joy, joy will bring us pain, and then—and then—

OSVALDO puts on a sad face, looks at PABLO.

PABLO

I know.

MATEO
You know what?

PABLO
I know.

MATEO
What do you know that I don't know?

PABLO
You already know it—

OSVALDO
Our angel-wrestler—

PABLO
—you just don't want to admit it.

MATEO
I don't know what you're talking about! And I certainly don't understand what the one with the sideways mouth over there is saying about “weft” and “warp” and spiders and—and—

MATEO trails off, goes silent. He holds out his glass. PABLO pours, then pours some into his own. MATEO sighs deeply.

MATEO
It's not right.

They all fall silent.

MATEO
Shouldn't we at least wait until we know he is actually going to return, you know, tickets bought, in hand, trunks packed, passport stamped, up the gangplank, into the cabin? The letter—you said that he said the doctors aren't ready to release him yet, so she can still write to him, she can—

PABLO and OSVALDO peer at him.

MATEO
Well, she can still write to him!

OSVALDO

His youth is showing.

MATEO

We—she—can write more letters!

OSVALDO

His tenderized heart.

MATEO

Don't—

PABLO

Don't mock him.

MATEO

Right!

OSVALDO

Might as well tell me not to breathe.

PABLO

You make such an improbable cynic.

OSVALDO

True—I have not the self-discipline to suck the oxygen out of a room.

MATEO

Stop it! Stop it! This is our friend's heart we are talking about. It is breaking our friend's heart that we're—talking—about—

They all fall silent.

PABLO

When—and how—on the table, now. We only have two choices: we either break it here, or we break it there.

They muse in silence some more. MATEO is distraught.

OSVALDO

I have a friend. Several. In the embassy. And in the consul's office in Madrid.

PABLO

You never told me.

OSVALDO

It is a shady past we share. Shared. We were just lucky we never got caught.

PABLO

You, a smuggler?

OSVALDO

Please—I do not want to taint your good soul.

MATEO

What are you talking about? How would that work? How would that work?!

OSVALDO

Come with me.

OSVALDO takes MATEO over to the coat rack. He selects off it what looks like a suit-jacket and a formal-looking cap and hands them to MATEO. He puts on his own rumpled linen jacket and battered panama.

He speaks to PABLO.

OSVALDO

You know what to say—telegram-style, por favor.

PABLO scribbles words on a piece of the rose-colored paper, then folds it and envelopes it, and hands the envelope to MATEO.

PABLO

Don't read it.

OSVALDO

You're a courier. From the consul's office—connection from my friend. And I am Juan Ramón Jiménez. Recently recovered from a touch of—something—lungful and romantic.

OSVALDO takes up a convalescent pose. He coughs.

OSVALDO

Go on—come in.

MATEO, distraught, stamps on the floor as if he's knocking on a door.

OSVALDO

Yes?

MATEO hesitates, then stamps again.

OSVALDO

Coming.

OSVALDO moves as if he is coming to a door.

OSVALDO

What can I do for you, young man?

MATEO

I have—I have a message.

OSVALDO

From?

MATEO

From the consul general's office.

OSVALDO

Which country? I have many in my back pocket.

MATEO

From Peru, señor.

OSVALDO

Is there a name on it?

Without answering him, MATEO thrusts the envelope forward. OSVALDO looks at it, and something shifts inside him, away from his flippancy towards something more dense. He coughs from deep in his lungs, then he takes the envelope. He fishes out a coin and hands it to MATEO, who takes it but looks confused as he takes it.

OSVALDO opens the envelope and takes out the paper.

OSVALDO

Have you ever loved, young man, been loved in return?

MATEO doesn't answer, just waits. OSVALDO reads it.

OSVALDO

Georgina Hübner is dead. Stop. Deepest condolences. Stop. This came all the way from—

MATEO

By cable. Today. Your friends wanted you to know.

OSVALDO

My friends. They introduced her to me.

MATEO

They must love you deeply.

OSVALDO coughs, and it is not a performance. MATEO puts a hand on him to comfort and support, gives PABLO a worried look. PABLO hands MATEO a glass of water, which he gives to OSVALDO. OSVALDO sips, gives it back.

When OSVALDO stops coughing, he is in tears—and they are not from coughing.

OSVALDO

This is good—this is good, what they did, what they have done.

OSVALDO folds the note back into the envelope, puts the envelope in his pocket, wipes his eyes on his sleeve.

OSVALDO

Thank you. Thank you.

MATEO

Is there a message you want to send back? I can arrange for that.

OSVALDO

No. Thank you. You can go now.

MATEO backs away, takes off the suitcoat and hat, hangs them up.

PABLO

Is that what he will do?

MATEO

We need to add another line: "Come home. Stop."

PABLO

We can do that—that would be good. Is that what he will do?

OSVALDO

Well, he won't go raving into the streets or starve himself—

PABLO

That's true.

OSVALDO

He will have his beloved melancholy to soothe him and keep him inspired and afloat.

OSVALDO takes off his coat and hat, hangs them up, sit, drinks.

OSVALDO

You know, of course, that he will want to see the grave. And headstone. Or at least the urn. If we know about her, then we will know that about her as well, know it for him.

The other two grab their wine glasses and drink.

MATEO gets OSVALDO's hat and puts it on. He raises his glass and speaks, in a smooth imitation of OSVALDO.

MATEO

Such a death is not an easy thing to pull off. It is, in its own way, our last work of art.

OSVALDO laughs.

OSVALDO

I do believe he has matured in the course of these several hours.

PABLO

Let us plot this out some more. Contact your friends in the embassy, make sure this can be done.

MATEO

I will check out urns.

PABLO

I will work the wording.

PABLO picks up the three-page letter.

PABLO

In the meantime, Georgina has some things to say about the diagnosis of doctors.

PABLO pulls out a fresh sheet of rose-colored paper and hands it over to MATEO, along with Georgina's fountain pen. MATEO writes the date.

PABLO

Now, let's see—"Querido Juan"—

As MATEO writes, lights out.