

Joseph Gueron
6207 Lakeview Drive
Falls Church, VA 22041
(703)642-5487
jgueron@gmail.com

About 2400 words

A STARTLING CHOICE

by Joseph Gueron

Laura was cleaning the bottom desk drawer where she kept assorted Happy Birthday cards, Mother's day cards, Christmas cards she had received through the years and somehow had touched her. Also among them were a few meaningful letters friends and lovers had given her in the sixty-seven years of her life. As she prepared for surgery, being somewhat fatalistic, Laura dreaded the thought of others rummaging through her things, in particular Sarah, her daughter and harsher critics.

With delight, she lighted a Virginia Slim, knowing that in a few days, they would deny her one of her few remaining pleasures. Slowly swaying in her rocking chair,

the drawer at her side, she would pick at random a card and read it. A hand made birthday card, from Sarah when she was five, made her smile. A Valentine card crudely made by her son Jimmy when he was four made her cry. A drunken driver had killed Jimmy while he was riding his tricycle that fateful afternoon.

Abandoning the cards, she focused on the letters. The first one was a short hand written note from Sam, her ex, asking her to join him for happy hour drinks, the first among many. The second bundle was striking. They were four pages, covered in large calligraphy, in poor English. Julio had written poems to her in the early sixties, during a short and intense affair. She had been the "older" woman at the ripe age of twenty-five, he was seventeen years old, a beautiful young man, with black curly hair, a light remnant of acne, and intense dark eyes.

Laura closed her eyes, as a rush of memories filled her with regret and wistfulness. She had gone to Venezuela in the fall of 1958, to complete research for her dissertation. She had chosen to write about the political and economic impact on the nation of Perez Jimenez, who had ruled Venezuela with an iron fist, and had been deposed after more than a decade in January 1958, just months before her arrival.

The Dean of the Political Science department of the Universidad Central de Venezuela had assigned Julio, a brilliant student who had graduated from High School at sixteen, to be her research assistant. Thanks to his mother Spanish born and educated in Gibraltar, Julio was bilingual. His father had abandoned the family when he was just three years old.

Julio's intellectual curiosity and voracity for books had no bounds. The week she met him, he was reading Somerset Maugham's "The Razor Edge", a Spanish translation of Rimbaud's Poem "A Season in Hell" and an English translation of Andre Gide's "The Immoralist". Laura wondered what kind of personal life such a young man had.

A week later, Julio invited her to his home. His mother, Anna, would make paella in honor of her visit. The taxi had difficulty finding the address close to "El Panteon", where Simon Bolivar was buried. The house was in one of the few neighborhoods of Caracas, which had managed to preserve their colonial architecture, barely escaping the relentless modernization the rest of Caracas had experienced under the dictatorship of Perez Jimenez.

From the outside the house looked very modest and needed a good coat of paint. Two sets of large windows, protected by elaborate ornate ironwork, flanked a heavy

narrow door. As she stepped into the foyer, she was taken aback by how magnificent the inside was. All the rooms had tall ceilings and opened to a central courtyard. In the center was a small fountain, surrounded by exotic tropical plants. The sound of the running water mixed with the singing, rather croaking, originating from two colorful toucans in a large birdcage, combined with the smells of jasmine, and certain mustiness filled Laura with wonder.

As they waited in the living room, Laura browsed the two immense and overflowing built-in bookcases, which completely covered two walls of the room.

"Most belonged to my ex", Anna explained almost apologetically as she entered the room and noticed Laura's curiosity. Anna, in her late thirties, was elegant in a dress, which may have been from the 50's, probably a find from a consignment shop. Following her was Marco, a large man in his forties with shoulder length hair with emerging silver streaks, a handsome face with delicate features almost feminine, and a sensual mouth contradicting the overall look of a slightly overweight middle-aged man.

"He was a very interesting individual, he wanted to write about the influence of the Masons in Venezuelan history, but had a breakdown, and never finished the book".

Marco said as he approached Laura; she smelled a whiff of his cologne, with as strong scent of musk.

"That's when he left us," Julio added, as he kissed his mother on the cheek. Anna was a petite woman, with large piercing dark eyes, attractive legs, wearing Italian sandals with too high heels, Laura thought as she sipped her drink.

"Rum, tamarind juice, lime and a drop of bitters," Marco explained with a touch of pride as he offered Laura a drink. As they waited for the paella, it became clear Marco and Anna were lovers, and Marco was filling the need of a father figure in Julio's life. As Anna was sharing memories of a trip they had recently taken to visit the Venezuelan Andes, the maid interrupted announcing the paella was ready.

The dinner conversation, lubricated with several bottles of excellent Tempranillo, flowed effortlessly. Laura was surprised how focused her hosts were on European culture, and how little they paid attention to U.S. events and American culture. However, they expressed strong admiration for jazz and the blues, and amusement for the adoration Elvis received.

After dinner, Anna offered grappa and Marco played a tape of Russian tangos, music that Laura was hearing for

the first time with pleasure. Anna and Marco danced quite well. Julio refused. Anna declared she would teach Laura first elemental steps, while Marco would show Julio how to lead in the dance. By the end of the evening Laura was dancing with Julio surprisingly well even though by then she was quite tipsy.

She did not see Julio for some days as she had travelled to interview some people in a small island where Perez Jimenez used to hang out. A waste of time it turned out as everyone refused to speak to a gringo who knew nothing about the dictator excesses. Frustrated she returned to Caracas. Julio was happy to see her, they had met for coffee in a high-end "arepera". He had written a small poem for her, which he read with some trepidation,

"The cup of tea on the table
the teaspoon in the cup
the smile in your lips
the light in your smile
and you, my love, you in my heart
Desire of the night
warmth of my life"

Laura was moved by the simple poem, and felt tenderness for Julio, whose timidity made him look even younger.

"It's lovely," Laura, declared as she bend over the small table and deposited a light kiss on his cheek. Julio, embolden, tried to kiss her on the lips, but Laura turned her head away, the kiss landing on her ear instead. Julio, embarrassed, walked away without saying anything.

Two days passed before Laura saw Julio again. They were in a small conference room, and Laura was reporting the progress she was making on her research to the Dean and small group of graduate students including Julio. At the end of the meeting, Julio stayed behind. Silently, he passed to her a folded sheet of paper, and left. Laura, upset with Julio's silence, ripped the sheet of paper without reading it, left the room. As she was leaving the building she felt guilty and somewhat curious, and returned to retrieve the pieces of paper. As she was reconstructing the message she realized it was another poem.

My soul -my love- is a bird
a bird that lost his wings
approaching the fire of your lips
-my love-
My soul -my love- is a bird

a bird that lost his life
approaching the rock of your heart
-my love-

Laura was enchanted by the simplicity of the poem. For the first time Laura considered giving herself to Julio.

"My god, he is so young... I would be arrested in Virginia", she told herself as she planned with a smile how she would seduce Julio. She would follow his methods, she decided. Instead of calling, she wrote a short note,

"I make a great putanesca pasta sauce, please bring a bottle of Chianti. Saturday at 8 PM, my place."

The sauce was salty, "too many anchovies," she thought, and the Chianti was less than optimal, but the lovemaking was delightful. It was lovely to be the first in the life of a young man. The awkward touches, sometimes tender, sometimes too rough, the wonder in his eyes as he discovered every inch of her body.

The memory of that moment triggers in Laura an overwhelming feeling of nostalgia mixed with sadness, tears running she caressed her left breast. The breast she would lose in few days. Her body once beautiful and sensual was thirsty for the touch of a hand. Making an effort to stop feeling sorry for herself, she picked one of the poems

Julio had offered to her the morning after their first encounter,

“Your hand on my back
grasping
your head on my shoulder
hiding
your lips on my ear
moaning
your breasts on my breast
dying
your thighs on my thighs
wondering
your life in my life
falling
glorious abyss, sweet agony
wonder of wonders.”

The weeks following their first night together were intense; Julio was insatiable. Laura amused by the metamorphosis of the young timid man, was beginning to feel more of an emotional attachment.

“Was she in love?” she asked herself. “No, I can’t even come with him”. Then it happened, the moment when their incipient relationship took an unexpected turn. When Julio

took her home weeks later, Anna embraced her with great warmth and murmured on her ear,

“Gracias”

Marco was somewhat more reserved. But more surprising was Julio’s change in mood, constrained, darker.

After dinner as they retired to the living room, Laura asked for scotch, Marco suggested “Ron Pampero” instead. The rum was surprisingly good, and Laura needed it. She wanted to get drunk not knowing why. Julio declared he had finished a new poem and would like to share it. He took a chair across from her, and taking a sheet from his pocket, began to read it, choosing a certain cadence,

“The consciousness of the present
without past, without future
when time becomes space
and space becomes nothing

The meaningless of the action
without verb, without subject
when light becomes darkness
and darkness becomes nothing

The vacuity of the hours

without minutes, without seconds
when I become Though
and Though becomes nothing."

An uncomfortable silence followed, only broken by Marco,
who, slowly, very slowly started clapping. Anna reached out
to hold Laura's hand,

"It's just a poem."

"Kind of sophomoric, I must say." she added as she
looked at Marco first, and then at Julio with accusatory
eyes. Laura retrieved her hand, and touched her forehead,

"I'm afraid the rum gave me a terrible headache, I
must excuse myself. Would you be so kind to call for a
taxi?"

More than a week passed, before she heard from Julio
again. That week, Laura had decided to abandon her research
on Perez Jimenez. "I don't like him anyway," she said to
herself, as an excuse. She was feeling homesick, tired of
the tropics. She wanted to be home for Thanksgiving; she
was tired of arepas, she wanted biscuits and grits. Julio
called, "Could they meet?", he needed to explain, Laura
reluctantly agreed. They would meet in Plaza Candelaria
known for small Spanish restaurants serving great tapas.

Laura, knowing she would be leaving soon, wanted to sample every tapa at the bar, even "callos", a rich stew made with the walls of the cow's stomach and chickpeas, a dish she had sworn she would never eat. It was only after they finished the second carafe of the house wine Julio had the courage to tell her. Fifty years had passed, and Laura still remembered every of his words, and how jealous she felt.

"Many of the writers I admire, Gide, Mann, Lorca, Maugham, Rimbaud, are or were homosexuals or at least bisexual" he told her as he held her hand.

"I want to become a great writer like them, to see the world the way they see it, to feel it, to experience it, to describe it. I want to learn to make love with a man," Julio added with determination.

"But you like women, you devoured my body" Laura exclaimed, as she retrieved her hand in protest.

"Yes I love your body, your sensuality, and I'm most grateful for what you taught me. But it's not enough" he said.

Then, after a long pause, Julio looked at the restaurant window, and broke Laura's heart with his revelation.

"Marco loves me, I decided I will give myself to him. I love him," Julio said, with wonder mixed with some trepidation.

As she held his poems against her breast the memory of that evening filled Laura with a sort of sweet sadness, "saudade" was the Portuguese word in those Fado songs she had learned to love. Experiencing again that same feeling of surprise, and rejection. She felt the need to transform mental pain, into a physical one. She pinched hard the nipple of her left breast. She felt pleasure in the pain, savoring the sensation of her body reactions. She was now weeping, not for her past, nor her future, but the present, ever grateful for the gift of pain from her flesh, alive.

With tenderness she put back the bundle in the drawer, lighted another cigarette, as she rested her head against the chair closing her eyes, still wet with tears. A smile slowly covered her face, and for the first time in days she was at peace with herself and the world around her, and at last understood Julio's startling choice.