

In this excerpt from Love in the Time of Cholera, Florentino Ariza has fallen madly in love with the wealthy Fermina Daza. He has written her a letter to announce his feelings and has waited an excruciating month for her reply. Read the excerpt and answer the questions that follow.

from Love in the Time of Cholera by Gabriel García Márquez

1 He had given Fermina Daza the letter a month before, and since then he had often broken his promise not to return to the little park, but he had been very careful not to be seen. Nothing had changed. The reading lesson under the trees ended at about two o'clock, when the city was waking from its siesta, and Fermina Daza embroidered with her aunt until the day began to cool. Florentino Ariza did not wait for the aunt to go into the house, and he crossed the street with a martial stride that allowed him to overcome the weakness in his knees, but he spoke to her aunt, not to Fermina Daza.

2 “Please be so kind as to leave me alone for a moment with the young lady,” he said. “I have something important to tell her.”

3 “What impertinence!” her aunt said to him. “There is nothing that has to do with her that I cannot hear.”

4 “Then I will not say anything to her,” he said, “but I warn you that you will be responsible for the consequences.”

5 That was not the manner Escolástica Daza expected from the ideal sweetheart, but she stood up in alarm because for the first time she had the overwhelming impression that Florentino Ariza was speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. So she went into the house to change needles and left the two young people alone under the almond trees in the doorway.

6 In reality, Fermina Daza knew very little about this taciturn¹ suitor who had appeared in her life like a winter swallow and whose name she would not even have known if it had not been for his signature on the letter. She had learned that he was the fatherless son of an unmarried woman who was hardworking and serious but forever marked by the fiery stigma² of her single youthful mistake. She had learned that he was not a messenger, as she had supposed, but a well-qualified assistant with a promising future, and she thought that he had delivered the telegram to her father only as a pretext for seeing her. This idea moved her. She also knew that he was one of the musicians in the choir, and although she never dared raise her eyes to look at him during Mass, she had the revelation one Sunday that while the other instruments played for everyone, the

¹ *taciturn* — reserved

² *stigma* — a mark of disgrace

violin played for her alone. He was not the kind of man she would have chosen. His foundling's eyeglasses, his clerical garb, his mysterious resources had awakened in her a curiosity that was difficult to resist, but she had never imagined that curiosity was one of the many masks of love.

7 She herself could not explain why she had accepted the letter. She did not reproach herself for doing so, but the ever-increasing pressure to respond complicated her life. Her father's every word, his casual glances, his most trivial gestures, seemed set with traps to uncover her secret. Her state of alarm was such that she avoided speaking at the table for fear some slip might betray her, and she became evasive even with her Aunt Escolástica, who nonetheless shared her repressed anxiety as if it were her own. She would lock herself in the bathroom at odd hours and for no reason other than to reread the letter, attempting to discover a secret code, a magic formula hidden in one of the three hundred fourteen letters of its fifty-eight words, in the hope they would tell her more than they said. But all she found was what she had understood on first reading, when she ran to lock herself in the bathroom, her heart in a frenzy, and tore open the envelope hoping for a long, feverish letter, and found only a perfumed note whose determination frightened her.

8 At first she had not even thought seriously that she was obliged to respond, but the letter was so explicit that there was no way to avoid it. Meanwhile, in the torment of her doubts, she was surprised to find herself thinking about Florentino Ariza with more frequency and interest than she cared to allow, and she even asked herself in great distress why he was not in the little park at the usual hour, forgetting that it was she who had asked him not to return while she was preparing her reply. And so she thought about him as she never could have imagined thinking about anyone, having premonitions that he would be where he was not, wanting him to be where he could not be, awaking with a start, with the physical sensation that he was looking at her in the darkness while she slept, so that on the afternoon when she heard his resolute steps on the yellow leaves in the little park it was difficult for her not to think this was yet another trick of her imagination. But when he demanded her answer with an authority that was so different from his languor, she managed to overcome her fear and tried to dodge the issue with the truth: she did not know how to answer him. But Florentino Ariza had not leapt across an abyss only to be shooed away with such excuses.

9 "If you accepted the letter," he said to her, "it shows a lack of courtesy not to answer it."

10 That was the end of the labyrinth. Fermina Daza regained her self-control, begged his pardon for the delay, and gave him her solemn word that he would have an answer before the end of the vacation. And he did. On the last Friday in February, three days before school reopened, Aunt Escolástica went to the telegraph office to ask how much it cost to send a telegram to Piedras de Moler, a village that did not even appear on the list of places served by the telegraph, and she allowed Florentino Ariza to attend her as

if she had never seen him before, but when she left she pretended to forget a breviary³ covered in lizard skin, leaving it on the counter, and in it there was an envelope made of linen paper with golden vignettes.⁴ Delirious with joy, Florentino Ariza spent the rest of the afternoon eating roses and reading the note letter by letter, over and over again, and the more he read the more roses he ate, and by midnight he had read it so many times and had eaten so many roses that his mother had to hold his head as if he were a calf and force him to swallow a dose of castor oil.

- 11 It was the year they fell into devastating love. Neither one could do anything except think about the other, dream about the other, and wait for letters with the same impatience they felt when they answered them. Never in that delirious spring, or in the following year, did they have the opportunity to speak to each other. Moreover, from the moment they saw each other for the first time until he reiterated his determination a half century later, they never had the opportunity to be alone or to talk of their love. But during the first three months not one day went by that they did not write to each other, and for a time they wrote twice a day, until Aunt Escolástica became frightened by the intensity of the blaze that she herself had helped to ignite.

³ *breviary* — a book of prayers

⁴ *vignettes* — decorative sketches