



Gabriela Mistral and Doris Dana arriving in Genoa, Italy, 1951

GABRIELA MISTRAL

“I have only you in this world”

Gabriela Mistral's Letters to Doris Dana

Translated from Spanish and with an introduction by Velma García-Gorena

THIS WORK IS A TRANSLATION of selected correspondence between the Chilean poet and Nobel Laureate Gabriela Mistral (born Lucila Godoy Alcayaga, 1889–1957) and her companion and executor, the North American writer Doris Dana. These letters—the vast majority by Gabriela Mistral—were written between the years 1948 and 1956, ending a few months before the poet's death in January 1957. Doris Dana (1920–2006), thirty-one years younger than Mistral, had hidden the letters for almost fifty years. After her death in 2006 Dana's niece and executor, Doris Atkinson, donated them, along with Mistral's other papers, to the Chilean National Library. The letters recount details of Gabriela Mistral's creative work process and tell of her personal life, her work as a Chilean diplomat, and her views on international politics and human rights. The letters also reveal that the women had a romantic relationship, which Doris Dana had always denied.

Gabriela Mistral is not well known in the English-speaking world, especially when compared to her compatriot and fellow Nobel Prize-winner Pablo Neruda. While a significant amount of Neruda's work is available in English, this is not as true for much of Mistral's poetry, political writing, and correspondence. These translated letters, then, will give an English-speaking audience a better understanding of her life and its impact on her literary production. The letters also are of great significance because they help dispel the “Santa Gabriela” myth of the poet's life. For many years the Chilean government and some scholars had portrayed Mistral as a sad, religious spinster whose poetry mirrored her tragic life, marked by the suicide of her boyfriend when she was a young woman. According to this perspective, her literary work focusing on women and children reflected her thwarted desire for a husband and children. In recent years

a few scholars speculated about Mistral's sexuality and its impact on her poetry, but there was no evidence to counter the traditional view of her life and work. These translated letters now show that the poet was not a chaste, traditionally Catholic spinster: Mistral was in love with Doris Dana and never expressed a desire for a heterosexual relationship. Instead, Mistral reveals her own fluid sexual identity, at times using male self-referential language, as in the letter dated April 14, 1949.

Gabriela Mistral was a brilliant writer but she always needed help. She didn't cook or do housework, she could never manage her own finances, she couldn't organize her papers, and she couldn't stand to be alone. Thus, she was always surrounded by a group of women who took care of all these tasks. In addition to Doris Dana the letters include references to Palma Guillén, Emma Godoy, Consuelo Saleva, and several other women. Doris Dana, a Barnard graduate and sister of the actress Leora Dana, was from a wealthy New York family. Palma Guillén was a Mexican educator and diplomat who was Mistral's romantic partner for about fifteen years. She and Mistral adopted Juan Miguel Godoy, known as Yin-Yin, together in the mid-1920s. Guillén managed her bank accounts, took care of her properties in Brazil, and provided constant emotional support. Emma Godoy was a Mexican writer, poet, and radio personality. Consuelo Saleva, Mistral's student when she taught at Middlebury College in Vermont, was from Puerto Rico and had also been the poet's romantic partner. These women, like others associated with the poet over the years, were highly educated and accomplished in their fields. They were drawn by Mistral's talent, charisma, and friendship, and were rarely compensated for their work.

Gabriela Mistral spent the last nine years of her life with Doris Dana. During this time she worked on her last two books of poetry, *Lagar* (Winepress) and *Poema de Chile*. Mistral was a member of the Chilean diplomatic corps throughout much of her adult life, and these letters were written from her consular posts in Santa Barbara, California; Jalapa, Veracruz, in southeastern Mexico; and Naples, Italy. In 1945, Mistral was the first Latin American writer to win the Nobel Prize. In this period of her life, however, she was also grieving over the 1943 suicide of her adopted son, as well as the earlier deaths of her mother and older sister. Her relationship with the young and beautiful Doris Dana thus renewed her desire to live, yet each time Dana returned to New York to visit her family Mistral worried she'd never return. Gabriela Mistral often reminded Doris Dana, "I have only you in this world."



New York, NY
February 9, 1948

My beloved teacher:

I've taken the liberty of sending you, in the name of New Directions Press, your copy of "The Stature of Thomas Mann."

If it had been possible I would have preferred, of course, to enjoy the privilege of putting this book personally into your hands. In our age besieged by commercialism a volume such as this one is worthy of much grace and dignity. I'm writing to express to you, as much as I can in a letter, the profound gratitude I feel for the great privilege of translating your potent and powerful essay, "The Other German Disaster," into English.

Your name and your work represent for me all that is strong and significant, beautiful, and truly eternal. Through the deep contemplative tenderness and the strength of your works the world has found in you a teacher of great feeling and a bright flame of the purest art.

I can never express, and much less repay, all that I personally owe you. This is a debt that the entire world owes you—the great artist who has revealed such excellent beauty and profound visions.

Cordially,
Doris Dana

[Santa Barbara, California]
March 1948]

Dear Señorita,

Your beautiful and cordial letter has moved me. I don't deserve that affection, not to mention your admiration; but we old teachers like to be loved by the young, whether or not we deserve it.

Consider me your friend. We've come together in a very noble world: in the work of our venerated Thomas Mann.

I'm a shy woman, despite the strength of my verses. And I have much respect for very hard-working writers, because of the quality of their work and because of their relationship with people. I haven't gone to see the Maestro. And now I've decided to go on a trip to Mexico and Venezuela. I might return, but I also might stay there. But I won't give up on the idea of seeing him.

If possible ask him if he can meet with me for just fifteen minutes. I'm going to Los Angeles at the end of March (I go out very little because of my poor health).

Thank you so much for the book. It was time that Thomas Mann's readers let him know of their devotion. I feel very honored to be present at that testimony of "thanksgiving"; he has given us so much.

Accept my affectionate regards.

Gabriela Mistral

New York

March 19, 1948

My beloved teacher:

Thank you so much for your warm and beautiful letter. Your words made me so happy!

I'm writing this letter quickly so that you won't wonder about your possible visit with Thomas Mann. Yesterday I sent him an airmail letter asking him to answer me by telegram or to write to you directly. Since you're thinking of travelling soon I don't want to run the risk that you won't receive my letter as well as Dr. M.'s.

That's why I'm urging you to send me your new address so that I can contact you if I need to send you a message.

T. M. spoke warmly and enthusiastically about your essay "The Other Disaster" when I saw him. I'm sure the professor will be happy and moved to see you and to greet you personally.

It's impossible for me to express what your visit with Mann would mean to me. It will be a joy for both of you to meet and I have dreamed about this for a long time; you two are my best and beloved teachers.

I'm planning a trip to Mexico too; I'll take my car. I would love it if our trips coincided! If that were the case, would you give me the joy of accepting my offer of taking you in my car? I've never been to Mexico but I know the changes in altitude can be very drastic there. If we were to go in my car we could stop when and where you'd like so that you could adjust to any change in altitude. The car is quite large and I think you'd travel comfortably and you could even take another person if you wish. We could meet in California or anywhere else.

I'd be so happy to go with you on your trip. If you accept we could make the arrangements over the phone. Send me your phone number if you like the idea.

February 9, 1948

Gabriela Mistral
1305 Buena Vista Street
Monrovia, California

Mi querida Maestra:

Me he tomado la libertad de mandarle, a nombre de la New Directions Press, el ejemplar destinado para usted de "The Stature of Thomas Mann."

De haber sido posible hubiera preferido, desde luego, gozar del privilegio de poner este libro personalmente en sus propias manos. En una época acribillada de comercialismo, un volumen como este es digno de tal gracia y dignidad.

Le escribo esta carta para expresarle, dentro de sus límites, la profunda gratitud que siento por el alto privilegio de haber traducido al inglés su ensayo poderoso y fuerte, "El Otro Desastre Alemán."

A través de sus obras, su nombre representa para mí todo lo que es fuerte y significativo, bello y realmente eterno. En la profunda ternura contemplativa y la fuerza de sus obras el mundo ha encontrado en usted una maestra de sentido y una llama viva del arte más puro.

Nunca podría expresar, ni mucho menos pagarle, todo lo que le debo personalmente. Deuda que es parte de lo que el mundo entero le debe a la gran artista que nos ha revelado bellezas tan excelsas y visiones tan profundas.

Cordialmente,

Doris Dana

Miss Doris Dana
438 West 119th Street
New York 27, New York

The first letter from Dana to Mistral, 1948. Courtesy of Educarchille.

Two years ago I had the pleasure of seeing you in person at a speech you gave at Barnard College, here in New York. At the time my shyness together with my deficient knowledge of Spanish, as well as the fear of joining those who were crowding around you, prevented me from approaching you to say hello and to say a few words. I still vividly remember how upset I was when I saw the suffering reflected in your eyes during those trying moments.

When you see Dr. M. please convey my warm greetings for him and for his wife K.

With my affectionate regards and with gratitude once more for your treasured letter,

Your friend,
D.D.

P.S. I know Dr. Mann speaks a little French and his wife speaks it very well.

[Santa Barbara]
April 6, 1948

Dear Doris Dana:

Yes, thanks to your graciousness I'll have the joy of seeing Thomas Mann's face and of meeting his companion. I owe you very much, dear.

That trip of ours to Mexico will be a fiesta. But my itinerary has gotten a bit complicated. It looks as if—it still isn't clear—I would go by train from Los Angeles to Alabama, to board a ship there bound for San Juan. I don't know when you're coming, dear, and I'm almost sure you wouldn't be interested in driving to New Orleans from Los Angeles. (Air travel raises my blood pressure and makes me dizzy.)

I'd very much love to see your face. At my age faces blend together a bit.

Perhaps I'll stay for a time in Puerto Rico. If that were the case, you might want to come to that lovely island which has been very much forgotten by American tourists.

Your book is beautiful. Thank you so much!! I'd have been so sorry to see no South American representation in it, because the essays truly contribute to the understanding of Thomas Mann, I have to say.

Let's meet then, wherever it's most convenient.

With affection and gratitude from your old friend,
Gabriela Mistral

[New York]

August 22, 1948

My dear Gabriela Mistral—

Thank you so much for the joy your news gave me. I'm so excited to think it'll be possible for me to be with you—and thinking about our trip to Mexico fills me with pleasure.

My dear teacher—I can go on any of those trips you're planning. Coordinating our dates isn't a problem because I'll be free to join you in my car whenever and wherever you wish.

I'll leave New York around the fiteenth [*sic*] of September, and I'll spend two or three days in Missouri—and later I'll be in the beautiful and vast regions of Nevada. I hope to arrive in California during the first week of October. Upon my arrival in California I hope above all to plan our itinerary. After that I'll go to Los Angeles to tend to certain personal matters—and later I'll return to Santa Barbara whenever you wish.

In the meantime I'll write to Thomas Mann to arrange our visit with him.

Thank you so much, dear Gabriela, for your invitation to stay at your house.

I hope to hear from you soon—and, reiterating my gratitude, I'm counting the days until I see you.

With affection, your friend

Doris Dana

Doris Dana arrived in Santa Barbara, California, in October 1948 and she and Mistral soon began their romantic relationship. They traveled separately to Mexico, arriving late in November of 1948. They lived together for several months in Jalapa and the port of Veracruz, until Dana returned to New York, promising to return to Gabriela Mistral in Mexico.

[Jalapa, Veracruz, Mexico]

April 12 [1949]

My love—how awful—I've found this letter in a book. The horrible Emma and possibly also Palma were looking at it.

I shouldn't send it to you because your illness has made you more nervous. But it seems to be the honorable thing to do to send it to you. I spent seven days without a word from you. I had no idea you were ill,

my poor thing! All of my writing in that letter—the rancor, resentment, ugly things, **all of that has passed and has been burned**. But the letter wasn't only about bitterness. Along with the complaints I also wrote about my constant worry about you, **permanently**. All of that, the ugly and the sentimental, you'll find there.

I spoke to you in my letter, my love, about a bad headache. Afterwards that passed and then returned. I went to see the doctor and once again he gave me penicillin and a double dose this time. It was my nose and ears. Full blown sinusitis. They've given me (second time) a double dose of penicillin. **I'm over this now**, my love. Don't get upset. It looks like we even have the same ailments. That's mysterious. Forgive me, love! I had no idea you were lying in bed too. Forgive me! **Seven days inside myself seem like an eternity**. I'm telling you again that I'm sending you this letter so that you can understand that when I'm angry I love you just the same and I worry about you. The poor salary I offered you—that isn't enough to be a salary—will have its counterpart in my will. I'm waiting for you to re-do it, to annul the old one and write up a new will. And I need to do that with you here because it's risky not to annul the previous will, my Doris. (Another letter from Coni arrived; now she sends kisses.)

I beg you: read this first and don't get upset, please!

I sent you the letter because I had to. Sending it to you is an expression of loyalty. Understand it this way. My infection has been what is called frontal sinusitis: nose, one eye, forehead, and the top of my head. All of this must be due to Veracruz's climate, which is abysmal. All of that doesn't matter if you're healthy. Lord, I need the latest news about your health.

Please don't torment yourself: that's over now. (Maybe the announcement you saw was just that.) I need you to rest on me, as if I were a rock.

You're the only one in fragile health now and your weakened state is a constant danger. If you want me to have peace of mind, take care of yourself!

I just received your letter. It's from the 19th, the day I sent you the check (\$200). It seems strange that I haven't received the telegram I asked for telling me that you'd received it. (I don't trust Latin American postal systems.) But that one was certified and with a return receipt. I'm going to send you another telegram today. It pains me to think that the money didn't get there sooner, love. You needed it at that most crucial moment.

I know from experience that vitamin E is a reliable remedy though it's often discredited. I beg you to take it. (Be careful because it stimu-

lates love . . .) Vitamin E resuscitated me in California when I returned from Sweden, love. Take it, please. But in addition they should give you something to **fortify your blood**. Iron? And eat extra nutritious foods like beef (grilled meat). **And tell me, tell me how much money you need**. I can't go on because I have work. A typist is making copies for me.

I'm yours. I'm the only one. Kiss me. Your G

[Jalapa]

April 12, 1949

My love,

You know my body, but you don't understand my poor soul. And you can't guess how your silence of seven days has been **pure hell** for me. I'm not asking for miracles; I'm asking for only one ten-line postcard every week. Yesterday I mailed you three letters. Forgive that torrent of writing. I've had three days of double crisis: a tremendous headache and a collapse of the hope I had in you. It's been only a few hours since I've been freed from that misery caused by the heaviness and deep sharp pains in my head. (Don't say anything to Palma.) I'm deeply grateful for that one letter I've received from you. I'll try to believe we have a future together. I believed that when you left. But there's nothing so damaging, so grave, so infernal, as a silent absence. It's like a breakup; it's exactly that: a permanent separation.

I understand that they didn't leave you alone at Palma's house. Latins never understand that solitude and freedom are the best gifts for guests. Perhaps Palma did that on purpose. But you could've gone out in your car to write those ten lines.

I'm writing you this letter to tell you that unless we go far away you're going to be in charge of the Monrovia, California, house. Incredibly, I forgot to tell you that if you return I'll let you have the rent money. It's not a salary, my Doris (\$60 upstairs; \$60 downstairs). You should try to save that money. In any case, you'll have between a hundred and two hundred dollars each month. I think you need to know this and I know it isn't much money. I'll pay for your clothes and shoes—even if you leave your shoes everywhere.

Thank you for having remembered, finally, that I existed in a hotel in Jalapa. May God keep you.

Your Gabriela

[Jalapa]

April 14, 1949

I was very confused and upset when I heard you on the phone today, since I couldn't understand what you were saying. It was painful and I was almost paralyzed. This is what I understood: that you had a problem involving your heart and that it happened on the plane. Your telegram said you'd arrived **safely**. You said something on the phone about Puerto Rico that I absolutely didn't understand. Your voice sounded weepy; I'd never heard you like that, amor, with the voice of a wounded bird. And there was something about a terrible dream you might've had. You know, love, that I have trouble hearing on the phone; I hear maybe **a third of the conversation. It's better to send me a telegram in cases of emergency, mi amor**. Two hours later, I think I've managed to understand what you were saying. I figured out that one of my letters, that harsh one, where I complained of your silence—that dumb, bitter, and harsh letter—is the reason for your weepy voice, for your wounded soul, your bad dream, and the damage to your heart. I've decided to send you a telegram; I won't call since **that would be useless**.

We're now apart and we haven't even had a chance to really get to know each other. That's not good. It looks like you're still unaware of the fact that I suddenly have fits of bitter rage, something like an infernal cleansing of my guts that's agonizingly painful though I shed no blood or tears. And I don't feel better afterwards. Those photos of you and the Arta-Sánchez family provoked one of these fits. I shouldn't have written you while I was in that mood, but I'm an impulsive man, remember that, and **quick to anger and DUMB, DUMB**. Please, don't ever, ever, suffer like that again on my account. Please know once and for all that when you suffer that way I'm deeply ashamed of myself. Promise me. You have, my dear, a **sagesse** that I don't have, a certain wisdom of your English race. You don't know this, but I have a profound respect for you because of your wisdom. And aside from my passion, I have a great esteem for you, for your ideas, for your demeanor, that you're unaware of too. My God, you're so far away, suffering for no good reason, and hurting your heart.

I can't type on this machine anymore.

This is my 4th letter

Living apart is a very bitter test, my love. I'm **completely convinced**

that there's nothing more senseless than being apart. When people are apart they run the risk of never seeing each other again. New interests could penetrate the soul of one member of the couple. That's what could happen in our case, to you, to you, **not to me**. I can assure you of that, Doris Dana.

I know you've gone to take care of your financial affairs and even my bank accounts. But all that, no matter how important, isn't worth the happiness we had together, and even more, it's an enormous risk—I repeat once again—of losing the relationship.

I'm living a strange existence I can't even begin to explain. (For four days I've been wandering around like a ghost, trying as never before to emerge from the obsession, the sadness, and the fear that comes over me. This is fear, the pure fear of losing you.)

I've received only one letter from you—one. But it's so beautiful, so nicely written, that for the last three or four days I've had it with me and I won't tear it up without copying the sentences that have comforted me the most, those that have moved me. Every time I take the letter out of my pocket I kiss it, as if it were a matter of life and death. And I cling to those words in order to believe, to have faith, **to wait**. But my God, there's still so much time left until you return—if you return.

Have faith in me. I thought you did, but I was wrong. Do me this favor: believe that your dear man is not unfaithful, or a pervert, or a liar, despite being Latin . . .

My writing isn't going well. I sleep very little. I finally fall asleep around two in the morning and I wake up very early. And this has been happening for about seven days. I take my medicines but I don't want to double the dosage of the anti-anxiety medication. I'm terrified of drugs.

That's why I said only inane things during our phone call; the news of your health worried me quite a bit.

I moved to the Hotel Mexico in downtown Jalapa, where we've eaten together. I have two airy rooms and there's a family environment and a nice patio with flowers; the service is better and the price of a double room is half what it was at that cold hotel with the attendants who didn't seem honest. The room they'd moved me to there shook due to some construction defect and there was no telephone and I was starved for space. Oh, if only you were here with your poor man, with this lost soul who waits with the ghosts of you and Yin. **You're the only person** who can save me for my few remaining years on this wretched Earth. Today's news was very disturbing, if you read between the lines. If war

breaks out how are we going to get back together mi amor, and where? The first thing to go is the communication system. Think about this too. If you have to stay in your country I'd return to California, even if it's dangerous, or I'd go to some other part of the U.S.—as long as I could be with you.

I beg you to please clear up what I didn't understand on the phone. There was something about a bad dream that I think had to do with Puerto Rico. Today I received another unbelievable letter from Coni—five pages long and completely banal. What nerve, how thoughtless! She broke my heart and now she sends me minute details of her trip. It's a tourist's letter. . .

I insist once again: believe me. Don't offend me with your suspicion and fears. I've given and devoted myself to you; I'm living that reality. I'm very aware of our intense and deep connection and I'm completely loyal to you. My eyes and my sad thoughts are fixed on you. Last night I was able to VISUALIZE your face and I kissed it, every part of it.

April 14th

In my next letter I'll tell you about M.M. [Margarita Michelena] and E.G. [Emma Godoy]

[Jalapa]

April 14–17, 1949

Love,

I was telling you in my letter of the 14th, today, that I haven't slept well for several nights. I sleep from two or three in the morning until seven. I want to call you again today. (I just sent you a telegram. These hicks didn't want to accept payment for a return receipt.)

I don't know what's happening, my love. I suspect my letter about the Arta-Sanchez family has upset you. And either the letter or the plane has damaged your heart. I love you more than anyone else and I've been an idiot, my Doris! Forgive me, my love! Forgive me. I won't do it again! **You can have your freedom**, but have faith in your poor man, who's a dumb, impulsive, and poisoned being because of his inferiority complex (**due to age**).

Sleep, my love, rest. I'll try to be less brutal and annoying. I owe you that; I have to rid myself of these defects. I owe you happiness since I've received so much from you.

As I've said before, the worst damage happens when two people separate too soon, before they know each other well and before they've created mutual trust, complete certainty.

It's terrible that letters are getting lost. That's very dangerous. I sent you a letter today and tomorrow I'll mail another one.

Sleep, my love, and may God cure your illness. Forgive me. I hurt you because I didn't think I was loved, because I thought your heart was ignoring me (I'll continue tomorrow). I'm kissing you, yours,

[Jalapa]

April 16, 1949

Dear,

Naturally, last night I was **stunned** by your news. Why had you hidden this from me, my love? But I don't have any details; I know it's serious and I know you're not doing **what you should** under these circumstances. For example, you've seen only one doctor; you haven't had any X-rays done yet. You should see three doctors for an accurate diagnosis; that's the least you should do, my Chiquita, the very least.

I'm **horrified** to think that since I'm not there you won't obey me or your family members. I've seen your indifference towards yourself and it scares me. I'm recalling your behavior and your attitude towards yourself and I'm really scared, because I see that you're not going to obey me.

In the letter I sent you yesterday I told you at the bottom of the page that you should tell me how much you'd spent on the doctor and on medications. These expenses should now triple. It's absolutely necessary, my Doris, that you tell me how much you spent *right away*, as soon as you've read this letter.

You've only said that you have a "lung infection" and a high fever. Fever is always a serious symptom. I don't know about the rest: I don't know if the infection is in one place or if it's new or chronic. Margarita Michelena told me the fever could be due to malaria. I remember your daily trip to the market, my poor little thing, and that place is so dirty. Oh, I'm just taking a stab in the dark. And I'm piling up memories. My sister had tuberculosis when she was young. We thought we'd lost her, and she was in a village without a doctor. They gave her a "points of fire" treatment and she was cured for life. A Venezuelan writer, Teresa de la Parra, suffered from the same illness and received treatment from the best doctors in France and Switzerland. The illness was latent and had been there a long time, and in

addition, she was going through an emotional crisis. One frigid day she traveled from Madrid to Paris by car; she had a relapse and we lost her. She was an elegant flower like you; her partner and nurse considered that trip a suicide. Teresa was riding in the front seat with the window open.

Oh, I'm reliving my memories and I'm so insensitive!

You must need your little typewriter. Take taxis *hijita*, and keep track of your spending so I'll know.

I hope—and sometimes I wish—that you were good and loyal to me, asking me for exactly what you need. **Cardiology** treatments are very expensive, Doris, my *hijita*. But they're absolutely necessary.

I'm somewhat relieved knowing that your older sister is a doctor. She can find lung and infection specialists. I need to know which ailment you have. Dear one, I'll feel better only with the truth. Tell me everything. I'm strong and can take it, first because I've suffered a lot, and second **because I have faith**. I repeat, you need to tell me the whole truth, all of it. I'm not a child, though I seem like one. And be blunt about your health, Doris.

I spoke to you in a previous letter, vaguely, about the rents from the Monrovia house that I intend for you to have. That rent (around \$120 or \$130) is now yours, though it's not enough for the expenses you'll incur during your illness. Once again I beg you: ask for what you need now. Tell me via letter or telegram, my love.

I have only you in this world. I haven't told you this directly. I only have you, and I love only you. Save yourself; summon all your strength and focus on this treatment. (And tell me about that bad dream you had.)

I received the news of your illness yesterday, Holy Friday. And I prayed in the afternoon. It occurred to me to pray in a different way, meditating on the crucified and suffering Christ. I thought of His blood. This is absolutely foreign and contrary to the usual way I pray. Perhaps it was because I was overcome by this pain, **this trial**. I'll endure this, for Him and for you. I felt stronger afterwards. Today is Holy Saturday. I was late to the service at the cathedral. I didn't pray. It seems that I can only pray alone.

I hope to receive a letter from you on Monday. (We're in the middle of the holidays and mail delivery has been unreliable.) Did you receive the lost letter?

I can't go see you, love: because I don't speak the language, only for that reason.

And this hurts me terribly. I'm going to send our best novelist's wife to go see you. She's a yankified Puerto Rican science teacher. Let her visit

you. I want someone I know to go and see you. She'll tell me the truth about your illness.

Once more: give me the diagnosis from three doctors regarding your illness.

I'm sending you a tender hug,
Gabriela

New York
April 21, 1949

Mi Amor:

Today I went for the first time to see the sky, the trees around the university—and the Hudson River, the river of subtle colors that flows into the ocean. I found spring! The little leaves, so young, so tender, and so green! These very fragile things touch me and move me. And the whole beautiful sky, clean and full of lovely hope, spoke to me about **you**. And every blade of grass gave me silent words and secrets about my beloved—my *hijita*—and the time that's coming, when we reunite. It's better than a song in the blood. **You're always with me!** It's like praying continuously—a new prayer, free, clean and of the world—and the only prayer that can unite the Divine with the world (the flesh). It's pure, dear, and **it has the grace of God.**

When I see the green of spring, I think “this is special, this color is sacred [*sic*] to me, because perhaps at the same time my love sees the same color—and perhaps **she** feels the same inexplicable, indescribable, and mysterious emotions—at this very **moment.**” I see a flower and remember the flowers you give [*sic*] me, silently in our car, in San Juan Cocomatepec. And suddenly, with this memory, the entire world is **a flower, offered right from your hand.** I see the sky and remember millions of skies over the dearest person in the world. And I think, “this same sky touches the head of my beloved.” Then I send you a kiss, a tender and passionate caress through the passing clouds. Perhaps you'll see them soon in Veracruz. I'm jealous of these clouds, which perhaps will see you sooner than I do. **And the wind**—the wind hugs me—and I beg the wind “hug her for me, make the wind be my embrace, tender and passionate.” I put myself in the wind and the gentle rain, so that they, wind and rain, can hug and kiss you for me.

[Doris Dana]

[Jalapa]

July 20 [1949]

Vida mía:

Yesterday you complained on the phone that I haven't written you. I've done just that almost every day, but how can I send you the letters? I forgot your American woman doctor's address. And here I am stupidly collecting this bunch of letters. If you had obeyed me by going to a hospital these letters would've gone out almost every day.

This sensation of suffocation, of drowning, and of silence all weigh on me. I don't think I can take another year-long or even six-month separation.

It's as if I'd always had you, as if we were siblings of the same age, or middle-aged lovers, or a couple married for a long time. Not for one moment has this felt like a ten-month relationship. (When we get to one year I want to be with you near the ocean, both of us healthy and strong. It'll be our first anniversary, *vida mía*.)

I hope you never again get as fatigued as you are now and I hope your infection doesn't return because you're so fragile, my little one, that you could collapse in two or three years and that would be terrible. Because we have a life—mine will last perhaps five more years—to enjoy like a fine, strong, wine. I want you to have “la dolce vita” with me as they say: a little ecstasy and a bit of intensity, with a burning flame and rest and TRUST. And trust. Until now we've had the misfortune of not believing in each other. That's the truth. And this absolute lack of faith is terrible; it could lead to a separation at any given moment and perhaps it could leave us both with a burning sense of failure and regret. On the phone today your voice left me thinking that you doubt me, that you think my silence means I've forgotten you. You're crazy. I'm kissing you.

Gabriela

[Jalapa]

Nov. 31 – Dec. 1, [1949]

Today it's been sixteen days since you left, Doris Dana.

In this half a month I've collected exactly one letter from you, and a very short one at that. Today I got a notice that I'd received a certified letter. Perhaps it's the usual, some book of bad poetry someone's sent. (If it's a letter from you I'll make a note of that at the end of this letter.)

You're completely unaware of the nature of the person you've been living with for almost a year. And if you don't know me, given how extroverted I am and given that you're a person of subtle intelligence, that means, Doris Dana, that you haven't regarded me for one moment with any kind of interest and with a desire to understand the person who has loved you so much. That's a very Anglo-Saxon way of seeing "color people." [sic]

Day by day and hour by hour, I've lived in a heightened state of anxiety because of the obsessional presence of your face and of a powerful and burning memory of the days I spent with you, ever since I first saw you enter my house. When one has that experience—something very foreign to an American—sixteen days without even one letter, sixteen, are a hell that is far too red, or too black, the color of tar.

I can't keep living like this, Doris Dana. Death would be preferable. Emma Godoy has been here for three days. I went from Miradores to Veracruz with her in her car; I was silent and she could HEAR, she could understand what my silence meant.

I know you Anglo-Saxons deeply despise people who are "out of control," who have no self-control, despite your drama-filled great poets. And I'm making a spectacle of myself with precisely that kind of behavior. (You can stop reading here if you want, because this letter only gets worse.) But this really is the last time. I'm exercising the right of those who will be erased from sight, those who won't be seen again.

Day by day and hour by hour, and at every instant I waited for a second letter from you. I was in a state of anguish that grew continuously worse. I've had to drink in order to sleep—and I wholly despise alcohol.

I don't want to keep living like this; I don't want to and I shouldn't have to. My heart has been in bad shape for three days. And my psychological defenses have run out.

All I have to tell you is this: I have no other dignified alternative than to be quiet and disappear from your life, a life which is filled with people and which you've hidden from me. Finally (!), this all leads me to believe that I'm not the right person for you. You don't treat me with compassion and I don't forget easily, nor can I be indifferent when I'm scorned by the ones I love most. And my defenses—the little hope in me—have run out.

You are, in the worldly sense, a person who understands everything. You're a cosmopolitan person—a believer in worldly science—and you accept situations without showing anger or surprise.

Back to my dreadful solitude, Doris Dana: “People of color” understand and withdraw, and if the person happens to be an Indian, he or she says little.

Be happy with the people who surround you, Doris Dana. In this envelope I’ve included something which I REALLY owe you, for the wear and tear on your car because of my trips, just my trips. If you return this check, Doris Dana, it’ll be because you wish to offend me, after already having given me ten days of agony. Don’t go even further, Doris Dana. That’s enough.

Be happy with your people. In another life I’ll have more intuition and I won’t try to get you to love me “against all reason.”

Forgive my huge blunders and my complete blindness.

Gabriela Mistral

[Jalapa]

January 8th, [1950]

Yes, your salutations, including the one in the present letter are “*querida . . . querida . . . querida*.” But THE OTHER has passed. But not for me. I write: *amor, amor, amor*.

Thanks for your cable. Oh, I hope my health doesn’t ruin our trip! My heart hasn’t been well and it wasn’t even hot today. And my black bile has come back, for no apparent reason. The only joy this week has been knowing you’re writing poetry. But I’m so upset that you can only write when you’re FAR FROM ME. It shames—and pains me—that you’ve lost a year and three months of writing while living with me and running our household. That’s a sin. While we’re in Italy if you don’t learn to free yourself of the house—and OF ME—and give yourself some freedom and peace and quiet part of each day, I’ll have to leave you, because I’m hurting the most sacred part of your being—your profession and mission. You have no idea how that hurts me! And the whole matter is due to this: your politeness towards me. You’re incapable of salvaging even one day for yourself, for your soul. This can’t continue. In Italy I’ll have to leave you alone once a week and go off to some village—yes, so you can write. So often I’ve wished that you could do your writing NEXT TO ME, at my side. But I always forget that your love for me isn’t romantic. The forty days left until the trip should be dedicated to resolutions. We’ll mend our ways. If you really can’t do your work when you’re

near me we'll have to live apart for at least a third of the time we're there. Oh, I wish I could tell you so much more but I'm very depressed, dear. (I haven't experienced any supernatural things, *cotovias*, for a while now.) Cheer up and keep working. And read the newspaper (by cable) for news from Italy. Today there was bad news. And even worse, the news from all of Europe has been bad. Don't be afraid. Living in towns full of gossips is much worse. We'll finally be able to visit an Atlantic island . . . Jamaica. (Teach me to read English.)

I'm kissing you and I'm next to you, in silence, hearing your heartbeat.

Gabriela

[Jalapa]

January 20th [1950]

Deinita querida:

It was so sweet to hear your voice! It's so strange that you remembered me and even called! I'm such a disaster in my relationship with you! I can never keep you at my side; I'm always losing you, and even when you're with me I'm nothing to you but a dumb gray-haired girl who talks too much, is senile and . . . is terribly attached to you. That's why I appreciate a call from you so much—to hear your voice after thinking that I'd lost you. Our entire life together has been a pattern of my almost winning you over and losing you always, and the atrocious repetition of that story. This pattern of coming and going, having faith in you and then losing that faith right away will end tragically, in a permanent separation. And when this break-up happens I hope to God that my life comes to an end because I don't want to be a burden to you, my *Chiquita*, my girl who's been unaware of this danger since the beginning.

I couldn't tell you on the phone that it pains me to bother you with letters and calls, that I don't feel I have a right to anything, that as soon as you leave the little bit of faith I'd gained melts and disappears. And I'm only left with a certain shame of having been a burden to you for months, of having hoped and believed, only to wind up with your leaving and cutting yourself off again. And I know that I'll repeat the same pattern as soon as you come back—that I'll fool myself again, believing and trusting, only to suffer for a second and third time the same bitter experience: that I'm not enough, that you need New York and all your people, that from the beginning to the end I've only been a little diversion for you.

Doris Dana, *Deinita*, precious girl: it's a sad shame I'm not your mother. I wish I loved you that way and that I could give you everything you want, do what you want, whatever you desire, only what you desire.

This time I've been able to change something in myself: to see you and to know I've lost you. And I also realize I never had you. You can come back whenever your fancy and your flirtation desire. I've managed to do this: not to ask for anything and to understand what's going on with you and to not be demanding. And not cry. This is a bit of progress on my part, and you benefit too because I won't shout at you through my letters anymore. You were going to arrive on the 20th, then the 25th, then the 27th. Come whenever you want. Only remember that the ship leaves on March 16th. For some reason I don't understand, because of a dark grace of unknown origin, I'm not going to fight with or scream at you. I'll wait for you without thinking about a particular date as my consolation. You can arrive tomorrow or in March. I won't go into hysterics. I'll offer you tea and urge you to rest. I would love to see you sleep. You're as beautiful when you're asleep as when you're awake. You're always a very fine person, a bit proud, but very correct, spiritual, delicate, well-bred, with a certain natural aristocracy.

I haven't changed, Doris Dana, except that I was left here without you. I AM YOURS. I'm your love. You think I'm unfaithful but I'm not.

Gabriela

Gabriela Mistral and Doris Dana left Mexico during the last few days of November 1950. They spent all of 1951 and half of 1952 together in Rapallo and Naples, Italy. Palma Guillén accepted a post at the Mexican embassy in Rome and she visited regularly and helped Doris Dana with Mistral's affairs.

[Naples, Italy
August 1952]

It's curious: I've picked up this letter from several days ago and now I'm feeling discouraged again. I wrote you a week ago about how that happens. Maybe it's because I've been eating very little. But I've just started eating out and now I only eat lunch here.

I have little news to report. I want to go to Sorrento to cheer myself up. Today I've had no desire to work. I picked up and put down *Poema de Chile*, which I was going to type so that I could at least look at it briefly, because



Mistral and Dana in Italy, circa 1951. Courtesy of Educarchille.

I haven't been able to envision its final shape. Maybe it's because it was brutally hot this morning and now a very brisk, almost cold, wind is blowing.

You were telling me that perhaps you'd return earlier than planned. I hope so. But I don't believe it. New York, that city filled with excitement, captivates you. It's natural and good for you, but not for me. Doris, remember once in a while that I have **no one**, except for that kind girl who's here with me. Remember. But I'm not forcing you to come back and I also don't want you to return before you see the things you like and before you buy everything you need. Otherwise you'd regret it and you'd want to return in three months, which would hurt me, absolutely. The little kitten's in bed next to me; she sends her love. She was very sad when you left, extremely sad. She's a little better now. Come back for her sake too.

Now this errand: there's a Spanish-language newspaper in New York. It used to be pretty good. Tell me if it still exists and how much a six-month subscription costs.

What is it about you that makes people love you so much, wandering girl? That's not a good quality for those who love you. You find it annoying.

You still haven't sent me the names of the people who are to receive your

letters of recommendation. I don't know if you've been to Washington to talk to that woman who adores you and who detests me. Go see her; she's very intelligent and she's feeling bitter because her very handsome husband left her. She hates me because her rival was one of my students and she loved me very much. She no longer writes me. The perverted Coni must've said negative things about me just as she did with the head of the university.

The world, dear, is about winning and losing. I don't want to lose you, Doris Dana. That would demolish the little faith in humanity I have left.

Give your little sister a hug for me. I love her very much, though I barely know her; I've only seen glimpses of her.

Doris, take all the money you need from our bank account. I'll say this again — *all the money* you need. Do it.

Don't forget that the first part of this letter is several days old.

What've you been doing? What are you working on? Who's with you? Are you in good spirits? Am I ever going to see you again? What are your plans for the future? Do you ever think about Naples? I need only you and the countryside. But I need those two things very much. I've realized that they're the only things that make me want to live when I have them and when I don't I lose my will and want to die. When I left the Elqui Valley in Chile, at the age of fourteen, I think, I became a kind of sleepwalker. There, in my hometown, I was thrown out of school for being mentally retarded and as I left my schoolmates threw rocks at me. I walked across the plaza with a bloodied head. I'm experiencing something like that somnambulism now. It's not anguish, just a sensation of absence from the world; it's worse than the incidents you've witnessed. All I want to do is sleep. And I want to wake up only when you've returned.

Your Gabriela

Despite the poet's doubts and fears, Doris Dana always returned from her trips, and in 1953 she and Dana moved to Roslyn, Long Island. Gabriela Mistral despised New York, but she realized she had to move there, since Doris Dana would always consider the city her home. They compromised by living in Roslyn: Mistral could live in a house near the beach, and Dana could commute to New York City for work. As Mistral predicted, she would live for only a few more years. In November 1956 she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and died on January 10, 1957, at Hempstead Hospital, with Doris Dana at her side.

Gabriela Mistral wrote the following lines in a spiral notebook. Doris Dana treasured it and kept it for the rest of her life.

I know very well that, except for us, no one, no person in this world can possibly understand the essence of our life together.

Our beautiful life is so imperceptible, so delicate, because it's filled with imponderables, that it's almost invisible. But, thanks to God, all we can do is live our life together.

I live in a kind of dream, remembering all the blessings you've brought me.

And I now have a new life, one I'd always searched for but had never found. It's sacred and rich.

Life without you is meaningless, absolutely pointless. You're "my house," my home, you yourself. My center is within you.

(And simply loving you purifies me.)! We live our life with abandon, in complete trust. I know you're unwaveringly faithful.

My memory is now a world, a vast and complete universe. Yet this world is incomplete since it continues to grow, though it would seem impossible.

Oh, a love deep and so sweet, and so light. My joy!

Mistral and Dana in their backyard in Rosalyn, Long Island, circa 1953.
Courtesy of Educarchille.



NOTE: Gabriela Mistral's letters are available online at the National Library of Chile and courtesy of the Franciscan Order of Chile.