

A Game of Cards

By: Lisa Goldstein

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It all looks so civilized. A dinner party in the film community, attended by civilized, cultivated people, served by a dark-haired woman who might well be a refugee from the Third World. Family problems, problems with work, relaxation with a game of cards.

What's wrong with this picture?

Only the eyes, flicking from face to face, counting up the betrayals. And the refugee, hoping to survive for another day.

"A Game of Cards" frankly reminds me of the game "Get the Guests" in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The question is, however, who gets them?

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The doorbell rang at seven. Rozal looked through the peephole and saw two guests framed as in a picture, a woman with short brown hair and a tall gangly man carrying a bottle of wine. Helen and Keith—they'd been at the house before. Rozal opened the door.

"Beautiful house," Helen said, coming in and slipping off her coat. Rozal nodded, not sure how to take this. Of course they knew the house belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Hobart.

She hung the coats in the closet; they had a faint perfume scent, and the smell that water brings out in wool. Was it raining, then? In the bustle that surrounded the preparations for dinner, Rozal had not been able to go outside all day.

Helen paused at the framed mirror in the entryway and patted her hair. Keith scowled and grinned at his reflection, as if resigned to what he saw. The bottle of wine hung from his hand as though attached to it; he seemed to have forgotten it was there. Rozal watched as they made their way through the thick off-white carpet in the living room, leaving footprints as they went. The carpet had been vacuumed just minutes before the party, and would have to be vacuumed again tomorrow.

She couldn't resist a quick glance in the mirror herself. Most Americans took her for older than her twenty-four years, but then most Americans looked far younger than their actual age. Her hair and eyes were brown and her complexion dark; they had called her skin "olive" at the immigration office, and she had looked the word up as soon as she got home, but she'd been none the wiser. She smiled at the reflection; she had not looked so healthy, so plump, in many years.

The doorbell rang, and she hurried to answer it. A young blond woman stood

on the doorstep, Carol, another frequent visitor to the house. As soon as Rozal hung up her coat, she heard the bell again. This time when she opened the door, she saw a good-looking dark young man, balancing on the balls of his feet in impatience. He had an amused, quizzical expression, as if he had put on a face to greet Mrs. Hobart.

Rozal had never seen him in the house before, but she recognized him immediately from the movies she watched on her days off. He looked shorter than she would have expected. He said something to her in Spanish, but she smiled and shook her head: no, she was not Spanish.

Mrs. Hobart had seated Keith and Helen and Carol on the sectional couch, and now rose to greet the new arrival. "Steve!" she said. "So glad you could make it."

"Drinks!" Mr. Hobart said, coming into the living room and clapping his hands. Carol called for something Rozal didn't catch. Keith stood to hand over his bottle of wine, and Mr. Hobart pretended to be angry at him; somehow it had been both right and wrong for Keith to bring the wine.

At a signal from Mrs. Hobart, Rozal hurried through the dining room to the kitchen for the appetizers. The kitchen was at least ten degrees hotter than the living room: both ovens were on, and the cook had set a teakettle on the stove for tea. Rozal nodded to the cook, who sat on a high stool near the stove and fanned herself with a magazine, but the other woman seemed not to notice her. There was some question of status between her and the cook that Rozal did not quite understand.

Rozal took the tray of appetizers out of the refrigerator and went back to the living room. The party had already divided itself into groups: Mrs. Hobart was deep in conversation with Steve, waving her cigarette smoke away from his face, and Keith and Helen sat a little uncomfortably on the couch next to Carol. "And what do you do?" Keith asked. His face was too long, and his jaw and forehead protruded a little.

"Keith!" Helen said, and leaned to whisper something in his ear. Rozal offered them an appetizer, trying not to look amused. She had seen Carol come up to the house and talk to Mr. Hobart; money and small plastic bags were exchanged. "I thought she had something to do with video," Keith said, unrepentant. Carol laughed, and after a while Helen joined in.

Rozal returned to the kitchen for more appetizers. As she passed the wet bar that divided the kitchen from the dining room, she heard a voice raised in anger, and she glanced around quickly. In the three months she had been with the Hobarts, she had learned that though they rarely became angry, it was best to pay attention when they did. But the shouting she heard was not directed at her. Mr. Hobart sat at the bar, speaking to someone on the phone.

"I just want to know where he is," Mr. Hobart said. "No, he isn't here—that's why I called you. Well, how the hell should I know where he is?"

Rozal hurried back to the living room and began to pass around the appetizers. “Thank you, Rozal,” Mrs. Hobart said. The shouting from the bar grew louder; surely everyone in the living room could hear it by now. Mrs. Hobart raised her voice to cover it.

“No, she isn’t Hispanic,” she said. She laughed a little, but Rozal could see that she was getting worried. She glanced at her watch. “Why don’t you ask her yourself? Rozal, Steve wants to know where you’re from. Do you understand?”

“From Amaz,” Rozal said.

“Amaz?” Steve asked. “Where’s that?”

“Oh, you must have seen it on the news,” Mrs. Hobart said. “There was a coup and then a countercoup—no one’s really sure who’s running the country now. It was horrible. But Rozal managed to get out—she was one of the lucky ones.”

“Yes,” Rozal said. She had found a pack of cards somewhere on the long terrible road to the United States, and they had told her what Mrs. Hobart was saying now, that she would be fortunate, she would reach her destination. “Great abundance,” the cards had said, and she had certainly come to the land of abundance, a place where even the candy bars were encased in silver.

The doorbell rang, and she set down the tray of appetizers and went to answer it. Peter Hobart, Mr. and Mrs. Hobart’s son, stood in the doorway. By the streetlight behind him Rozal could see the rain she had sensed all day, coming down now in a black sheet like a slab of stone. She looked for Peter’s wife, but did not see her anywhere.

“John!” Mrs. Hobart called. “John, he’s here.”

Peter took off his leather jacket, revealing a ponytail that fell nearly to his waist, and handed the jacket to Rozal. It shone like silk from the rain. Mr. Hobart came into the entryway as she was putting it away. “Finally,” he said. “Don’t you think you’re taking the concept of fashionably late a little too far?”

“He wants to shout at me but he doesn’t dare,” Peter said to Rozal. “Not with all these people here.”

Rozal smiled at him, not too wide a smile because her first loyalty, after all, was to her employers. Still, she couldn’t help but like Peter; over the months she had discovered that most people did.

“We can start eating now,” Mr. Hobart said, going into the living room. “My son has decided to grace us with his presence.”

“Kill the fatted calf,” Peter said. He did not follow his father but remained behind to whisper to Rozal. “I’ve got something for you, Rosie my love. You’ll like it.”

Rozal closed the door to the closet, pleased. She remembered the loud dissatisfied tourists she had seen in Amaz, traveling in groups like fat geese, and she thought how lucky she was to be here, in this house, working for people as kind as the Hobarts. She had never heard that employers gave gifts to their servants. What could Peter possibly have for her? The pocket of his jacket had felt heavy.

The guests moved in an undisciplined group toward the dining room. "I'm sure everyone needs their drinks refreshed," Mr. Hobart asked, going behind the bar. "I would have asked before, but I was busy trying to find my son."

"Were you?" Peter asked. He sat at one of the two remaining places at the table; the other was probably for his wife. "There was no reason to bother Debbie—you know I always turn up sooner or later."

Rozal went to the kitchen and began ladling the soup. "Does Mr. Hobart hate his son?" she asked the cook.

The other woman looked at her so oddly that for a moment Rozal thought she had gotten a word wrong, and she went over what she had said in her mind. Then the cook said, "It's none of our business what they get up to. My job is to cook the food, and yours is to serve it, and that's all we have to know." Chastised, Rozal took the first bowls of soup out to the dining room.

"Looks wonderful," Keith said. "Is this Amaz cuisine? Amazian cuisine?"

There was silence for a moment; Keith had made another social error by not knowing that the Hobarts had a cook in addition to a maid. Rozal began to like him. "I'm sure Amaz cuisine would be wonderful," Mrs. Hobart said graciously. "We're stuck with plain old American tonight, I'm afraid. Does anyone object to lamb?"

Rozal went back to the kitchen for more soup. She had never heard of Amaz cuisine; since the drought and the disruptions on the farms, most people had had enough to do just finding food to eat. A friend of hers, a man who had come to America with her, had opened a restaurant in the refugee neighborhood near downtown. He'd told her that no one here really knew what people ate in Amaz; he could serve anything he liked.

The talk at the table grew boisterous. Rozal knew that Mr. and Mrs. Hobart were in something called the "entertainment industry," and the idea of a business formed solely to entertain greatly appealed to her. But she could barely understand anything the guests said, with their talk of points and box office and percentages.

Steve began to talk about a movie he'd seen lately. Carol, seated next to him, was watching him intently. Keith tried to say something but Steve interrupted him, his voice growing angrier and louder. "You've got to look at the numbers!" Mr. Hobart said, pitching his voice to drown out everyone else's. "Look at the numbers!" Rozal wondered what numbers Mr. Hobart meant. She didn't think she could ask anyone; certainly the cook wouldn't know.

At last the meal ended, and Rozal went to the kitchen to prepare the tray of coffee cups. Loud laughter came from the pantry; Rozal looked through the doorway and saw Carol and Mrs. Hobart standing there. “He’s gorgeous!” Carol said. “Wrap him up—I’ll take him home! Did you invite him for me?”

“Of course I did.” Mrs. Hobart waved the smoke from her cigarette away from her face. “You were complaining for so long about never meeting any good men that I thought it was our duty to find you one. Go in there and be charming.”

“What’s wrong with him? Is he married?”

“Never been married, as far as I know.”

“What does that mean? Is he afraid of commitment? Oh, no—I bet he’s gay!”

Mrs. Hobart laughed. “I don’t think so. He was dating someone for six months—they just broke up.”

“It’s drugs, then.”

“You’d know that better than I would.”

“I don’t sell the hard stuff, you know that.”

“Listen—why don’t you ask him yourself if you’re so curious?”

“Oh, sure. Excuse me, but do you have any antisocial habits I should know about? And by the way, you wouldn’t happen to have any horrible diseases, would you?”

Mrs. Hobart shepherded Carol into the dining room, and Rozal followed them. “You don’t know how lucky you are, being married,” Carol said, turning back to her hostess.

The guests in the dining room seemed to have talked themselves out; Carol and Mrs. Hobart took their places in silence. Rozal could hear the rain beating on the roof. Peter leaned back in his chair. “Oh, yeah,” he said. “I brought something you might be interested in.”

Rozal set down a coffee cup and looked up at him, wishing she had some pretext to stay in the dining room. Or could this be the present he said he’d gotten her? As if in answer to her question he said, “Stay here, Rosie—you’ll like this.”

He stood and went to the living room. Mrs. Hobart exchanged glances with a few of the guests, her eyebrows raised above her china coffee cup. Mr. Hobart whispered something to her, and she said, “Well, I certainly have no idea. He never tells me anything, you know that.”

Peter returned with a flat box the size of a book. “Oh…” Rozal said involuntarily.

He winked at her. “I thought you’d like this, Rosie my love,” he said. “You’ve seen these before, then?”

She reached her hand out to touch the box, but Peter had already turned to show it to Steve. “I found these in that new neighborhood downtown, where all the refugees live,” Peter said. “They said it’s the first time they’ve gotten a shipment of cards from Amaz.”

“What are they?” Carol asked. “Are they like tarot cards?”

“Apparently you’re supposed to play a game with them,” Peter said. “That’s what the man who sold them to me said, anyway. Isn’t that right, Rosie?”

Rozal shook her head, wishing she had the words to explain. “They say—they tell us what happen in my country. In Amaz.”

“What do you mean?” Mrs. Hobart asked.

“Like on television. We have no television, so we read the cards.”

“You mean like the news?” Carol asked.

“*Beka*,” Rozal said, so grateful for the word she reverted to her own language. “Yes. They tell us the news.”

“Actually you’re supposed to play a game with them,” Peter said, frowning a little. “See? It looks like Bingo.” He opened the box and took out little boards, which he passed around to everyone at the table.

Carol laughed, delighted. Keith turned his board over and studied the elaborate pattern on the back. “Come on, Helen,” he said to his wife, who had not touched her board. “Let’s play awhile.” Helen looked around the table, seeming anxious that her husband not make another blunder, but when she saw the others collect their boards, she relaxed.

Rozal looked on, feeling wretched. This was not the way you treated the cards at all. You had to read them for the latest news first; it was only when they became outdated, when all the timeliness had gone out of them and another pack was issued, that you played games with them. Or you told fortunes; she had been the best in her village for coaxing meaning out of the cards.

She ached for news of Amaz, something to counter the rumors she and every other immigrant heard every day. Who had come to power while she had been struggling to find her way in America? Which faction had triumphed? Were the famines finally over?

Peter began to read the instructions. Was this the present he had promised her? She felt cheated, so bitterly disappointed that she could barely pay attention.

But Peter had said that a shipment of cards had come in. She could buy one

the next time she went downtown to visit her friends. She relaxed and began to watch the game. It seemed odder than she could say to look on while these people, most of them strangers, played a game familiar to her since childhood.

“ ‘Announcer will take card from deck and read face,’ ” Peter read. Everyone laughed. “Rosie! Hey, Rosie, what does this mean? Look, it’s written in Amazian, too. Here, translate this for us, will you?”

The language she spoke was called Lurqazi, not Amazian. She took the instructions from Peter but did not try to read them; she had had to leave school when she was eight. “You have to take the card from—from here—”

“The deck,” Mrs. Hobart said, encouraging her.

“Yes, the deck, and read what it says. And then if you have that picture on your card, you cover it with a stone. And if you have these pictures here—” She drew lines on the card with her hands, vertical, horizontal, diagonal.

“See, it’s Bingo,” Peter said. “Where do we get all those stones, though?”

“Poker chips,” Mrs. Hobart said. “John, where did you put the poker chips?”

Mr. Hobart stood heavily; he had had a little too much to drink. Carol studied her card. “Look, there’s a picture of a cactus here. And ugh, look—here’s a snake.”

Mr. Hobart returned with the case of poker chips. “Now what?” he asked.

“Now I take card from deck and read from face,” Peter said. “Okay. Okay, it looks like a house. Anyone have a house?”

“I do,” Keith said.

“My man!” Peter said. “One poker chip for you— here, pass it down. And the next card—”

“No,” Rozal said. Everyone turned to look at her. “Now you read the—here. Read what it says.”

“Hey, look at this,” Peter said, unfolding the instructions. “It’s got—they look like fortunes. House, let’s see. House—here it is. “Beware of build on unstable land.” There you are, Keith—beware of build.”

Everyone laughed but Helen. Now Rozal remembered that Keith and Helen had talked a little about their new house during dinner. The card must mean that they couldn’t afford it. She glanced at Helen; the tightness around the other woman’s mouth told her everything she needed to know.

These people weren’t that different from the ones whose fortunes she had read in Amaz. They had the same hopes and fears and desires, and their bodies gave away what they tried so hard to hide with words. But she saw that they didn’t

understand the power of the cards, that they had no idea what they were doing. If she said something, would they stop? She didn't think so.

"Okay, next card. Cactus. Hey, good one, Carol." Someone passed Carol a chip. "And the cactus means—"

"Don't tell me, I don't want to know," Carol said. "Prickly, right? Sharp and unpleasant."

"Cool water in a dry country," Peter said, reading.

Everyone turned to look at Carol, who blushed. "Not bad," Mrs. Hobart said. "Come on, do another one. I want to see what they say about me."

Rozal had sagged forward a little in relief. The cactus meant that the drought in Amaz had ended. She had seen it on Carol's board but that didn't mean that it would turn up in the deck. So—unstable land meant that the country was still in the hands of bad leaders, but at least the water had come, and the famine might end.

She glanced at the well-fed group at the table and saw that they had guessed none of this. They were only interested in what the game might say about themselves; they didn't realize that the cards held more than one meaning. A story they could not guess at unfolded all around them.

Peter drew another card from the deck. "Looks like—scales." He showed it to the rest of the party. "Scales of justice. Do you have that in Amaz, Rosie?"

Rozal nodded, unable to speak. Justice would come to Amaz, then. She was crying a little, and she wiped her eyes quickly so that no one would notice.

"Here!" Keith said, looking up from his board.

"Keith!" Peter said. "Who said you're supposed to win this game? I haven't gotten a single one yet."

Keith grinned. "Read it."

"Justice, balance. A wise man speaks unwelcome words."

"A wise man," Keith said, still grinning. "What do you know?"

"What do they mean by unwelcome words, though?" Carol asked.

"You did tell me my last picture sucked," Mr. Hobart said.

Helen stirred, and with that gesture Rozal understood a great many things. Keith needed to write for Mr. Hobart's next picture; he had bought the house on the strength of his expectations and then had antagonized Mr. Hobart by speaking frankly to him. Helen, sitting beside Keith and squeezing his hand, meant to make certain he said nothing unpleasant the entire evening.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—”

Mr. Hobart waved his hand. “No, no—you’ve groveled quite enough for that already. And look at Steve here—he’s spent dinner telling me how much my current picture sucks.”

“Yeah, but he’s an actor,” Keith said. “Everyone knows actors don’t know anything.”

He had meant to be charming, Rozal saw, but because there was some truth in what he said—Mr. Hobart listened to screenwriters far more than he listened to actors—Keith had managed instead to insult Steve as well as Mr. Hobart. Helen saw it, too, and she tightened her grip on her husband’s hand.

“Is that so,” Steve said flatly. “Did you know I have a master’s degree in philosophy?”

“No—look, I’m sorry. Do you really?”

“No,” Steve said, and everyone laughed. Keith sat back with relief. He thought the crisis had passed; he had missed the fact that no one had really relaxed. Mrs. Hobart lit another cigarette, though her last one still smoldered on the saucer in front of her. Steve glanced at his watch, and Carol looked at him anxiously, clearly hoping he would stay. The rain sounded loud on the roof.

“Whew,” Peter said. “Next card. Or should I just give it up entirely?” Everyone called for him to continue. “Okay. The lion.”

“Yo!” Steve said. “That’s me—the lion. What does it say?”

Peter looked at the instructions and laughed. “Cruel,” he said.

“What?”

“Cruel. That’s all it says. Here, look.”

“That can’t be me—I’m a pussycat. It’s got to be a mistranslation. Here, Rozal. What does this say?”

Rozal moved forward to take the instructions from his hand. There was a growl of thunder from outside, and all the lights went out.

Someone laughed; she thought it might be Peter. “Get the candles!” Mrs. Hobart said, sounding a little frightened. “Rozal, you know where the candles are, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Rozal said. She felt her way toward the kitchen. Lightning jumped outside, briefly illuminating her way, and the thunder roared again. “Hey, it’s the lion,” Mr. Hobart said, behind her. “Just what the card said.”

A few people laughed, but Rozal knew Mr. Hobart was right; the cards predicted small truths as well as large ones, current events and things that might not happen for years. A light glimmered ahead of her, and she saw that the cook had managed to find the candles and light one. She took the silver candelabrum and four candles from the cabinet, lit the candles and set them in the candelabrum, and headed back.

“Can you read this by candlelight?” Steve said as she came up to the dining room table.

She took the instructions from him. “*Kaj*, cruel,” she read. Perhaps she should he and tell him it meant strong, or manly. But by the shivering light of the candles, she saw Carol looking at him, wide-eyed, and she knew that she couldn’t lie for Carol’s sake. “Cruel, yes,” she said.

No one spoke for a moment. Then Carol said, “What the hell—it’s only a pack of cards.”

Suddenly Rozal saw a brief glimpse of the future, something that had happened to her once or twice before when she read the cards. Steve and Carol would become lovers; she would be water in a dry country to him for a little while, until his temper and jealousy got the better of him. She wanted to warn Carol, but she knew the other woman wouldn’t believe her.

The lightning struck again. Each face stood out as sharp and meaningful as a card. She saw the patterns and currents swirling among them, and she knew from the way they looked at her that now they saw her for what she was, a fortune-teller and wisewoman.

Peter took a long breath and turned over the next card. “Garden,” he said.

“I’ve got that one,” Mrs. Hobart said.

Peter squinted in the candlelight and read the instructions. “A shelter shaded by leaves, a place of protection,” he said. Then he laughed, almost involuntarily. “Refugee,” he said.

No one laughed with him. Everyone sat hunched over his or her card, drawn in tight against what might be coming. “Let me see that,” Mrs. Hobart said, reaching out for the instructions.

“Refuge,” said Keith, the writer. “They mean refuge.”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Hobart. “Oh, thank God.”

“Next card,” Peter said, speaking quickly as if anxious to finish. “Looks like a beautiful woman. Anyone have this one?”

“I do,” Mr. Hobart said.

“Good. Beautiful woman, let’s see. Here it is.”

“Well?” Mr. Hobart said. “What does it say?”

Peter looked up at his father. His face was expressionless in the candlelight, all his good humor leached away. “I’m not going to read it,” he said.

“What?” Mr. Hobart said. “What do you mean— you’re not going to read it? Give me that.”

“No.”

“Peter—”

Silently, Peter gave his father the instructions, and in that motion Rozal saw twenty-five years of similar gestures between father and son. Mr. Hobart scanned the list of cards, looking for the beautiful woman.

“ ‘Treachery, betrayal,’ ” he said. “ ‘The woman does not belong to the man.’ ” He looked up at his son. “So? What does that mean? Why wouldn’t you read that?”

“You know perfectly well.”

“I’m afraid I don’t—”

“Do you want me to tell everyone? I will if I have to. I’ve certainly got nothing to lose.”

Mr. Hobart laughed. “Peter, if you’ve got something to say—”

“You slept with Debbie, didn’t you? And you didn’t even have the decency to do it before we got married—you had to wait until afterward—”

“Peter, you can’t believe—”

“It was more fun to wait, more exciting, wasn’t it? More of a conquest—see, the old man’s not quite dead yet, not if he can interest his son’s lawfully wedded wife—”

“Peter, stop that. You have no right to say those things—you have no proof—”

“Of course I have proof. She told me. She felt so bad about it that she finally came out and told me. Why do you think she isn’t here tonight? She never wants to see your face again.”

Mr. Hobart turned to his wife. “Janet, I never— You have to believe me—”

“Of course I believe you,” Mrs. Hobart said. The gaiety was gone from her voice; she sounded almost as if she were talking in her sleep. “Peter, why are you

saying these dreadful things?"

"I'm not saying anything, Mom," Peter said. "It's the cards talking. The cards just told you everything you need to know."

"It's only a game, Peter," Mrs. Hobart said. She reached for a cigarette.

The lights came on. All around the table people blinked against the brightness. One by one they dared to glance at each other, seeing in each others' faces a harshness that hadn't been there earlier. "Well," said Carol, pushing back her chair, "it's late—I've really got to go."

"Me, too—" "Thank you for a wonderful dinner—" "We'll see you again—" Rozal hurried to the entryway closet to get their coats.

As she went she saw a last picture of Mrs. Hobart, the smoke spiraling up from her cigarette as she stared bleakly at the board in front of her. It would take awhile, Rozal knew, but after all the accusations were spoken, after Mr. Hobart had moved out and started the divorce proceedings, she would learn to be, finally, a shelter shaded by leaves, a place of protection.