Madre and I

Reyes, Guillermo

Published by University of Wisconsin Press

Reyes, Guillermo.
University of Wisconsin Press, 2010.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/1179.

⇒ For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/1179

🔗 For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=22498

Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Mother was drowning in Ensenada, Mexico. Her arms were tired of waving, and there was no lifeguard in sight. The sun was setting, the beach isolated, and a few fishermen sailed somewhere in the distance too far for them to see her. Only a few seconds before, she had turned around to say something to Mario, the companion who swam by her side. He disappeared behind her.

My mother, her best friend Carmen, and her Chilean comadre Sara, along with Sara's husband, Mario, and their teenage daughter, had formed their weekend caravan and headed south to Mexico. They formed a small but thriving Chilean-American community that often gathered in the only Chilean restaurant at the time, El Rincón Chileno, on Melrose and Heliotrope near the Los Angeles City College.

The comadres and compadres enjoyed crossing the border to Mexico, speaking Spanish, shopping for tourist trinkets, and eating pan dulce. They were a tight-knit, unified, lively crowd. I avoided them like the plague, as I did with most adults, along with their family units, values, and familial bonding. I was an American teenager, I thought, more grownup than teenager actually since I was going off to college in the fall, and I would no longer be treated like a youngster. I had little use for the immigrant experience and preferred to stay home reading some cruel Nietzsche tirade, excerpts of which had been assigned by my Advanced Placement English teacher Mr. Battaglia once, but I had taken to reading it for pleasure. Morbid pleasure. Some antisocial habits, alienation, even rudeness, must have
rubbed off from *Ecce Homo* or was it *Twilight of the Gods*? I did not want to be seen with my mother and her Chilean friends.

That afternoon Mario and my mother ran into the water for a final swim before hitting the road back to Los Angeles. They swam away from the beach, toward a comfortable spot where the water reached up to their chests. Mother had visited the beach before several times, but Mario was unfamiliar with it. He usually swam in his pool back in Los Angeles. Mother said later that Mario didn’t know the Pacific Ocean the way she’d always known it like a seagull, from Chile to California, and down to Baja. She felt at home there and quoted a Neruda poem about finding one’s way back to the sea.

“I want my ashes to be spread there,” she once said. “I will go back to the sea.”

“We’re getting fancy,” I teased. “Quoting Neruda and all.”

“It’s no laughing matter. All creatures emerged from the sea. That’s where I want to be put to rest.”

It almost happened that summer.

Mother felt a strange sensation, water tickling at her feet like an eel passing through and then suddenly tugging away at her leg. She couldn’t move forward. She couldn’t swim out. She turned and saw Mario struggling with the same forces. “Sabes qué?” she asked, keeping it casual. “It feels like I’m drowning.”

“Well, me too,” he answered with a nervous smile. The two of them locked eyes with an intensity that signaled it was time to panic—and to make others know it. Hey, we *are* drowning. They began screaming, waving their arms. “Help!” She did not remember noticing she was splattering water and howling all by herself. She waved her hands toward shore, but nobody could see, and nobody heard her pleas. I’ve had it, she thought. She started praying, saying her goodbyes to the world, accepting the inevitable and surrendering to fate gracefully and compliantly. Then it occurred to her, of all revelations to have: the image of the brat, the boy she called “Willy.”

*I have a teenage son back home in Los Angeles, my only son. All he has in the U.S. is me, a mother; the rest of the extended family lives across the continent in Chile. I’m not leaving him like this, el pobre Willy.*

The water kept pulling her back in, but she insisted on swimming forward. She was making little progress, and realized her energies would be
Comadres

expended any second. It occurred to her to stop trying to swim. She lowered her leg, figuring she had nothing to lose, and she might as well try to get a firm footing on the sand. To her surprise, she touched ground. She took one small step, and then another, and started walking forward. She began to make headway. The intensity of the tide began to lessen. She had swallowed water and was afraid she would throw up, lose her balance, and sink. The waves were breaking on her head. She was afraid of being rolled over, but she remained standing. She breathed in, and then her body began to emerge from the water, slowly, gradually. She arrived at the nearly isolated beach, fell on the ground, and then, with relief, threw up on firm ground. She looked up and saw the face of a beaming little Mexican girl looking at her in wonderment and awe, and then she remembered Mario. She got up, startling the girl, and stumbled forward, weakly and feebly trying to move, but nonetheless she gathered the energy to suddenly run with greater purpose in search of Mario’s wife, Sara.

“She! Sara! I was drowning!” she shouted as she reached the spot on the beach where Carmen, Sara, and Mario’s daughter stared back at her, horrified. “We were both drowning!” Her friend bolted out of her place in the sand and went screaming in a desperate search for her husband. Fishermen, docking nearby, heard her cries of help and ran forward. They got back on their boats and went searching for him as the sun had nearly set. They found Mario’s lifeless body floating nearby. A trucker volunteered to drive them to the morgue in what Mother called the longest ride of her life. A Mexican blanket covered Mario’s rigid, pale body, and his wife and daughter stood incredulously by, holding on to the side of the truck as it hit potholes and crushed their bodies together.

Mother didn’t find a public phone inside the morgue, and found an assistant too rude to let her use hers because she said she was keeping the line open for an important phone call. Outside the morgue she found a diminutive old lady who barely reached up to her chest. She led her to a Mexican public phone. María’s hand shook uncontrollably now, and she didn’t know the number to make a collect call to Los Angeles. This old woman stepped forward to help her. In L.A., I heard the ring in the middle of the night and answered the phone. I had gone to bed after a rerun of Saturday Night Live.

“We lost Mario,” she told me.

“What? What do you mean, Mother?” I remember the call despite the haze of sleep.
“I was drowning with him,” she added, “but I thought of you back in L.A. reading your books. I couldn’t let go.”

I was stunned into silence. I finally blurted out some words about taking care, driving back carefully. I failed to ask for details. I am still amazed that my curiosity didn’t kick in till much later.

When she arrived at our apartment in Hollywood the next morning, Mother gave me a long hug. “I just didn’t want you to be an orphan. Being a bastard is hard enough,” she added, this time laughing nervously. She actually used the Spanish word \textit{hijo natural}.

I was eighteen and about to start my first year of college at UCLA. I was relieved Mother had survived, but astounded to feel a touch of guilt, the audacity of this poor woman who couldn’t let go of life because of her only son. I must be such a burden to her, I thought. She has no other life but me. How could I ever match this act of bravery and leave home for college, and return only rarely and begrudgingly, as other normal young people are supposed to do? This time was supposed to be about my rite of passage. Not just a rite, but a right. I was leaving in the fall to live at Sproul Hall, one of UCLA’s dorms in Westwood. I wanted distance. I wanted to stop living in a crowded apartment like an immigrant so I could live in a crowded dorm like a happy freshman. I was self-conscious about our way of life, despondent about it. I had camped out in Mother’s living room in Los Angeles for three years, and I never brought friends home to witness our tenement-style living. Sharing a room with an American student and eating dorm food sounded like an improvement over my current living arrangements in Hollywood. I wanted to experience progress and live with a sense of hope for the future. My mother’s life, stuck in what appeared to be an endless parade of cleaning gigs among Bel Air patrons, left me uninspired. I was grateful for her many sacrifices on my behalf, but still I wanted out. It seemed that with this survival “act,” Mother’s presence would remain engraved in my imagination and my conscience forever. There was no letting go of her even as I planned to put her life behind me. She would think of me as she was drowning, and say so afterward. I was either a terrible son or a typical teenager, or both. She had bought me an expensive watch for my birthday that year, and I had immediately sent it back. “I am not interested in the materialist/consumerist nature of society,” I told her. She sold the watch to a friend and gave me a cheaper Timex bought at the local Thrifty’s. My hair was long, and I was
listening to Bob Dylan and Janis Joplin, pretending to be in the 1960s a decade too late.

Aside from disdaining our poverty, I was repelled by the spectacle of watching poor people such as my mother and her roommate Carmen pursuing property in wild consumerist abandon. Mother’s life and that of her immigrant friends was spent comparing notes on their employers, their wages and treatment, and the various goods bought, consumed, and discarded. Poor people glowing in gratefulness for domestic labor struck me as pathetic. Yet, compared to the dismal standards set back in our civil war–ridden countries, or dictator-afflicted ones, life was good. Life was prosperous, even promising. We could afford the stereo, the color TV, or the rugs on the floor, once a sign of luxury for us in our neighborhood in Santiago. I bought myself books and blank paper for my electric typewriter, and I could afford the bus ride to Westwood to watch first-run movies on the weekend. It was all I really needed out of life.

On the stereo, Janis Joplin sang, “Lord, won’t you buy me a Mercedes Benz,” the wailing of a country woman praying for the Lord to provide the American lifestyle most of us couldn’t afford. Yet for us, the purchase of an old battered model of a car was a cause for celebration. Our prayers were answered. Joplin’s song was written in jest, as social satire, but these were our lives she was mocking. Mother constantly turned down the volume on Joplin’s husky voice. She failed to understand the lyrics, not simply because of her difficulties with English but because irony landed in her ears like a foreign language, and perhaps at that junction in life she could not afford to laugh at herself. I was disappointed at not being able to share rock ‘n’ roll music with her. She preferred the playful lyrics written by the late Chilean folk singer Violeta Parra. I tried to point out the best I could that one could find wit in a song such as “Mercedes Benz” just as one could appreciate Violeta.

“Janis Joplin’s lyrics can be witty, too.”
“Her voice is loud,” she said quite dismissively, “and it’s raspy, and she’s going to lose it if she keeps abusing it that way.”
“Well, she’s dead now and burned the candle at both ends, biographers say.”
“She was loud; that’s all I know. My ears hurt when I hear your records, and same goes for that other guy, Bob Dilo.”
“Dylan.”
“He can’t sing either.”
“But if you didn’t know Spanish, wouldn’t you find Violeta Parra’s strange, nasal voice a bizarre thing to listen to as well?”
“But at least she can write lyrics.”
“And so can Bob Dylan—he writes great lyrics. You should try to read them.”
“Ay, por favor. Who has time to figure out some hippie lyrics? You are developing strange tastes, and I’m not too surprised. You’re growing up in this country, well, in this big city, and you’re only young once, I guess, so you might as well listen to your records and like what you’re going to like. I can’t stop you. I know my mother never liked Elvis, and that hurt my feelings once. At least disco is something we can all understand.”
“What’s there to understand? It’s just one lyric sung over and over like ‘Fly, Robin, Fly.’ How many times can you say that?”
“But at least the ‘Fly, Robin’ people are not trying to say anything. You have to go to school for years to understand the lyrics in that album, the Bob Dilo.”
“It’s not right that you can’t appreciate Dylan. And it’s Dylan, not Dilo.”
“Sorry, but that’s how it is, and don’t play him or that Janis woman too loud, ’cause I get a headache, and don’t pout; it doesn’t look good in a boy.”
“I’m not pouting.”
“You are. You’re still a little boy, and you don’t see it.”
I wanted out of that life, and that fall, I did get out shortly after the drowning incident. Now I was cast in the role of the ungrateful son, which I was. I recognized it even then, and yet I played it out for long periods of time in my youth. All these thoughts crowded my feverish mind even as the image of my mother, the brave survivor, lingered on ready to expunge guilt. I thought of you as I was drowning. You can’t beat that. I was badly upstaged by an immigrant parent.
There were reasons to keep coming back to her. There was no escaping this one existence, and no inclination on my part to simply roam the world and get lost in it, though a future stint in Italy would satisfy the need for greater distance. But my mother would come join me there, too, and complete alienation was not possible. The hippie lifestyle was gone by the late 1970s, though my hair continued to insist it was possible to emulate it.
The near drowning of that summer continued to haunt my imagination and my dreams. My mother clung to life out in the middle of the
Comadres

ocean with sharks and other dangers and insisted on not letting go, and I could not shake that image out of my mind, whether in my dreams or in my waking thoughts. A few weeks later, instead of the initial impressions of dorm life, I was more struck by the humorous letter Mother received from a friend in Venezuela.

“Doña Norma is living in Caracas now,” she told me. It was the day before I was due to check into Sproul Hall at UCLA.

Norma was another one of those unsinkable Molly Browns out there in my mother’s life, a humorous clown of a woman from our neighborhood in La Palmilla. During the destructive years of the dictatorship, Chileans had left, not only as political exiles but as economic refugees as well. Norma had gone off to Venezuela with her husband to work. She corresponded with my mother, and it seemed amusing to be getting letters not only from Chile but from another South American country.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” she wrote after she heard of my mother’s near disaster in Ensenada. “Esther Williams? You have to be the hero of the film—la niña buena de la película.”

It made sense to me. I wasn’t the only one who connected the dots. We communicated in movie codes. Esther Williams, the former Olympic champion swimmer who had turned into a glamorous movie star, was the right celebrity with which to tease Mother. Her famous duet with Ricardo Montalban, singing (lip synching, I assumed) “Baby, It’s Cold Outside,” was also etched in my imagination. I mention it because I wasn’t the only one to speak in Hollywoodese.

Doña Norma had attended the same movie theater, La Palmilla, across the street from our home in Santiago. The triple features on Sundays became a way of life for people who hadn’t yet adopted the television set in droves as they would do later in the 1970s. We lived as Americans had in the 1940s, with a neighborhood bijou, supplemented by news broadcasts and radio drama. The comadrazgo that was born in that theater permeated conversations through long days, especially when Norma and other comadres showed up at our magazine stand to talk, often sitting down on the step at the entrance of the store and knitting.

“Esther Williams was from my mother’s generation,” my mother explained as if I wouldn’t have known Esther Williams. She was explaining Norma’s letter, and I didn’t need the explanation. I was in on the joke.
Those Hollywood triple features had shaped us, not just Mother and me but all the residents of La Palmilla. Our theater was a cavernous place with poor maintenance, crumbling seats, and a clientele that smoked until we could see the screen only through a haze. That way of life ended when television established itself, and we were gone to the United States by then. Yet, among us few Palmillanos then living in the United States, we were the ones specifically settled in the belly of the Hollywood beast, albeit without the glamour and with the dour promise that we would be stuck in that servile mode that was our fate as immigrants. I had soured on the dream by my teenage years. I had to rebel against something, anything that might link me to my mother’s generation, and clearly Hollywood was the one thing that dominated our imagination. I was headed for UCLA with a glimmer of hope for the future, but also with plenty of attitude. Mother had grown up absorbing lessons of bravery and endurance in Hollywood films, and I wasn’t much different, only beginning to question that system altogether. Courage—coupled with a certain lovability and “perkiness”—was something my mother learned from the many heroines who played out their lives on celluloid: the appealing girlish Doris Day and Audrey Hepburn, the unsinkable Debbie Reynolds, the tough (though neurotic) duo of Joan Crawford and Bette Davis, and finally the ultimate martyr/heroine, Julie Andrews, aka Maria von Trapp in *The Sound of Music*.

If it weren’t for a woman in Taiwan who established her fame in the Guinness Book of Records for watching the Robert Wise film hundreds of times, my mother would have gladly usurped the title. She went beyond admiration for this film. She lived in its enchantment. I, in turn, was not too far behind—until I discovered in my later teenage years the dark, hidden charms of Dostoyevsky or Friedrich Nietzsche. The *angst* in my *weltanschauung* was clearly being nurtured and established in my precarious state of mind. Up until then, I had still shared in the optimism of the American dream and could still respond to Julie Andrews with certain admiration and glee. I became much more systematic in my study of the Rodgers and Hammerstein–Robert Wise classic. I read the published script for the original musical in school, listened to the Mary Martin soundtrack, and compared it to the eventual classic film, winner of the 1965 Academy Award for Best Picture, finding it much more compelling than the critics’ Best Picture favorite, *Darling*. I don’t believe anybody would be entirely
inspired or awed by John Schlesinger’s intelligent, chic study of a bored princess. *Darling* is the type of film critics try to encourage the public to go see, and the public, for all its collective flaws as mass consumers, exhibits wisdom in not buying too much into the attitude. There’s something calm, studious, and slow about *Darling*. Yet, it was the type of thing that I was connecting with in college. I watched *Darling* several times, on television or at the revival film house, the Nuart, near UCLA. One of Christie’s male friends takes off with a male lover on the bike, and I found that titillating. A glimpse of a gay affair—I was in a rush to grow up and witness more of those. Another Schlesinger film, *Midnight Cowboy*, added further titillation. In *Midnight Cowboy* the hero abandons his Texas small town to become a hustler in New York City and survives under the tutelage of a street bum played by Dustin Hoffman. The film was shocking enough in its time to gather an X-rating even though there was no pornography in it, just frank talk about sex, and it became the first and only X-rated film to win the Best Picture Oscar. My rebellion entailed the contemplation of sexuality, but without the hustling. I retained wholesomeness, but kept the attitude. It was a tough balancing act to keep up through college.

Mario’s funeral provoked other feelings. I attended and saw for myself that I was worried about my mother’s isolation.

“I’ve lost my friend, and now you’re leaving,” she said that day as Carmen drove us to the funeral. She was beginning to plan ahead. “I want to bring José Luis to the United States.”

“Why are you even thinking about that?” I asked. It was true that she had lost her friend, but I was only moving across the city. Her brother had made no effort to contact her about coming to the United States, but she believed she needed to plan ahead for that day. A one-bedroom apartment crowded with three people had become a standard way of life for her. She could not withstand the relative silence of only two people living in the limited space. We had been kicked out of our Arlington apartment for being overcrowded, but my mother was planning already to have someone take my place on the couch.

I also wasn’t looking forward to this funeral. A small incident the previous day between the *comadres* had left my mother disturbed. Mother arrived with Carmen that afternoon after she had visited the widow, Sara, who had mentioned the funeral arrangements. Mother went into the bedroom to lock herself in, looking aggrieved. I figured that, finally, the
shock of the accident had begun to take a toll on her normally upbeat, sweet disposition.

Carmen explained it to me, “Sara made a nasty comment.”

María had gone over to Sara’s to be supportive as this usually bright, rowdy, life-of-the-party comadre continued to cope with her husband’s drowning, but she was not in the best of shape. Sara turned to Mother and said: “I don’t know what you people were doing out there swimming anyway. It was getting late, and people were leaving. Why did you have to go out there and take a final swim?”

The tone was accusatory. “Your mother grew silent,” said Carmen. “And Sara turned away looking angry. It was time to go. It was unfair, to accuse your mother of anything. I felt for her, too.”

I didn’t understand why Mother took it so personally. “But I’m sure Sara didn’t mean to . . .”

“Oh, Sara sounded angry,” Carmen confirmed. “Like she really blamed your mother.”

At the funerary services at a local church, I got dragged into it. My mother didn’t want to line up with the well-wishers at the cemetery and say comforting words to Sara.

“I just can’t face her,” she said. “You do it.”

I was stuck with the duty of offering my condolences. I didn’t know her particularly well. She was my mother’s good friend. I had spent their friendship mostly avoiding them together because I was playing the alienated teenager role. I was at a loss for words. For once, I felt the weight of being far away from Chile. My mother and I had missed all sorts of family functions, from weddings to baptisms, first communions, confirmations, graduations, and, of course, funerals. Since I had withdrawn from the church altogether (and who had time to worry about my confirmation when I made an event out of the release of Ingmar Bergman’s latest film, Autumn Sonata? And I’d also celebrated the resulting Oscar nominations that included its star Ingrid Bergman for Best Actress), I had been shielded from my father’s own passing and everything else our extended family could offer up and down in Chile. I had forgotten how to mourn, to process loss, and to wish people the best.

The priest’s sermon had been to the point, and affecting. I felt Mario’s loss and grappled with the concept of eternity. I appreciated a note of
Comadres

hope, even though I wasn’t particularly religious. Then, that’s when my mother insisted I be the one to approach the widow.

Sara made it easy for me. She reached out to grasp my hand and, with tears in her eyes, bid me good luck. “You must take care of your mother, and hold on to her, and think about how easily we can lose everything in one instance.” I shook her hand right back, gave her a light hug, and withdrew. She had managed to comfort me effectively, and I appreciated it. I wasn’t much help to her, I feared.

When I repeated Sara’s words to my mother, she grew silent again and didn’t want to talk about it. She stopped going to Sara’s place and shut her out of her life. Five years passed before my mother could bring herself to talk to this woman. By then, Sara had moved on with her life, was dating a new man, and all seemed well between them again—except the friendship had died in the meantime.

“I think I’ll definitely bring my brother,” she said not long after the funeral. I was at UCLA, and there was a tone of emptiness over the other end of the line. It was my mother running out of ideas for her own life, but other people’s lives were something she could still help organize. “Everybody else is buying homes and new cars. I can’t think about such things when my brother can’t even find work back in Chile.”

“Why not get married?” I said. How impertinent of me to even mention this, but my mother didn’t seem taken aback.

“Oh, a woman my age,” she said. She was in her early forties, still thinking like a woman in the hometown of Mulchén, where a woman that age was already dismissed as a solterona. Even a woman turning thirty was already suspect in Chile. “Only really old, old men might want to marry someone like me. What’s the point? I’m not a gold digger. And why change the subject? I want to help my brother.”

“Charity begins at home.”

“When are you getting married?” she asked. It was revenge time. I was too young to get married, but I wasn’t dating either. I didn’t seem to have a discernible private life of any kind. I had trouble taking showers at the dorms. I was avoiding dealing with my body altogether, and only a fast metabolism kept me looking thin and boyish. Otherwise, I wasn’t exercising or eating anything particularly healthy. I had the excuse of being in college. I didn’t have to deal with a private life. That trauma would begin years later.
Avoidance was the lifestyle we had settled into. I couldn’t argue for a choice other than my mother’s need to care for others. The day care still loomed somewhere in the future, when she would save for a down payment on a home where she would set up a business. But meanwhile her brother rebuffed the plans she had made for him. He was in no rush to come to the United States. It was true he was unemployed, or underemployed, but he insisted he could get by doing something else. He went to Argentina to try his luck as a street vendor, and that was the only adventure he was in the mood for. His sister constantly miscalculated if she thought she could make choices for him. But one of those days, Mother called one of her *comadres* back in Chile. It was Aunt Chata, one of her childhood friends. I had grown up playing with her daughters, Mariela and Janet. They had kept in touch, and Aunt Chata was one of the few talented writers back home. She wrote long, descriptive letters about life with her family, little masterpieces of detail. When she had lost a child to a miscarriage, I had visualized the fetus of the child on her bed, as she described it, born dead. When the economy had forced the family to live on the tightest budget one could imagine, she described her daughter’s struggle of wanting to attend a party at her school, but they couldn’t put together the coins needed to pay for the bus fare. “She stayed at home,” Aunt Chata wrote about her daughter. “I think she learned something about the type of world we’re living in.” When we drove from Arlington, Virginia, to Los Angeles, her letter put our journey in perspective: “You are charting the westward movement in the country’s history.” I looked forward to reading Aunt Chata’s exquisite personal letters.

Mother called me up, overjoyed that day. “Your aunt Chata is coming to visit us,” she said. It was a done deal. My mother had already made the arrangements. She had bought the plane fare on Chata’s behalf. “She’ll come with a tourist visa, but she’ll work here with me, and eventually, pay me back.”

Carmen was skeptical. “What if she can’t earn enough to pay you back?”

“Such awful thoughts!” my mother cried over the phone while talking to me, but answering Carmen’s interjections. “Carmen is always the skeptic around here. What are we going to do about her? I can’t live with that type of negativity.”

Aunt Chata didn’t arrive alone. She brought her daughter, Mariela, and
I discovered later that my mother also lent her the money for that ticket. If she could afford it, I didn’t see the harm in it. We welcomed this strange, impromptu reunion of the *comadres* that was the product of one long-distance call, in which Aunt Chata just said, “I’m going.” It was the type of decisiveness my mother wanted to hear, and even help finance. Carmen looked on with a wait-and-see attitude. She wasn’t buying it.

Aunt Chata and her daughter easily obtained the tourist visa, and within a month she was taking a bus up to Bel Air with my mother, helping her clean homes for Hollywood people. Her daughter mostly stayed behind to lounge around Mother’s apartment, feeling a bit abandoned as the days went by, but at first it seemed exciting enough to be in the United States and to be watching American television. There were now four people crowded into the one-bedroom Hollywood flat, but they were having the time of their lives. I got my daily reports over the phone. The women were caught in the midst of an intense *comadrazgo* galore. Nobody seemed worried about papers at the time. It was already a given that some people came without them. It was a small miracle to have the learned, wonderful, vibrant aunt Chata in our midst, an example of that type of cultured middle-class woman from Chile who grew up fairly well-off yet was living a life in which, according to her, nothing much was happening. She was married and had three wonderful daughters, but she wanted a drastic change in her life. My mother delivered with a great flair and enthusiasm. The women would work during the week, but on weekends my mother drove her guests to the Grand Canyon, later to Las Vegas, then to the beaches of Southern California and Yellow Park. The old von Trapp spirit was back—it was María showing her charges the good time to which she felt they were entitled as her friends.

But Carmen’s skeptical attitude began to become a reality. “She’ll never earn enough to pay it all back.”

It was true. My mother had lent her friend close to two thousand dollars, and the salaries of an average maid, shared with a helper, were not covering the debt. But my mother, at first, didn’t care.

“I didn’t bring them here to worry about such things,” she said. “In the long run, they’ll pay me. If not . . . we’ll figure something out.”

A long-distance phone call from her husband in Santiago caught Aunt Chata off guard one day. I had gone over to dinner. I got to see the change on her face myself. “He wants me back,” she said after she hung up. “He
said he’ll earn back the money. He’ll pay La Chela back himself.” (“La Chela” was still my mother’s nickname in Chile.)

There was silence. Back in Chile, men were supposed to be the wage earners, but unemployment or underemployment stirred up their pride. Chata’s husband didn’t have the money. Everyone knew that. Earning two thousand dollars in Chile under that type of economy was virtually impossible for someone without a major position or inheritance. My mother wanted to forget the conversation. She had planned another one of her outings, this time to San Francisco, and that’s all that mattered during those intense four weeks of Aunt Chata’s visit.

But Chata had her pride as well. “I said I would pay for it, so I will,” she said. “When we go back, I’ll wire the money, you’ll see; don’t anybody fret over it.”

“You should stay and make your daughter work, too,” said Carmen, ever so practical.

“I don’t know what you’re insinuating!” shouted Aunt Chata, losing her temper unexpectedly, hitting the table with her fist. “If you people care so much about money, you shouldn’t have brought me here.”

Mariela had tears in her eyes and turned to my mother. “We’ll find a way to pay you back.”

But my mother didn’t want to make this about money. “Just stay, and we’ll figure it out, even if you just pay a little bit. I’m really not in a rush.”

“My husband wants me back!” cried Aunt Chata. “I need to get back to my family. I will pay every cent back!”

“You shouldn’t go, Aunt Chata,” I said. This is where I, the supposedly retro hippie, got involved. “I’ll marry your daughter, and then I’ll help her fix her papers.”

The women looked at me with great anxiety. One didn’t just get married back in Chile. One didn’t do it for papers certainly. Mariela blushed. She thought of me as her friend. Marriage carried the connotation of sex. Aunt Chata looked at me as if I had said something terribly fresh.

“Nobody’s marrying anybody,” she said. “We’re leaving. I couldn’t live like this. All you people worry about in this country is money! That’s all you care about.”

My mother looked defiant. This is where Sara had gone wrong, too. My mother was generous and all giving, but let the comadre say one wrong-headed, unfair comment, and the stubbornness emerged out of her
as if she’d been a debt collector. “Fine!” she said, and then turned to me. “Draw up some papers.”

Papers? I looked at my mother, wondering what on earth she meant. We had my old manual typewriter back in my mother’s apartment. I had taken the new electric one to UCLA, so there I sat that evening, writing some unofficial promissory note with a clunky old typewriter in which Aunt Chata agreed to make a monthly payment of fifty dollars or so for years to come, without interest. Aunt Chata had too much pride to call this crazy thing off. My mother was too incensed to stop me. I wasn’t a bank. I wrote what I could in Spanish and tried to make it sound official. I left room at the bottom for signatures, and the two obstinate women, angry at one another, signed. We needed a notary public, but we didn’t bother. We committed ourselves to a piece of paper that had no legal standing. It was sealed in the fury of stubborn pride.

The friendship was shattered. Aunt Chata fell sick with a psychosomatic symptom that kept her awake at night for her remaining days in Hollywood. She had kept her return ticket, and her tourist visa had not lapsed. She had kept her legality, and her pride, and she could return to her friends back home to talk about the wonderful times her friend, María, had shown her in the United States.

The truly sad thing is my mother never cared about the money. She had invested in the pure fun of sharing her life in the United States with one of her best friends. Who else would have put up two thousand dollars for that? My mother exhibited great happiness when Aunt Chata and Mariela were around. She was the hostess, and the caretaker, and the great generous fairy godmother granting her kids their wishes. She invested in that feeling, and she wanted it to last. It wouldn’t have mattered how long it took for them to pay the money back. She herself had taken a couple of years to pay back Aunt Nelly for the loan that bought her ticket to the United States back in 1970. But Aunt Chata couldn’t see it in that light. She felt shame in having to borrow, especially since paying back meant working in the United States as a servant. Her escape from Santiago had been a whim, the type of temporary lunacy my mother was more than glad to pay for. Aunt Chata, too, had been happy during her visit. My mother had extended the invitation for her to stay as long as she needed to. But Aunt Chata had listened to reason, or, more ominously, she had listened to her husband, who had not been happy with her sudden desertion, and
what did she get in return? Her pride back, at most. Because, as she was about to leave, she confessed that all along her pride had taken a hit, even while she was having fun. She didn’t believe my mother didn’t want her money back right away like a normal person living in the capitalist world should. Aunt Chata’s spirit of adventure was exhausted, and that practical side of her nature had been gnawing at her from the start. This was crazy, she said, and she should have never done this. She also made it very clear that she never intended to become a mere maid in the United States.

“I have my family back home,” she told my mother. “I don’t want to live like you.”

The words hurt. Again, the accusatory words of the other comadre, the widow Sara, came back to haunt María. It was her fault all over again, or so said this childhood comadre. She would have trouble forgiving Aunt Chata for it. “My husband will pay back every cent,” she insisted. “I don’t want to stay here a moment longer.”

Carmen drove Chata and Mariela to the airport and then walked them to the gate. But suddenly, Chata fell ill and ran to the bathroom to throw up. When she came back, she could barely walk. The airline assistant called for a wheelchair. Chata was having some sort of nervous breakdown, accompanied by a seizure or a fit, or some big dramatic mix of all these things.

“Well, postpone the trip,” said Carmen. “And stay until you feel better.”

“Are you kidding?” cried Chata. “I’m not going to live like this!”

That’s what Carmen reported anyway: one more stab at the wound, suggesting no normal Chilean woman would live like these women did.

“That was meant for me,” Mother said later.

Mariela wheeled Chata into the plane, and off they went, with the poor aggrieved aunt convulsing and crying.

“No lo dije yo?” Carmen was confident that she had said so. She usually was right about these things.

We didn’t hear back from Aunt Chata for a long time thereafter, with one exception. My mother got wired a couple of hundred dollars from Chata’s husband, and then, just as easily, the payments stopped.

“But the money wasn’t the point,” insisted María for years to come.

“So what was the point?” I asked.

“Sometimes, you just have to leave,” she said. “It was the right impulse, but Chata didn’t trust herself enough. Perhaps my niece will turn out better.”
“Your niece?” I asked, my voice beginning to panic. The cycle was starting all over again. My mother had already made the arrangements to bring her niece in the same manner, \textit{a la mala}, with a tourist visa that would in this case lapse. Mother’s savings had dwindled down to the hundreds, but it didn’t matter. She trusted the impulse. “Here we go again!” I cried in exasperation. “\textit{No me meto},” said Carmen. “Keep me out of it.”

But the impulse had to wait. This time her niece’s parents delayed the trip, and it would be four more years before my mother would get the pleasure of playing gracious hostess once again to a fellow Chilean. Late in the summer of 1984, Catalina came to live in the United States, and this time my mother would ensure that she would stay. The girl was barely fourteen, and unlike Chata, she had no one to call her back. Somebody had to occupy that well-worn couch, and Catalina replaced me on it. I was still finishing up my undergraduate studies at UCLA, renting an apartment closer to campus, and my mother had been restless for a long time to move on to this next focus point in her life. Meanwhile, she had gotten a better job than the freelancing gigs that came her way in Bel Air. A Chilean friend—Olga, an overweight, raucous old lady with a scratchy voice—got cancer and returned to Chile to die. Mother inherited from her a reasonably appealing job, taking care of the home of the renowned designer James Galanos. She was bringing in a steady income, and Mr. Galanos was the type of caring employer who set up benefits.

“I’m a lucky woman,” María said. Working for Mr. Galanos gave her status. Mr. Galanos’s red dress for Nancy Reagan was photographed for the historical record when Nancy wore it to the inauguration. María felt more secure now, eager to play hostess to her niece and goddaughter, Catalina. Carmen remained the naysayer.

“I don’t understand the point of asking for more trouble,” said Carmen. Mother dismissed her negativity one more time. Did anybody ever listen to Carmen about anything? How many times did this woman have to be right? Mother insisted that it was somebody new and young, and a hope for the future.

“It’s another mouth to feed, as I see it,” said Carmen.

Catalina—or the idea of Catalina—made sense to my mother, who entertained romantic notions of providing an education for a poor young
child. Unfortunately, her approach started off on the wrong side of the law, although it wasn't inconceivable for Latin Americans to bring their family members across the border or by plane as tourists. She'd find a way to get the child her papers and was confident that the move would help humanity in some way. It sounded so good, I was opposed to it just like Carmen. I thought it a distraction from Mother's idea of one day getting a degree in child development and opening up a day care center. I was all for that. But now her plans had to be suspended again on behalf of her fourteen-year-old niece from Chile. A fairly well-off friend of hers, Doña Aida, who lived next door to her family in Chile and was the owner of various businesses, helped with the inevitable bureaucratic arrangements to bring Catalina over. Doña Aida walked into the American Embassy in Santiago with her usual business acumen and loquaciousness and convinced officials that this fourteen-year-old would simply be visiting her aunt.

After our experience with Aunt Chata and her daughter, I wanted to stay away. But no, I would not be allowed to keep my distance one more time. I was inducted immediately into my mother's welcoming ceremonies. As September approached, I was assigned to enroll Catalina into high school. She would be attending my alma mater, Fairfax High, and my mother thought it made sense that I should introduce her to the campus on Melrose Avenue.

"It should warm your heart to do this, for a poor child," she said, tugging at the heart strings shamelessly. "She's your cousin. She's family."

"Send her back," Carmen insisted. "She'll have nice memories of Disneyland, and she'll be grateful for maybe ten minutes. This is Los Angeles, not Utah. The schools are not pretty."

"But Willy attended the same school," my mother told her, using me as the example, "and he turned out a responsible young man."

Carmen looked annoyed. She didn't quite know how to size me up. I wasn't trouble. I wasn't a hoodlum, but I hadn't quite turned out a doctor or a lawyer either. There was still something about me—the hair was shorter, but stylized—that bothered her. The jury was still out on what I represented, if anything. I was on my fifth year at UCLA and counting. Something hadn't fallen quite into place. She didn't like my situation. And now there was Catalina.

"It's not as if I'm going to change María's mind," she said, hoping to make the situation go away, which it wouldn't any time soon.
I complied with my mother’s demand that I enroll Catalina into Fairfax High. I walked up the steps of the entrance of the building with my cousin trailing behind me during the late August registration. I approached a gentleman by the entrance who turned out to be a security guard. That was the first sign. When I attended, there were no such things as guards or locked gates. It was an open campus once, like a university. But several shootings around its perimeter had changed all that.

“Could you tell me where the registrar’s office is?” I asked the guard.

The man with the sunglasses shook his head with a smirk on his face. “Young man, you need to say ‘Excuse me’ when you address me. You’re starting high school now. You need to learn these basic things.”

I realized that my low height and small boyish frame still created the illusion I was a kid, but I didn’t realize that people thought I was starting high school. It explained why a stubborn woman at a local bar had refused me a drink after I had forgotten my ID. Another woman at a local grocery store would not sell me a lottery ticket, and you had to be eighteen to buy one of those. The guard’s statement made me feel an immediate regression back to childhood. I felt as vulnerable as my cousin did. I walked her toward the registrar’s office, but I realized I had to watch myself. I had to learn to say “Excuse me.” I must admit that, even if I had learned some basic manners in my (by then) many years of college, I often failed to use them with any consistency. But it was my look that revealed something worse than youth: my immaturity. I was nothing more than a grown child, and a quasi virgin, and it showed.

“Excuse me, I need to register my cousin,” I told one of the clerks, but I didn’t even get a chance to talk to him. A female counselor, a stern Asian American woman, stopped to stare at me with suspicion. She asked me to step into her office. My cousin followed, and we both sat down in front of her desk.

“Why isn’t her guardian with her?” she asked.

“She’s my cousin, and she lives with my mother,” I said. “I’m just helping out.”

“We have had teenagers enrolled here by their pimps, and they go to school in the day and get prostituted at night,” she explained to me, staring at me with disdain, sizing me up. “How old are you, for that matter?”

“Look, I’m at UCLA! I’m not a kid, and I’m not a pimp. My mother just wants her registered for the school year.”
“Tell your mother she’ll have to come in and sign the papers herself,” she added. “I need to see a responsible adult.”

I didn’t argue. I was too depressed that my school had deteriorated to this, and one look at me, and the woman chose to treat me like a punk. I left feeling despondent of the entire situation. I was an adult, and I needed a drink.

My mother couldn’t believe I wasn’t able to register my cousin, and she returned a few days later with Catalina to get the task done. I should have realized then that my cousin was registering in a school that had changed remarkably since I had been a student. I should have known there was nothing but trouble ahead.

Every bit of skepticism that the prescient Carmen had expressed from the very beginning became a fulfilled prophecy. Let’s just cut to the chase and say that after a few years, a boyfriend, and an abortion, Catalina left home and disappeared into the American landscape. She returned a couple of times, with two sons whom she abandoned at my mother’s house, and then, as Mother lay dying in Portland, Oregon, Catalina stayed away. Her mother in Chile hasn’t seen her in twenty-five years. Last time a friend of my mother ran into her in Los Angeles, she was in her thirties, allegedly living in a trailer without electricity with a new boyfriend.

What went wrong? There was clearly a clash of cultures in our home, or at least a clash of generations. We thought we knew well the environment back in Chile; Mother and I lived there ourselves. Yet, we had apparently forgotten the dysfunctions of our old neighborhood, La Palmilla. Catalina’s father—my uncle—had gotten himself into trouble with the law by allegedly buying stolen goods. He was sent to prison and beaten up by guards who—he claimed—also put electric rods on his genitals to get him to talk. *La parrilla*, as it was called, or the grill, an apt symbol for the Pinochet dictatorship. Political dissidents were tortured under Pinochet’s regime, but my uncle claimed that torture was readily dispensed to other prisoners, and he’d been one of them. Catalina grew up under parents who couldn’t provide a stable environment, had no formal education themselves, and made their living by trying to pull deals together at a flea market. Understandably, my mother wanted to take the child away from that way of life. A small child would have been manageable, probably. A fourteen-year-old girl in Hollywood from La Palmilla was impressed instead by
break dancers on Hollywood Boulevard and, more importantly, by the appealing sight of muscular black men.

Catalina had been brought up in Chile taunted by her own darkness. One look at her and another look at Janet Jackson, and one could have called them sisters. Catalina was darker than an average mestiza, and her schoolmates in Chile taunted her as la negra. I knew all about those schools. I knew that cruelty prevailed in them, and that once children found the difference in you, you’d be taunted for life. Whether you were el negro, the gypsy, or the faggot, it made no difference. I had barely made it out of those schools in one piece, and it didn’t take much for ridicule to leave its scars on someone more vulnerable. In the United States, Catalina turned her darkness into an advantage, around black young men.

“Your cousin is pregnant,” Mother called to say. I was living in West Hollywood by then, sharing an apartment with two gay roommates. I had, I thought, escaped that world and was living in another across town more befitting to my particular sexual proclivities. There was no transcending that world with a change of zip codes.

When Mother came over for a brief visit, she had thought of the solution.

“I’m paying for the abortion,” she said without much emotion. It had been a long road from the girl’s school run by nuns to the enchantments of The Sound of Music to paying for an abortion. My mother had come to support a woman’s right to choose and felt Catalina had no other alternative. I agreed. I didn’t think a teenage girl had any business giving birth to a child, but something continues to bother me about having to impose it on her. Not that she resisted it. She behaved like a helpless child and went along with the decision. Both my mother and I were products of sexual escapades of the nonmarital kind and owed our births and upbringing to women who decided to take responsibility in having us. But the blank stare in Catalina’s demeanor made me wonder what other type of problems she was having.

“Algo le falla a esa pobre chica,” said my mother. Her diagnosis made sense. The trauma of her Chilean experience had come back to haunt us all. The signs were there when my mother drove her niece to the abortion clinic and witnessed the young woman’s strange indifference. She pretended not to care.
“She must have been dying inside,” María later said. “But she wouldn’t show it, not to me. I think she hated me all of a sudden for making her go through this. But I couldn’t tell. She became a stranger that day, a complete mystery to me.”

Catalina’s behavior grew more perplexing over the next couple of months. “She now promises me to behave, to do well in school, to avoid the boys in school, especially the one who got her pregnant, and to start a new life,” said my mother, who felt she was raising this child on her own. She didn’t inform Catalina’s parents in Chile about what happened because my mother felt that, at such distance, the most they could do was send a couple of strongly worded letters. She already realized that this child was not easily reached through language. My mother was also protective of her family in Chile and didn’t want to worry them. Here was one major difference between ourselves and other Latino immigrants. Although family was important to us, ours lived in the farthest, southernmost country on the continent, and no relatives ever visited us. None could afford the plane fare, and we couldn’t afford to visit frequently either. The Aunt Chata visit was a unique phenomenon with its own bizarre details. It cost my mother plenty, but she was in her own way crying out for a visit. It was one of the things she had paid for. Otherwise, distance kept us apart, and it was easier to keep our secrets than it might have been for, say, Mexican immigrants who shuttle back and forth from their native cities and towns across the border. Distance worked against us because the discipline, the family pressure, and even the shame that might have helped Catalina weren’t there. We were clearly not enough for her.

“I visited the school to ask her teachers about her grades,” my mother added. “I didn’t mention the pregnancy or the abortion. Maybe I should have, maybe they could have counseled her, but I felt ashamed. I didn’t want more trouble. I didn’t want to involve the boy responsible for the pregnancy. I wanted to see what I could do to help improve things. The teachers told me the same thing. She’s a quiet girl, doesn’t say much in class. She doesn’t turn in homework and doesn’t seem motivated by school at all.” The counselor told my mother she didn’t expect her to graduate. She was failing. She’d have to come back in the fall to take extra classes, if she hoped to graduate at all. “When I talked to Catalina, she smiled and said she’d do anything to improve. She sounded sweet and cooperative all
of a sudden. She would improve her grades, and then forget all about boys—that’s what she’s saying now.”

A few months later, a young black man drove over to the apartment building and picked Catalina up in a limo. This was not the same man who had left her pregnant.

“I’ll bring your niece back by ten, tía,” he said, using the Spanish word for aunt. Rather cheeky of him. María called me up to tell me the latest news, muy atrevido. But he did own a limo. She didn’t try to convince Catalina to stay inside that night. She knew what she was up against now. Eleven p.m. came around, and no sign of Catalina, no phone call, nothing. My mother kept up Carmen, who told her to just give up on la pobre loca and get to bed. María couldn’t. She worried and paced around the room, feeling responsible for the latest developments. Past midnight, my mother got a phone call from the young man. Their limo had broken down on the freeway, and he promised to have the girl back by two a.m.

Mother stayed up till three, then four. Five a.m. came and went. Catalina didn’t arrive till ten thirty the next morning. She came in laughing. Oh, don’t worry, she insisted, they had waited for the man’s sister to arrive by the freeway where the limo had broken down, and this sister didn’t arrive till five, and so they spent the rest of the night at the sister’s place. She wanted to sleep now. She wouldn’t be going to school that day. Yes, it was her decision to make. Mother, who had barely slept that night, left Catalina sleeping, then made a quick getaway to the L.A. office of Lan-Chile Airlines.

“I just bought her a one-way ticket back to Santiago,” she proudly called me the next day, borrowing the phone from the Lan-Chile office to keep me informed. “I put my money down, in cash. It was all I had in savings—first the abortion, then the plane fare. Still, it’s money well spent. No more Catalina. She has a mother, and I’m only her aunt, I admit it now. I can’t do much more for her. I’m going home right now to present her with my gift.”

The next day, Catalina was gone. She had slipped out in the middle of the night, leaving a note behind. “Please don’t call the police. I’ll call to say that I’m all right. I’m going out of state with another girl with problems at home.”

Mother called me again from Lan-Chile the next day to say she got the plane fare refunded minus a penalty. With the balance, she drove to Las
Vegas that weekend to try her luck. She lost $180. She called to report that, too. We wouldn’t see Catalina until Thanksgiving that year, briefly picking up a paper plate of turkey and stuffing and other goods. We would see her like this, on and off for the next couple of years. She would contact us when she chose it. We didn’t know where she was living or what her phone number was. She eventually disappeared altogether, but not before leaving two young boys with my mother one day.

My mother discovered the value of her own education, at least. If she couldn’t raise a daughter, she would instead become a professional nanny, one with a degree. She enrolled at Los Angeles Community College, where she followed a curriculum of preparatory courses, including English. She then meticulously followed the process that led to certification in child care. The care of other people’s children—infants, not teenagers preferably—became her life’s work. She succeeded in doing that, as long as she didn’t have to do the follow-up of helping kids cope with the malaise of teenage angst. Mother knew the sweet nothings that spoke to babies, not the tougher logic of keeping a young adult away from sex, drugs, or any other temptations found easily in an overwhelming and unforgiving city.

In 1992 Los Angeles rioted against a decade of inner-city neglect. We had been living in Reagan’s fabled, Hollywoodized America for too long. Even we, the movie lovers, admitted that something was broken, even the Maria von Trapp Syndrome. It had helped, in so many ways, to inspire my mother to survive a riptide in Ensenada. It had permeated her lovable personality and made her a fun mother, and an inspiring one to other people’s children, but they were growing up in Los Angeles now, in modern times, and no longer selecting Rodgers and Hammerstein tunes to sing along to. Rap and hip-hop had supplanted even hard rock. The times had moved on, and we were still living, literally, at the movies. Boyz ’n the Hood was now the choice of B-boys and B-girls, the language was rough, the life it portrayed violent and deadly. My mother was watching Driving Miss Daisy while her niece abandoned the old women’s sensibility altogether. She got herself a man and was out there doing it for herself, a modern young woman living independently, but unfortunately in the streets. Something was wrong with this picture. Mother came home one day from Ensenada, shook up but unscathed, and would live another twenty-three years, but clearly a story of courage and survival would never suffice to keep the peace.
at home. She was up against an entirely new set of values, and they inevi-
tably clashed. Catalina had listened to all of Mother’s stories about hard
work and survival, and instead of feeling the inspiration and the need to
sing along to “Do-Re-Mi,” she went packing, out into the streets, from
which she has not emerged.