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.
My mother may have embodied Maria von Trapp, the caretaker nanny, as a role model, but she eventually also evolved into one of Tennessee Williams’s lovable neurotics—Alma Winemiller would do, the undefiled woman in the first half of *Summer and Smoke*. Yet, my mother never became the town’s libidinously inclined wallflower of the second half of the play/film, as played by Geraldine Page. That honor would have to pass down to me. From a silent, repressed sexual entity, uncomfortable in my body, clothed to cover up every bit of skin except hands and face, I became sexually active—for a while anyway. Desire overpowered my body in specific periods of time, then retreated into hibernation. The pattern persists today. Periods of isolation followed by outbursts of indiscretion. It’s the Winemiller syndrome.

But *Summer and Smoke* won’t do as an analogy any longer. My actual fall from grace as the male spinster boy virgin in Italy resembles more closely *Summer Time*, starring Katharine Hepburn as a middle-aged woman who finds romance and physical intimacy in the arms of Rosanno Brazzi. I watched the film in our dorm-sized apartment off Sunset Boulevard early in the late 1970s as a late show one lonesome Saturday night. I was fourteen, and Mother had seen it in Santiago in the late 1950s and watched it again several times on TV. Italy as the place one goes to get laid is, of course, flattering to Italians, assuming they care about so many tourists defiling their streets and expecting sexual favors and romance and all other demanding expectations of affection-deprived Americans. Italians
Italian Holiday

may be romantic, but they’re not to be used for our purposes, unless they wish to be, and some of them do, so God bless the willing.

Mother went to Italy first in 1980 on a Europass tour but never spoke of getting laid. She missed a deadly terrorist bomb in Bologna by a couple of days, and that was the most excitement she got out of the trip as far as I knew. When I announced that I was going to Padua, Italy, through the education abroad program, she was overjoyed for me, and for herself. Mother followed me there in 1983 to visit me, and we managed to bicker like cantankerous old ladies. Who got laid first and who overcame some powerful hang-ups is not for me to say here. I don’t know everything about Mother’s private life. She was never one to tell. All I know is that the same syndrome of Catholic virgin that Mother struggled with in her youth was inherited by her son, a virginal, feminized, puny, and asexual young man who arrived in Italy sensing he needed to let go of the past.

I did let go, not for the obvious reasons of quick conquest, but because, in the lesson of Hollywood romances, I learned something about myself that went beyond sex. Yes, there was sex, and there was also romance. The soundtrack played out in the background; the gondolas sailed. Italy, the wine, the pasta, the men—it worked as it was meant to. It also brought me into life and initiated me to the spontaneity of love and sex, which is what I remember best about this period of life. The poet Pablo Neruda titled his memoirs I Confess That I Have Lived. The confession also assumes there’s a way to exist without living. I have gone through periods of great danger doing precisely that, of repressing my feelings and my instincts and therefore shying away from living. This period is not one of them.

I discovered creative writing at UCLA, and even though my only experiences in life up until that point seemed to be about hiding from reality, at least I had something perversely real to write about: sexual repression. All my early efforts, however, were disconnected from that reality. I was too self-conscious to delve into my specific fears about sex and other aberrations. I wrote fantasy scenarios, melodrama, detective stories, sci-fi, things that I eventually kept away from people but retained in my files as reminders, the way parents keep baby shoes. After writing on my own for so long, I finally sought to enroll in a fiction class, but all the classes were full. There was an opening in a playwriting class, however, and the theater
professor, Carol Sorgenfrei, welcomed me into it. I was theatrical at least. Scratch the surface of the quiet boy virgin, and you’d find the makings of a neurasthenic Tennessee Williams heroine struggling to break free. I do sense a female quality about me, a sense of polite reticence worthy of Alma Winemiller. Williams wrote successfully about boozy, sexually repressed, middle-aged women falling apart, but as a teenager, I felt he was writing about me. I was a perfect fit for a playwriting class. I had aspired to be an actor, and while I had given up on the idea, the thought of writing for the live theater seemed to fulfill a theatrical yearning.

I started writing about Latino immigrants. Nobody else seemed to be doing it at the time. One of my first efforts, as an exercise, was about an INS officer who gets seduced by an illegal alien/femme fatale who then takes off with his money. Then, my first full-length play, Flute of the Andes, depicted a Peruvian family in Los Angeles with lots of kids, too many for modern staging capacity. Nonetheless that play allowed me an opportunity to write about a warm, loving family the likes of which I’d never really experienced in the United States. Some vague memories of my grandmother donning an apron and cooking French cuisine like an expert rubbed off on this play, but as an idyll, it blurred like an imperfectly captured memory.

I was floundering as a student, a creative writer, and a human being. It seemed perfectly reasonable to attend an education abroad program far away from home. I imagined myself as one of those writers, scribbling away on a journal in a café in Italy, which is exactly what I would do for almost a year. My life became literary even before I could accomplish anything as a writer. I believed at least in the posturing of writing. It sustained a fantasy life I needed. I was turning twenty; I was an unattractive, hairy virgin. My mother and my high school best friend, Eugene, were suggesting my self-image was to blame for how I felt, that I actually wasn’t that ugly, or some such condolences. Sex was a remote possibility, and if I had failed to get laid on Santa Monica Boulevard, or Hollywood and Vine, I had probably missed the boat altogether. I believed I was headed for a life of celibacy. Reading Dante in the original didn’t help. His chaste love for Beatrice, the ideal woman he never touched, struck me as an act of masochism. At least he was married to somebody else. I was more afraid of Mann’s Death in Venice, a fateful tale of obsession and death. My Santos obsession had been an early warning that I was developing an extreme psychology. A major getaway trip seemed like the answer, and the need to
write was another. I started short stories, novels, a couple of plays, and, most importantly, a journal that I’ve kept to this day.

“It’s a wonderful thing that you have all these opportunities,” said my mother. “At your age, I had dropped out of school and began working at a vitamin factory in Santiago. Americans invest in young people, in education in particular. I hope you’re grateful for all these things.”

I was grateful, but I was also surrounded by young people who were learning that the United States was “imperialist” and racist. When my mother spoke of the great advantages of living in this country, I felt myself being pulled in various directions. I trusted my mother’s instinct to be grateful toward our adopted country, but anti-Americanism was the cool disposition at a public university like UCLA, especially after the voters elected Ronald Reagan, who labeled the Soviet Union “the evil empire.” In my first talk with an American student at an orientation meeting, he said that he was looking forward to meeting the Italian people who were being occupied by American forces.

“I’m glad to have immigrated to the United States,” I said, but he looked at me with suspicion. He’d been brought up in an American suburb. He had never been abroad before, but he had taken a political science course with a Marxist professor at UCLA. He was quick to label me conservative. He would do so the rest of my stay in Italy. I would continue to project an uncool disposition because I was considered too much of a grateful immigrant.

The overnight train from Paris stopped in Padua on its way to nearby Venice. It unloaded a group of us that had flown to the French capital with other students bound for different cities in France. We had separated from them and taken a train to Italy. We congregated in our American dorm located in a quiet cul de sac close to the train station and met the other students who had arrived earlier.

I discovered I was not the only Guillermo in the program. In the United States, even in Los Angeles, I had been used to the fact that my name—William in translation—still proved to be unusual, even “exotic” wherever I went. I was living closer to West than East L.A., so I wasn’t living in a “Hispanic” area. My classmates and my professors knew me as William; my mother knew me as “Willy,” which I had tried to ban to no avail. The Other Guillermo, as I began to refer to him, was a Mexican
American young man. He was handsome, outgoing, popular, and, of course, excessive. He considered himself bisexual and found himself partying on down in the daytime anywhere with a couple of beers, and sometimes drugs, with boys and girls, sometimes at the same time. He was a chick magnet. He was the opposite of whatever it is that I was. I could have blamed my solitude on being too Hispanic, or too queer, or too shy, or too unattractive, or everything else that suited my need to blame anything other than my choices. In Italy, the Other Guillermo emerged on the first day to shake my hand and confront me with some other self I might have been in some other life. The Other Guillermo was the living refutation that attitude mattered more than ethnicity, hang-ups, or teenage depression, for that matter. I had no valid excuses. White people, Italians, Americans, Latinos and non-Latinos, men and women—he seemed to draw them all as I watched in amused silence from a distance. But not for long. The Other Guillermo felt compassion, maybe even attraction, toward me. He would never admit it. There was no cachet in admitting any attraction for the uncool. I wore clothes that were too unfashionable for an older man to wear, which is why Mr. Galanos had discarded them. I clearly struck the Other Guillermo as pathetic, or at least worthy of pity. On the second night in Italy, I heard of a gathering up in his room, and I went up, uninvited, to check things out. The Other Guillermo was drinking with his buddies, both male and female, all laid out on the bed. He drew me to him and locked lips with me and everybody there laughed. It was essentially my first male-to-male kiss. But later, when I mentioned it, he didn’t remember it. He was probably drunk or high. The next night he went out running in the streets of Padua after consuming drugs, and he broke his ankle while jumping from a bridge over a river bed. He was in the hospital for a couple of days. I went to visit him. I was alone with him for once, not counting Italian patients in other beds. Alone in this case meant that the other American and Italian friends had left, and I had him to myself. He looked vulnerable for once, laid out on the bed, broken. The hospital struck me as sparse, a large room with a dozen beds in it, as if in a military camp.

“How do you say ‘ankle’ in Spanish?” he asked.

I had to think. I had been learning Italian. When I started to think in Spanish, the two languages would cancel each other out, and I would draw a blank. He was writing a letter to his Mexican mother. “Ah, tobillo,” I finally said.
“With a long b or a short one?”
“Long, I’m pretty sure.”
“Would you look over my letter and see if I made any mistakes? Sometimes, my Spanish, you know . . .”
“Oh, I know how it is,” I said.
“My mother only speaks Spanish. She’s an immigrant and works as a maid.”
“Oh, well, good,” I said. I hadn’t expected him to reveal his background either. That was something I never talked about. In college I didn’t make up the type of stories I had told in the D.C. area, but I didn’t speak about my family at all. My family was probably a bigger secret than my sexuality. I looked over his letter and didn’t find any particularly gross mistakes. He disguised his own activities, telling his mother he had been running and fallen, nothing about running in the middle of the night after a bacchanalian episode.
“If you can look over my Spanish grammar now and then, I’d appreciate it,” he added.
“Oh, of course.”
“Good, then we’ll help each other out.”
The Other Guillermo took me under his wing and tried to change everything about me. “You dress like an old man,” he told me one day, and I hadn’t even told him that I wore hand-me-downs from Galanos. He started taking me to fashionable thrift shops, which in Italy often featured designer clothes at discounted rates. Italy was the capital of fashion. Even in a small city like Padua, the various Italian designers had their outlets, Armani and Versace particularly, among many others. Walking to school, the Other Guillermo would stop and announce, “Fashion break!” The big names in fashion were priced beyond my ability, but nonetheless, they gave us ideas on how to combine colors and accessories, and we could then find them at cheaper stores minus the labels.

He picked out various shirts and pants for me to try on. The dollar exchange rate was reasonably favorable, and I broke down under the Other Guillermo’s pressure. I bought myself new shirts, shoes, jackets, and pants. The weather was mildly cool and pleasant. The Other Guillermo didn’t notice my preference for long sleeve shirts because there was no need to buy summer weather clothing in September. We were preparing for a cold winter, and I got away with the typically perverse choice of hiding beneath
layers of garments. But nonetheless, these clothes were fashionable and elegant. The Other Guillermo moussed up my hair, stashed my old man’s slacks away in the closet, and, as his foot healed, took me to Milan for our first taste of a gay nightclub in Europe.

The Other Guillermo, for all his excess, his booze and drugs, and womanizing (and man-izing, too, for that matter), seemed to me a thoroughly compassionate being. He had a sense of inclusiveness, even mercy and empathy. He didn’t know much about me, but he saw in me something bothersome, the very face of solitude and pain. I didn’t have to say much. He knew what to do, and he accomplished it quickly within a few weeks of my arrival in Italy. Like Eugene in high school, and Valerie back in UCLA, the Other Guillermo realized that he was saving a life somehow. Like Blanche Du Bois, I’ve depended on the kindness of these “strangers” who became my friends, and who seemed to guide me in a direction that was the opposite of the quagmire I constantly built for myself. I inspired something in these people to come to my rescue.

In Milan, I accomplished my first pickup of a man and my first heartbreak in the span of twenty-four hours. The Other Guillermo had approved my outfit, a nightclub shirt with a solid color, pearly white; he bid me to polish my shoes into a sparkling dark black. Walking in new shoes, hiding behind designer clothes, I was ready to enter a nightclub for the first time in Italy’s main fashion city. The Other Guillermo enjoyed his thick sunglasses and strutted through the streets across from Milan’s gothic cathedral, Il Duomo, as if he were a model. Tall, lean, and statuesque, he prided himself on his style. I was his dim, diminutive copycat, but I preferred to think of myself as his apprentice. I clearly did not feel like his equal, but I was learning.

The first half of the nightclub proved to be merely quaint, disappointingly so. Older men danced to slow boleros (or the Italian equivalent). One led; the other followed. It was a scene from the 1940s. My grandfather would have felt comfortable with this scene, had it not been for the same-sex dancing. We didn’t fit in.

The Other Guillermo looked around and noticed something happening through an opening in the building, looking like a small tunnel. “There’s another dance floor!” he announced excitedly.

We discovered there was a second half to the nightclub. Loud, rambunctious, with a dizzying array of disco lights flickering, this more happening
Italian Holiday

section of the club lured us in, and that’s where our night really began. We danced to “Gloria” in the original Italian version (Americans would dance to the song in Laura Brannigan’s English-language version). We danced to synthetic Euro pop hits, and the imported American ones, and whatever else worked. Italian men surrounded us, the two Guillermos on the dance floor in a sea of handsome people.

The Other Guillermo and I took a breather. He bought me a beer. Not my first one, but nonetheless my first nightclub drink. It went to my head, this one single beer. Before I knew it, I was making out with an Italian policeman. At least he claimed to be a cop. He was short with a dark moustache, a bit stocky, but attractive, and was dressed in civilian clothes, basic dark slacks and white shirt. He took me outside the nightclub toward an unlit area and manhandled me beneath a tree. He kissed my neck, then my lips, and I for the first time felt a sensation, a weird exhilaration. It was a make-out session, a first ever for me. Back in high school, I had missed out on this, no necking in the Hollywood Hills inside a car overlooking the city. I made up for that fast. I was suffocating under this much delight, stirring my body and soul. I stopped the policeman. I tried to make conversation. The policeman had to think about what he said carefully. He insisted that he couldn’t say much about his work, that Italy had suffered a couple of years of terrorist attacks, and that he worked in an anti-terrorist unit, and that’s all he could say. I agreed.

Enough talking. We made out some more. I gave him my number and address in Padua, and all my basic statistics, before we said goodbye.

I walked on air on our way back to the hotel. The Other Guillermo kept telling me to calm down. I was acting like a giddy little girl, he told me. First lesson to learn is . . . not to fall in love after one make-out session. I was simply enamored of the feeling of touch, intimacy, heat generated by closeness, and the sensation of feeling wanted. The Other Guillermo had been sexually active since his teens. Early teens. He didn’t think my behavior was amusing. It harked back to earlier times for him. He was cool and detached about such things as love. He took me to the hotel, and we slept soundly next to one another, but each to his own side of the bed. By then, I didn’t care if he ignored me. I had found affection—even if through a temporary flirtation—all on my own.

The next day, after walking through the streets of Milan and trying on expensive clothes we couldn’t afford, we went back to the same nightclub.
In retrospect, this was a bad idea. Another nightclub would have been more appropriate, if only to explore the nightlife in different ways. We didn’t know another club, and that was our choice, to repeat ourselves. The policeman was back, and I enthusiastically went up to him and kissed him on the lips, and then told him how much I’d enjoyed the previous night. But this time, he pulled back. He seemed scared or intimidated by this teenage-looking virginal creature in his arms expressing an overflowing sense of joy. He took a sip of his drink, looked pensive for a second, and then, finally, let it out:

“I have a job where I have to be discreet,” he said. “I can’t be involved with anyone.”

He walked away, lost in the crowd. I was so devastated I found myself walking out of the nightclub and into the streets of Milan. I walked slowly back to the hotel without even noticing the people or my surroundings. Whoever populates and threatens the streets of Milan past midnight blurred as a forgettable entity around me—I didn’t notice it at all. I was stunned by this rejection and thought it was because of me. I had done something wrong. I wasn’t good enough. The feeling returned; I’m a fool thinking I can suddenly attract anyone just because I have a new haircut and a change of clothes. When I got to the hotel, I threw myself on the bed and cried. An hour or so later, the Other Guillermo walked in, throwing down his jacket on me and wanting to punish me.

“Where the hell have you been? I was worried to death about you! I couldn’t find you. Why did you do that? Explain yourself, mister.”

I did explain to him in details with tears in my eyes and a childish pout at that.

“Well, you should have found me and told me you were leaving. I would have come with you. You shouldn’t be walking the streets of Milan by yourself! You idiot, don’t ever do that to me again!”

I promised I wouldn’t. The Other Guillermo lay down next to me and bid me to sleep, which I did. His presence was of great comfort, but I felt awkward. I had shown a surprisingly childish side to him. From then on, the Other Guillermo kept an eye on me. I resented the feeling of vulnerability, something I had rarely shown anyone, caught up in my own thoughts and too guarded to show any emotions. It was an arduous step for me, to exhibit something other than caution and impenetrability. A few weeks later, I accompanied the Other Guillermo again to Milan. At
the back of my mind, I entertained the thought that I would use this venture and new friendship to forget Santos. On that night with the Italian policeman, I felt justified and freed of youthful obsessions altogether. On the second night, with the policeman’s rejection, I found myself right back in a childish state of mind, that I had failed, that I wasn’t good enough. The Other G. got a chance to see all this, but I didn’t explain to him why this happened. I never revealed to him my Santos obsession.

I took my studies seriously and integrated the weekend forays into nightclubs, momentous though they might have seemed at first, into a more balanced life. I had never made much room for socializing, and I looked forward to the weekends without becoming entirely devoted to them. I became an avid reader of Boccaccio’s *The Decameron*, a series of bawdy tales that eventually inspired Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Pasolini’s film based on the *Tales* portrays Chaucer pillaging ideas, or even whole passages, from the manuscript of *The Decameron*. The story about the nuns who collectively screw the gardener and start a convent of their bastard children struck me as especially invigorating and funny. It was the right mood for what I was experiencing that year. I had left Kate Hepburn behind. I wasn’t a middle-aged spinster. I was a twenty-year-old man. I had to constantly remind myself of that. The Other Guillermo even told me I looked good in my new clothes, that I even looked “handsome.” It was the closest thing to a genuine compliment he gave me since he always seemed cool, and indifference was supposed to be part of his persona. He didn’t have to compliment me. Being allowed into his company was already a compliment. Except that I awakened in him a fraternal instinct. He felt the need to flatter me, to make me feel wanted. There was no reason why he and I couldn’t have been lovers, except that the Other Guillermo preferred to keep his feelings toward me at a familial level, intimate but chaste. Any contact between us would have been incestuous. Besides, he had other people to pursue. He had gotten himself an Italian girlfriend, a hairdresser in her early thirties, and I was the kid brother who followed him around. I knew that on weekends he would go out to gay bars and make out with men. It was our little secret. His Italian girlfriend was simply in love and seemed clueless to his nature. I was jealous of his, shall we say, versatility and flexibility with genders, but I felt lucky enough to have a friend and would never have called him on it.
I struck out on my own. I took the train to Bologna with another student who claimed that city offered the liveliest gay scene in Italy. We went dancing in one of the city’s intimate, cavernous, little nightclubs. Young Italian men in designer clothes with white boy rhythms made up the scene, as they tried to jerk themselves up into a dance. Bologna was also the main hub of the Italian Communist Party. The Cold War raged on, with our NATO allies often having to weather the blunt criticism of local leftist or pacifist parties. Reagan was called a warmonger. It’s never been easy to be an American abroad, but with this president sounding particularly hawkish, one had to be careful not to enrage some European sensibilities by speaking with a pro-American slant. A detached indifference seemed to work here as well, and we were young. One could get away with sounding un-opinionated, but I tended to listen, make notes, and formulate ideas in my mind. I came from a country torn by the Cold War, in which a dictator promised to make Chileans safe from communism. I was anti-fascist, but clearly not a Marxist either. I didn’t care for the pacifist stand in Europe. If we didn’t arm ourselves, perhaps they would disarm—that was the delusional belief among some of the pacifists. Still, most Italians proved to be surprisingly friendly to Americans, even when they considered themselves Leftists. Italian students sought us out. We received guests at the dorm, and while some of them were men trying to pick up on the young women, others genuinely wanted to talk about everything, including politics. They may have disliked Reagan, but that was the cool, official thing to do. Peer pressure dictated it. Politically, they didn’t want to join the Warsaw Pact nations. At election time, in the privacy of a booth, peer pressure dissipated. Italians chose again and again to be part of the West, much to the chagrin of the Left. I believe our group of students also embodied accessibility and open-mindedness they didn’t find in other foreign students. Across from our dorm, Chinese students congregated among themselves in their own buildings. The Italians told us they couldn’t get any ideas or opinions out of them. They were afraid to speak about anything. They were in Italy to study safe, nonpolitical subject matter such as engineering. They had to speak enough Italian to use it in class, but if they ever used their conversational skills to utter a full sentence, the Italians didn’t hear it. In contrast, the hospitality room in our dorm was hopping with American kids drinking and smoking on a Saturday night and often arguing. Our opinions were not monolithic. We had Christian boys and rowdy frat
types and girls without inhibitions and others who were shyer and demure, and the Other Guillermo and I also represented an immigrant component among the students that impressed Italians altogether. They loved our dorm, and one of them ended up meeting a future wife there. It took me a while to contribute my own share of pairing up, but I did.

Which all goes to say that, in Bologna that night, I picked up an Italian Communist man who had strong, firm beliefs about the end of American hegemony in Italy and who believed that Italians could make communism work without the Soviet Union in a softer, more open version of that doctrine. He was deluded, I believe, but nonetheless, he was a relatively handsome man. And so was his lover. He was fair-skinned, his lover dark. A complex relationship of threesomes would begin that night. Their names were Francesco, light-skinned, and Stefano, a darker, swarthy, Mediterranean type.

At the club, they confused me for Asian because my friend was half-Filipino, half-Japanese, so the first thing Francesco asked me was “Where are you boys from? China?”

“Not China,” I said. “Chile originally. But we’re both now from California, USA.”

“Ah, so you’re American!” His face lit up in wonderment, but then again, Francesco’s face would always light up in the same manner, helping Stefano’s face spark in turn as a chain effect of amazement. There was something naturally gregarious about them, and they fed off each other’s gaiety. “Well, you’re exotic looking, whatever you are,” Francesco added. Exotic was always the code word when you looked different, and I had no problem playing the exotic card. My friend from California left us alone. He had his own flirtations to contend with that night.

“I’m Francesco; this is Stefano, my lover. We’ve been together for almost ten years,” he added.

“Oh, wonderful,” I said, not quite sure how to react. Stefano left to get us drinks, and Francesco kissed me on the cheek. “Che bello! How beautiful you are!”

I didn’t ask the obvious. Would Stefano be jealous? Why was he doing this in public? Stefano returned with beer bottles, and Francesco quickly moved in to corner me up against the wall to kiss me. Stefano looked on in amusement. It was one of those relationships, I gathered. No explanations were needed. The rules were understood. They were casual about
themselves, about issues, about their lives. “Oh, yes,” Francesco revealed after a couple of kisses. “Stefano and I belong to the Italian Communist Party. We’re both very active in it.”

I wasn’t scared or intimidated. Italian politics mirrored the political landscape of Chile. I had family members who’d once been Socialists, as well as Communists, right-wing Nationalists, and Christian Democrats. The same range of parties functioned in both countries, and Pinochet was the new Mussolini, as far as Italians were concerned. Italians were much more aware of Chilean politics, having received a good share of exiles after the military coup of 1973. I didn’t have to explain a thing, as I usually did to my American friends, if they cared at all about Chile. Being a Communist in Italy clearly had a different connotation in Italy than it did in the United States. One could not afford to play the American naïveté. When in Bologna, you do the bolognesi.

The first night, only Francesco made out with me at the club, but when I went back the following weekend to spend more time with him, his lover climbed into bed with us. I was, therefore, initiated into sexuality by not one but two Italian Communists. I kept the politics to myself, especially the pro-market, pro-individualist politics I had learned from Ayn Rand’s essays and novels. I betrayed the rugged individualism of capitalist doctrine to pure lust. I had to. I was barely into my twenties, but late in life by American standards to be losing one’s virginity. I wasn’t entirely doctrinaire anyway. I was registered as a Democrat, but I read Ayn Rand as if to annoy my leftist friends. Somebody had to. My mother’s pro-American attitude was also part of my thinking. There was no point in belonging to one group anyway. I had no qualms about sleeping with two Italians at the same time.

What were these two? What could one call them? They weren’t my “boyfriends,” and they were lovers only to one another. They had lived together in a small apartment in downtown Bologna for a decade now. Stefano had a teenage son from a former marriage who came to visit in the afternoons after his father completed his share of ravaging me, and then we would all go to the movies to watch some dubbed American film such as An Officer and a Gentleman. His teenage son was quite well aware of his father’s relationship to Francesco, but I am not clear if he understood my relationship to both of his daddies.

I visited these two men throughout the winter of 1982. And each time, a slight variation of coupling took place. The two of them would serve me
Italian Holiday

a lavish, homemade meal in their tiny apartment where the bedroom and the kitchen were practically attached and divided only by a thin wall. The meal would threaten to make me sleepy, but with two eager lovers, there was no time to rest. Francesco would start on me first; then Stefano would climb into bed and take turns.

“Sei bello!” was the only thing Stefano would repeatedly say in bed. “You are beautiful.” That’s clearly not something I’d heard anyone say to me, let alone in bed. I had to believe it. I felt these men made love to me in spite of what I looked like, or what I thought I looked like. If they were blind, that was their problem. I thought myself lucky that they saw only what they wanted to see. I continued to close my eyes during copulation because I didn’t want to see any aspect of my body naked. It was the one way someone with my disorder could cope with a situation I hadn’t been in before, the recipient of sex, anybody’s sex, and enjoy it in spite of the aversion I felt toward my body.

Needless to say, I managed to shock some of my colleagues back in the American dorm in Padua. Even the Other Guillermo expressed surprise, even delight.

“I didn’t think you had it in you,” he said when I told him the entire story of how these two Italian men took turns in bed with me. “Go for it” was the Other Guillermo’s refrain toward just about everything.

I went for it. I went back to Bologna for more. During the next school year—and yes, there was school, there was studying to be done, and exams to take—I would take time out to take a train down to Bologna and spend the weekend with my two friends. I couldn’t call them lovers. I had to think of them as the men who initiated me into sexuality, and who thought of me as their willing sex slave.

Gradually, I learned about their beliefs, and their lifestyle, and I seemed to embrace an aspect of their lives I would otherwise have never understood. They were so-called Communists, but they were primarily Italian, and their working-class background made them seem like my Chilean relatives. They lived in modest circumstances. Time has passed, and memory eludes me as to their profession. Stefano complained about the repetitive nature of his work, which made me surmise he worked at an assembly line, and Francesco mentioned his own work at another factory. The most joyous part of their nature was their addiction to television and films, and here I was totally at home with them. Their politics were completely Italian—that is,
not addicted to absolutes and thoroughly pragmatic. *The Fountainhead*, based on the Ayn Rand novel, played on television, and they were overjoyed. They loved the hero Howard Roark’s rebellious nature, and they likened it to the struggle against capitalism. I didn’t break their hearts by telling them Ayn Rand was a rabid pro-capitalist, anti-communist stalwart, the most fanatical advocate of laissez-faire economics on the American scene. I had to remain a quiet presence, slowly absorbing the lessons of their mutual affection for me, even enjoying the irony of my presence in their lives. I needed their affection, and their sex, and I kept our odd weekend friendship going until I left for the United States. I never got a sense that I was disturbing their relationship or threatening it. Stefano once stopped in the middle of our lovemaking and seemed preoccupied. Francesco had left to go pay a visit to a friend, leaving us alone. I asked if everything was going well between them. I feared I was becoming the cause of their problems, if any.

“Oh, Francesco is just a romantic,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“He falls in love all the time, and he may be falling in love with you.”

“Oh, so is that a problem? Should I go?”

“No, no, *non si preoccupare.* I told him you’re a young man in transit. You’ll leave soon and go back to the United States or maybe even back to Chile. It’ll be sad to see you go. You’ve brought so much love to our home, but we have to enjoy the moment, and let that be it. We take the blessings of life, and then let them go.”

“That’s sad,” I said. “I hope I didn’t . . .”

“You didn’t do anything. We chose this. We chose to make love to you, and we are responsible for our actions. So no guilt; we’re not Catholics.”

But there were other things going on to make Francesco melancholy that day.

A woman acquaintance was courting Stefano. That is, she wanted a child and had offered him the opportunity to impregnate her. Francesco had expressed at least some envy or unease about Stefano’s ability to attract women, and also about the fact that Stefano was already a father. Now that another woman had approached him to father one more child, Francesco had begun to feel possessive.

“I haven’t made up my mind about whether I want another child,” Stefano said, “but Francesco should approve, or at least be supportive. We live
Italian Holiday

in a dangerous world, and there's no point holding back. Only three years have gone by since la strage . . .”

“La strage?” I asked. “What do you . . . ?”

He meant the worst act of terrorism in recent Italian history. A bomb exploded inside the central train station in Bologna on August 2, 1980, killing eighty-five people, wounding hundreds of others. My mother was riding on a train bound for Florence that same summer and had mentioned her closeness to Bologna on that day. Right-wing, neo-fascist extremists claimed credit for the attack, in retribution for Bologna being a main hub of the Italian Communist Party. The entire city, Stefano and Francesco included, had gathered in Piazza Maggiore to mourn the loss of life. Since then, August 2 was preserved as a memorial to all victims of terrorism.

At the train station that night, I noticed for once the monument to the victims that had been incorporated in the waiting room of the rebuilt new structure. At first I thought the architect had designed a symbolic ray of lightning parting the wall of the station, but later I discovered it wasn’t meant as symbolism. That was an actual crack left from the incident that was maintained as a reminder. The clock was permanently stopped at 10:25 a.m., the time that the incident occurred.

“We’re always subject to fascist attack,” he said that day. “We need to live for today.”

I never stuck around long enough to find out if he chose to have a second child. He had been correct about me—I was in transit.

Back in Padua, the Other Guillermo kept me busy with “fashion breaks,” which came to absorb time and expendable income. Every day, I brought home new attire. Boots one day, to go with a new sweater, and a bar shirt to be worn to Cosmopolitan, the only gay nightclub on the outskirts of the city, between Venice and Padua.

“We’re impressed already,” said my roommate at the time, an Italian American young man from California, who thought I was becoming superficial, having arrived in Italy as well read but clueless about frivolous things such as fashion. He made it clear he didn’t like the new me. “You lost your virginity to two Italian Communists; congratulations. Now you need to study.”

I did study. I did my homework and kept up with everyday chores, but the winter felt long, and the need to find moments of pure diversion continued to claim time. The Other Guillermo was never satisfied with only
studying. The need to improvise a party claimed his life at times, and there
was no stopping him as he dragged me along.

He and I took a bus that left us in a small town where the only gay
nightclub had been allowed to open up at the time. At least it allowed for
men from various parts of the Veneto province to gather in this one hot-
spot of nightlife in the middle of nowhere. The buses stopped at midnight,
and we were forced to hitch a ride from a willing Italian gentleman with a
car, most likely someone the Other Guillermo skillfully flirted with.

I seemed unable to “pick up” strangers in that club until I met a
middle-aged man who owned a furniture company. He gave me his num-
ber, and a few days later I was receiving a gentleman caller up at the dorm.
He’d take me out to dinner and talk about his wife—his soon-to-be ex-
wife. He had come out recently at forty and had made arrangements with
her to keep living together until the children grew up. I had no qualms
about seeing him, although I considered him too old for me. But there was
something inherently interesting about a man who could speak about cul-
ture, art, politics, and books. Moreover, he looked like Rosanno Brazzi, the
middle-aged suitor Kate Hepburn picks up in *Summer Time*. I was sup-
posed to have made a break with the spinster drama. I had to start thinking
of myself as a young man. But still I kept seeing him for the Rosanno
Brazzi resemblance alone. I enjoyed his attention, and his kisses seemed
needy and appreciative of me, for someone who’d been denied same-sex af-
fection his entire life. He decided, finally, that he wanted to fly off to Rio
with me, all expenses paid. I’d come as his younger companion. Before I
could gesticulate like a grateful boy toy, my sense of geography spelled out
the obvious: Rio meant beaches.

“I just don’t go to the beach,” I told him rather bluntly without ex-
plaining the reasons why. The speed with which I rejected the offer came
across, of course, as a slap in the face. It spoiled dinner at a small family res-

taurant in Padua.

“I don’t understand,” he said, looking befuddled. “Why on earth not?
Ma perché, Guglielmo, dimmi perché?”

“I just can’t!” I even raised my voice. I was adamant.

He didn’t insist. He went off on his own and found boys quite easily in
Brazil a lot more eager to don a Speedo and sun themselves at a beach. It
was impossible or imprudent to explain to him or to anyone else that I’d
stopped going to the beach as a teenager because I couldn’t take my clothes
off in public, and that I held to that policy because my mind was twisted by a form of social anxiety disorder I could not name or understand. I made do with excuses, school being an acceptable reason for skipping Brazil, all expenses paid. I had taken my dysfunctions to Europe with me.

The Other Guillermo was spending more time with his Italian girlfriend and decided he didn’t want to go out to Cosmopolitan with me one weekend. He encouraged me to strike out on my own. He’d also grown impatient with my irascible moods and habits. He had once wanted to go to the gym to work out. I told him I would gladly go except that I didn’t have any gym clothes. He told me he could lend me some shorts and a T-shirt. Finally, I told him the truth, in part, that I’d find them too revealing, and that I didn’t want to show any skin at the gym.

“OK, that’s enough,” he said. “I’ve had it. Your shit’s gotten too weird for me.”

I couldn’t argue. I understood people’s impatience with my strange condition, and I didn’t think my eccentricities were particularly bearable. Yet, I bore the brunt of them and found myself alone that weekend. One more instance of solitude wouldn’t hurt.

I took the bus to the nowhere town by myself, wearing my white ruffled shirt with a bowtie and black pants. To avoid resembling a caterer at some debutante ball, I piled on a wool black sweater that glimmered in newness and elegance. I wasn’t afraid to go out by myself, but I also knew that meeting anyone while alone would prove difficult, if not impossible as well. I needed the Other Guillermo to make the rounds, speak to men, and introduce me to some of them. I needed that extra push from an emphatic, relentless person that the Other Guillermo proved to be around strangers. On my own, I rarely opened up to anyone, and since I didn’t initiate conversations, by the end of the evening, I was incapable of asking anyone for a ride, which you were supposed to do if you wanted to get back home. The buses had stopped after midnight. The nightclub was closing at three a.m., and the men had started to drift away. I went out into the night not knowing how I’d get home. I tried hitchhiking, but nobody stopped. A light drizzle had started, and I was a rare sight out in the middle of nowhere. I was a sad sight, a young man dressed in an elegant white ruffled shirt with black pants and an elegant sweater waiting at the curbside while the rain picked up in intensity and cars passed him by.
I decided to try walking the thirty kilometers or so toward Padua. Or rather, I knew it would be impossible to walk the entire way, but walking kept me warm, and I figured sooner or later, something would happen. For better or for worse. Somebody would have to stop, the police at least. The road began to feel dark and foreboding. Only a car or two drove by, and nobody stopped for me, but by then, I’d stopped trying to hitchhike. I kept on walking in the dark, guiding myself by the small glint of light emanating from a partly clouded moon, and continued to do so for nearly an hour before I could see any lights in the horizon. Deep inside, I felt this walk was what I deserved. I’d failed to initiate the conversation and ask for a ride. It wasn’t in my character to initiate conversations with strangers, even when crucial. They usually spoke to me, if they chose to. I had no choices—or so I felt. I even silenced a cry for help that night. Would I be this silent even while dying out on the road by myself? What would it take for me to speak up? I continued to walk as if to find out.

I arrived in a small town called Dolo after four a.m. A few street lights guided me toward a couple of brick buildings that could have been factories in the middle of nowhere. I opted to walk around and see if a late-night diner would be open. Instead, I found a bus depot and an office where bus drivers went to rest before and after their shifts. Three bus drivers, older men in uniforms, were watching a late-night show on television, and I walked in looking like a lost boy, already drenched in drizzle, my shoes dipped in mud. I disturbed their rather noisy conversation in front of the TV. But I must have awakened some fatherly instinct in them. They took immediate pity on me and asked me to sit down. One of them brought me coffee and asked me what the hell I was doing out there in the middle of the night walking by the highway like that.

"Ma cosa faceva Lei nel pieno della notte nell’autostrada?"

They seemed genuinely concerned, but in all honesty, other than darkness and solitude, I had failed to find any real danger, not even a stray dog. Perhaps I’d been lucky, and the rain had scared away creatures, thieves, terrorists, who knows what. The bus drivers’ concern did reveal that danger was to be found out there, but I had arrived a little wet, yet unscathed.

"Volevo camminare a Padova," I said, managing to break some sort of record in naïveté, judging by the resulting laughter. “I wanted to walk all the way to Padua.”
They made it clear that it might have taken me some twenty hours, nearly an entire day, but I told them I walk fast. They still laughed at my strangely unrealistic demeanor. I finally asked about a bus. They told me the next bus to Padua would be leaving at 5:30 am, and I was welcome to wait for it in their office.

“Il conducente sono io,” said the bus driver, proudly, an older man with gray hair and a pot belly, slipping into a jacket, as the night had turned colder. “I’ll be your driver tonight.”

An American TV movie starring Candice Bergen played for the next hour and a half, and we all watched together. A young woman moves to New York City and gets a job in a slick new corporate building.

“Is that how it is in America?” one of the men asked me. “You work in a big building?”

“Sono uno studente,” I said.

I was a student, I revealed; I wasn’t working right now, I didn’t know much about the working world—well, other than maintenance, I should have added, but didn’t. A would-be lover was off to Rio de Janeiro without me, my best friend had dissed me because of my inscrutable behavior, and I couldn’t speak up in social situations; I was lost and wet in some small town waiting for a bus. I did not explain all that, just smiled, and enjoyed the warmth of the waiting room. Candice Bergen spoke in Italian, and I nodded off until one of them woke me up.

“Parte,” one of the bus drivers said, shaking my shoulder. “Signore, l’autobus parte adesso. Venga subito, venga.”

The bus was leaving. I yawned and shook off my sleep to get up and walk out into the street where the bus waited for me along with a couple of old ladies in some sort of gray, factory uniform. I looked out the window as we pulled away from Dolo, that small refuge from a drizzling night when I’d been too shy to ask for a ride. I got home safely, and I have been grateful to the polite bus drivers of Dolo ever since.

My other relationship with a young man in Italy ended up a sexless encounter. It certainly created a contrast with the double pack of Communist lover men. But it showed this double-sided nature in my character. I could allow myself to be sodomized in Bologna, but I could be the perfect gentleman in Pisa. I’d met Ricardo almost as soon as I arrived in Italy. I took a
train to Venice from Padua and found myself in the midst of a lively regatta festival. Gondolas paraded themselves through the waters of the city as people applauded them from the galleries above. On a ferry from the train station to St. Mark's Cathedral, a young man struck up a conversation with me. He was also a reticent, soft-spoken, and shy person, and I suspect that I at least didn't intimidate him. It was safe to talk to me. I also suspected he was gay, but I couldn't determine so at that point. What was important was how close we drew quickly, and how we later failed to draw closer.

He and I spent the day walking around Venice, comparing notes on living in Italy versus America. I told him I wanted to be a writer, and that I'd started a series of plays for a class at UCLA. He told me he lived with his parents in Livorno, but studied in Pisa, and that I should come visit him so that I'd get to tour another part of Italy. I could have taken the train back to Padua that night, but instead he and I went to the local Youth Hostel in Venice, where we spent the night on separate bunk beds. This rather chaste flirtation seemed perfectly abnormal for me at that age. I was not one to make friends this easily, and besides, every conversation I struck with men my age jumpstarted a guessing game for me—guessing what was up, whether I was picking up on homoerotic longings, or whether, as usual, I was imagining them. I liked Ricardo and was drawn to his pleasant quiet nature. When it was time to go our separate ways, we exchanged information. We kept in touch.

That Christmas, I took the train down to Pisa, where he was waiting for me at the station. He took my picture in front of the infamous Leaning Tower, which would eventually need major restoration to prevent it from leaning any further and falling. Ricardo lived with his parents and an aunt. They were equally reticent people. His aunt had suffered the loss of her husband, had come to live with her sister, and while they seemed like an average family, I couldn't help but feel a certain discomfort—if not with me, with the idea of them sharing their mourning with a stranger.

The mother told me she had imagined a blond American. “You’re darker than the average American,” she said. “Sei moro,” she added, the Italian word for dark, but it also meant “moor,” the invaders from the south who’d once conquered Spain.

“Well, I’m Latin American then,” I had to say, and that seemed to quell their suspicions.

“No problem,” she said. “Just wondering.”
This befuddled but attentive host cooked the best Christmas meal I could possibly remember eating—turkey, ham, lasagna—and I can remember trying everything and having to stop eating. I ached, burdened by food and gastric maelstrom.

That same evening, after dinner, Ricardo took me to a radio station where he worked as a volunteer. Co-op radio stations made it possible for young people to conduct their own programming, and he was part of one of them. He introduced me as his American friend over the airwaves.

“Ecco qui un’amico americano,” he said, bidding me to get closer to the microphone. He wanted me to introduce his radio listeners to Blondie. I told the listeners in my imperfect Italian that the lead singer Deborah Harry represented a new wave of female vocalists with a tough, rock ’n’ roll sound such as Pat Benatar and Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders, that Janis Joplin was an early precursor, and women were no longer expected to sing the “suono dolce,” the sweet sounds of love ballads, and that they could also be expected to get down and dirty. It seemed like a fair analysis, rendered in an American-Chilean-accented Italian.

“Ecco qui la bellissima Deborah Harry di Blondie.”

He played “Dreaming” and “The Tide Is High,” and while the music played, he smiled at me, reaching out to congratulate me.

“You know so much about American music,” he said. “Why can’t you come back during the summer and help me put together programming? You can be my co-host. In our spare time, we’ll go to the beach.”

He said the cursed word, the beach. Livorno is a port city, which means, of course, a beach, and nakedness, and all that. I saw it all crumbling down fast.

But Ricardo continued to insist, thinking he could entice me with summers at the beach. “Come back and we’ll go swimming.”

Finally, a few days went by, and I had to come up with some explanation. “I’ve already made arrangements to go spend the summer in Paris learning French at the Académie Française.” It wasn’t true when I said it, but when I got back to Padua, I got my Let’s Go: France book out and made contact with the Académie Française. I enrolled myself in a French class in Paris because I’d be far away from a beach. It was something I couldn’t explain to Ricardo. It was one more offer I turned down because of the Condition.

On the final night of my stay, I was in the guest room lying down, ready to fall asleep, when Ricardo came into the room to get something.
He opened up drawers in a chest and pulled out a shirt or two. But ultimately, he wanted to talk and sat by the edge of my bed. This was the closest thing to intimacy I could get out of him. Ricardo was no more forward or outgoing than I was, and ultimately, he proved himself equally frightened. If he meant to initiate something other than a conversation, if he meant to make a pass, or touch me in any way, he failed to do so. I failed to do the same. I clearly wanted something. I’m not clear on what he wanted, or what he could bring himself to want.

“Why won’t you come back in the summer?” he insisted. “Why couldn’t you spend only part of the summer in Paris? You could do both.”

“I don’t know—I’ve always wanted to spend time in Paris,” I said, in an awkward tone. I had to look away because I didn’t have a better excuse. I would have liked to come back. I would have liked to have embraced him, and at least shown some form of affection for him that very night—whatever he’d allow, whatever his own inhibitions would permit. I would have liked, in fact, to have spent the entire summer in his arms. But he had brought up the beach, a forbidden zone for me. I had managed to disappoint him. He got up from the bed and then left the room carrying two white shirts. The next day, he would shake my hand goodbye at the train station. I failed to hug him as well. Although we wrote to each other a couple of times, I never saw him again.

My relationship with the Other Guillermo became more distant during the rest of my stay in Italy. We were still friends, but ultimately, he had found his own companionship. The Italian girlfriend got serious. She started to spend more time at his dorm, which was one of the few that came with its own kitchen. She began cooking for him, inviting other people over. Every afternoon, a small party would gather in this liveliest of dorms, in which the girlfriend would preside over what appeared to be a quickly improvised marriage. He sat down, she served him a meal. He played Mexican husband, she Italian wife. Then, the Other Guillermo’s roommate would bring his own girlfriend, a German exchange student. They’d pull out bottles of *il vino* and then some recreational drugs, and the party would intensify. I wasn’t exactly invited. I would just show up and mostly observe. The couples would start making out, and I would still observe. In front of me, and in front of his other friends, the Other Guillermo seemed eager to emphasize his heterosexual side. A wild, rambunctious
side, and yet my presence invited resentment. He didn’t want to be pigeonholed. He went out of his way to remind me that he and I never had sex, as if I needed the reminder. He even chided me for telling people we’d slept together in Milan. People would get the wrong idea. If he wasn’t ashamed of being bisexual, then the only reason he was behaving this way was because he didn’t want people to think he’d had the bad taste of once technically sleeping with me—again, this is how I took things at the time, with a posture of extreme defensiveness. His possessive girlfriend was a woman in love and—in my rude opinion at the time—without a life. She didn’t seem to aspire to anything much. She threw herself into a torrid love affair with the Other Guillermo because her work as a hair stylist had become routine. She was in her early thirties, if I can gauge age, but clearly, she was older than him by some ten years. She must have known he was going back to the United States, but he needed company, and he had to have it at any cost. He wasn’t going to be caught without it. He wanted to prove he was the one Guillermo with a life, and I was the other one who had trouble getting one. Nonetheless, I had thrown him for a loop as well, acquiring two scandalous lovers at a time in Bologna. The Other Guillermo sought to prove his competitiveness, making it clear and obvious to everyone he didn’t do “dry spells” in relationships. He had sex, and he could get it on his schedule.

More seriously, for all his fashion breaks, his illicit drugs, and wild times with the boys and the girls, the Other Guillermo held one dirty secret: he wanted to become a lawyer. He entertained a conventional future for himself, in contrast to the free spirit he sought to exhibit in his youth. He held a not-so-secret love of fashion. He sketched vivid, colorful portraits of himself donning ambitious outfits of his own creation. When I first saw them plastered all over the wall of his dormitory, I stopped to stare and then observe their great detail.

“These are amazing!” I told him, sincere in my praise. “You should study fashion.”

“Oh, I’d love to chuck everything and go to Milan to make my mark on the world.”

“You should.”

“I’d love to dress up beautiful models in Milan, make them stunning.”

“Well, what’s stopping you?”

“My parents want me to be a lawyer.”
Italian Holiday

“Why is it up to them?”
“Because they’re poor people. They want certainty.”
“I hate that. Certainty.”
“Well, it’s what they want.”
“But—”
“There’s no point in arguing. There’s work and money in the law.”

I looked disappointed. He clearly possessed the talent, if not the will, to pursue fashion. Years later, when I graduated with a master’s degree in playwriting from UC San Diego, I looked back upon this conversation and thought how odd that the one man who sought to give me a makeover and transform me into a more fabulous version of myself ended up opting for a profession he felt no real love for, and I—the square, repressed, Catholic virgin—ended up in a career that’s all about risk and multiple rejection. He became practical. I became the “risk-taker.” I often wonder if, without his constant, persistent goading of me, I would have broken through my inhibitions. Yet, he chose conformity, having done a wonderful job of inspiring more from me.

That spring as the Other Guillermo prepared to return to the United States in June, I opted to stay longer in Europe. The boyfriend of one the UCLA students was subletting a tiny hole of an apartment in Paris at Rue de Cherche Midi during the summer, and I took it. I would spend the summer of 1983 without discretionary income trying to write another set of novels and short stories. The Other Guillermo was already thinking of going back to UC Santa Barbara and worrying about his LSAT.

The time had come to say goodbye. But I couldn’t let go of the Other Guillermo with a solemn hug and a kiss. In fact, I got nowhere near him that afternoon at the train station. His girlfriend stood by his side. She and I both went to bid him farewell, but she took center stage. In the most dramatic fashion possible, and emblematic of many scenes one might imagine in a neo-realist, Italian film, in which a Sicilian momma (played by Anna Magnani) grieves the loss of a loved one, the Italian girlfriend began to cry, throwing herself at the Other Guillermo’s arms, circumventing any chance for me to show emotion. She outshined me, stole what would have been my scene (more subtle and without the tearjerker), crying in a loud, panting manner. The best I could do was pat her on the back, and go “there, there, there.” The Other Guillermo pulled himself away and made a quick ascension to the train, as if scared. He barely waved at me, looking worried.
Italian Holiday

for the mental state of this woman. What had he done to her? The sadness I felt at seeing him leave was compounded by a simple realization: nobody had ever cried for me with this type of energy and conviction. I doubted that anyone would ever want me in this manner. The girlfriend’s genuine grief was proof of the dynamic personality the Other Guillermo represented, in contrast to my own relative insignificance in the scheme of things. The Other Guillermo inspired passion; I didn’t. This contrast between me and my more charismatic friend would always haunt me, from the moment I consoled his intense, anguished girlfriend as the train pulled away. The Other Guillermo was gone, leaving behind a devastated woman. Immobilized and outflanked by the Italian girlfriend, I had trouble expressing my own grief.

The Other Guillermo had also left behind a fairly presentable young man, expertly clad in Italian fashion, with a good sense of color and coordination. He had helped my transformation from that sickly frail creature into a more fully realized version of myself. His artistry was expended, somehow, in the creation of the new me, and often I felt I was wearing his clothes, his fashion, and emulating his walk. Still, even borrowed style was better than none. I would develop my own one day. The Other Guillermo eventually applied and entered a law school, as planned. I was his only (if flawed) masterwork. I was no longer the repressed neurasthenic maiden of a Tennessee Williams play. Something had changed, and the Other Guillermo had left me more firmly planted in reality with new powers of transformation and, even, sexuality. That was his gift to me. I often wonder what I did for him. It hadn’t occurred to me at that age that I could contribute something to his life. I was too busy absorbing the lessons of his teaching. I would have to go on to finish my novel or my play, or whatever I was meant to write, I thought. I had no idea how to repay people with something other than the fondness of memory.