I flew alone into the United States at ten years of age, and the first word that caught my attention upon my arrival at JFK International Airport glowed in the various signs that pointed toward the world outside: Exit. The Spanish word for “success” is éxito. My translation was, of course, wide of the mark, but my child’s eye saw something else: what a great country, I thought; it wishes you success as you leave the building. Today, I would advocate changing all the exit signs to success. Give your best wishes to people. Let them feel confident as they go out of the building into those streets where they might well be devoured by people who lack success or, conversely, zealously cling to their own. Be an optimist, and let your best wishes prevail. I would eventually learn the flat, unadorned meaning of “exit,” but I haven’t forgotten the translation that amused me at that age and that I thought was so original, an optimistic one for a child who constantly sought to bend the world to his imagination.

The United States felt welcoming to a child of ten, impressions colored by my mother’s rosy disposition, her Maria von Trapp aura of seeing the world through a wide angle and Cinemascope lens with a bouncy soundtrack playing in our heads. The music and the rhythm of the streets invited one to think in terms of music and dance. The juke box in the diner across from the Manhattan hotel featured the hits of the times, and I could choose Diana Ross’s “Surrender,” the Jacksons’ “Going Back to Indiana,” or Joan Baez’s “The Night They Drove all Dixie Down” with haunting lyrics by Robbie Robertson that I wouldn’t understand until I learned English. My mother didn’t hesitate to give me enough quarters to play all
three selections and then poured raspberry syrup on my pancakes. That’s how she welcomed me into the country, through a glimpse of the Big Apple, both my taste and aural buds appeased. We took the bus to D.C., where we settled down in the nation’s capital—for a short while anyway. Settling down did not suit us well. We turned out to be restless immigrants on the go. We started in D.C. and then bounced around the country until we reached L.A., the last station for fidgety people before the ocean put a stop to us.

My mother had arrived a year ahead of me like a scouting agent looking at the schools and the way of life. She had been working for a family in Bethesda, Maryland, as their house- and life-keeper. Mother claimed she ran the house, the lives, and the everyday rhythm and traffic of her chosen home. Housekeepers try to believe this, but I suspect my mother was right. She had yet to learn English fluently, but an irrepressible smile conveyed plenty of meaning, and she could communicate loudly with her broken new language. She was well loved by the American family for whom she worked, but she couldn’t surrender her need for independence and self-sufficiency. Within a year, she had saved enough money and moved out. She continued to work for several families in the Bethesda–Chevy Chase area as a live-out domestic, but only for families she’d select. She shared a diminutive apartment with a Mexican woman on Bradley Boulevard within walking distance of a bus stop that took her to the various homes she cleaned. Her roommate was Flora, a hairdresser, who let her stay in a foldout bed in the living room. No problem. While Americans see overcrowding and poverty, an immigrant sees an opportunity. Americans who bothered to notice may have wanted to define us as underprivileged. But poverty is a way station on our road into the American way of life. María appreciated the United States and considered herself lucky to be sleeping on a foldout bed in a cramped Maryland apartment. She bought herself a modest camera with a flashcube. On weekends she and her cousin Nelly hopped on the bus to Washington, D.C., where they posed for pictures in front of national monuments and mailed them to Chile. A picture of my mother standing next to anti–Vietnam War protestors shows her smiling in sweet innocence. The hippie protestors struck her as exotic creatures, part of the free-love lifestyle that she had once seen in the movies, and that she could now join in as a shy young Catholic woman who had no trouble getting male admirers, yet kept her distance. Another picture is a glamour
shot. My mother poses in a miniskirt in front of an average home in the Maryland suburbs, showing plenty of legs and a sensual pout with painted lips. On the back, a dedication to her son. All the homes look like this, she writes, in front of a cobblestone entrance to a gorgeous house.

What is remarkable in all the pictures she leaves behind is the adventurous spirit of an immigrant woman chronicling her eagerness to see it all for herself. The Lincoln Monument: we must stand in front of it. The Washington Monument: make sure it appears in the background. The Jefferson Memorial: let me move to the side for you to catch the cupola. It was a long way from the girls' school in Santiago in which food shortages had forced her to eat spicy ants off a stick.

A year's worth of paperwork, and I became entitled to join her in the adventure. I've always been grateful for this, even today when immigrants get attacked, and conservative politicians write that we're unwilling to learn English, that we refuse to assimilate. My mother and I arrived in a confident country that still welcomed immigrants. We sensed it. We felt right at home. We had trouble believing that there were Americans who resented us, who felt threatened by us. That's not the people we met in this suburb of D.C. Americans seemed sane. Anti-war protests revealed a democratic process, not chaos or hatred. Learning the language would take time, but there'd be no deep alienation for us (maybe mild befuddlement at times), no obligatory inner-city malaise that required us to, say, denounce our oppression as Third World people. That type of thing wouldn't come up until I went to UCLA, a shocking new political reality that tried to tear down my American childhood, deconstruct it for me, and spit it back as an imperialist, oppressive reality. My childhood had been the mirage. The luminous world into which I thought I had immigrated, in which my “poverty” seemed brighter, cleaner, more comfortable than any middle-class status I had experienced in Chile, would eventually be ridiculed—by more than one professor and several of my classmates. A Marxist history professor asked me about my background, and when he heard Chile, he was overjoyed. U.S. intervention, the CIA, the martyr Salvador Allende. When I told him we immigrated before the military coup, he was unfazed. He said I needed to pick up the struggle. When I told him I liked moving to the United States, that's when he replied, “That's all bourgeois illusion.”

“Your need to struggle anyway. You must find out the truth about Chile.”
I agreed. “But I don’t want to seem ungrateful to the U.S.”
“The CIA destroys your country, and you’re supposed to be grateful?”
“I’m getting an education because of the U.S.”
“Milk it for all it’s worth,” he followed. “The Republicans are going to cut down on student aid, and then don’t come tell me you feel grateful.”

I couldn’t argue. I didn’t want to come across as naive, as I continued to cling to memories of my initial days as an immigrant as days of liberation. I also came from a school in Chile where bullying was practically required as a social norm. I have learned plenty about bullying in the United States, especially in the aftermath of the Columbine tragedy, but I thought that any meanness I encountered in U.S. schools did not compare to my childhood perceptions of cruelty in Chile. I wanted to listen to everybody and learn from all my teachers, but I often felt that they wanted me to fulfill their image of the victimized minority. I was poor. I was supposed to be angry. But my mother and I experienced exhilaration instead, a honeymoon with the much-denounced Empire. Even my Socialist aunt in Chile had warned me: the moment you get there you’ll turn into a gringo. This was her specific lament. Still, my Socialist aunt was practical. She talked of a Cuban Revolution but understood with some fatalism the lures of the capitalist empire. She sent me to the United States to experience it for myself. She claimed one day the Socialist countries would also be ready to welcome immigrants, but for now, people tried to flee Cuba and the Soviet Bloc countries and risked their lives doing so. She recognized it as a temporary historical phenomenon: people wanted to live in the United States, but one day they would actually choose socialism. Until that happened, off I went into the United States, and she found that perfectly acceptable, for the historical moment.

The Chilean relatives who put me on the plane wished me luck. Success, they whispered among themselves, éxito. Hacerse la América, they said, yet another expression that connotes success. It literally means “to make yourself an America,” your own America, your own creation of the Big Time. The expression started with the European newcomers, for whom all the Americas meant finding gold. That’s how you made your own America, by migrating to it, but now the term had turned north. Latin Americans used it to imply the United States, where you went to make yourself an America. To leave for the United States was considered a lucky break, leading inevitably to making it. My relatives, dozens of them,
came to bid me farewell at the then-called Pudahuel International Airport of Santiago. Most had never seen a plane up close. There were still literal gates, the type that swing open, not simply the holes in the wall in which a moveable unit (a jetway) connects travelers to the plane. They could stand behind those gates, and I—a little person traveling alone—went with my ticket and my legal residence papers into a bus that transported me and the other passengers to the plane. I got out of the bus and gave a final farewell to this throng of supporters cheering me on. The stewardesses gave me a suspicious look: a child traveling alone, something for us to take care of. But I gave them no problem. I was too busy inspecting the plane, playing with the buttons, and then admiring the clouds and the moon outside the window. I was an astronaut. I was Neil Armstrong. There had been a time when our teacher had made us memorize the names of American astronauts.

A friend of my grandmother, the indomitable Mother Lolita, who lives on into her nineties and looks as spirited and lovely as ever, slipped a bottle of her homemade liqueur into my backpack, a sweet concoction she called dulce Lolita. This was her farewell gift—meant for my mother. I chose to sip dulce Lolita on the plane ever so slowly, to calm my nerves. The stewardesses kept looking at it. At a distance, it might have looked like a sugary drink, yet they didn’t realize I was a ten-year-old enjoying a happy hour. Once I landed in New York City, the customs officials smelled it and gave me a strange look. Half the bottle was gone. Then, when they looked into my suitcase, they found herbs. Yet another aunt had slipped in bags of herbal remedies, which were packaged in loose, plastic bags. The customs inspector smelled them just to be certain but determined that those suspicious-looking products were what they were, rural medicine. They’re good for your mother’s digestion, the aunt had said. To top it off, an uncle had crowned me with a huaso (Chilean cowboy) hat at the airport, and I had boarded the plane wearing it. As I slept on the plane, it slipped somewhere into the crevices. I forgot about it altogether, and it disappeared into the night. At JFK customs, I suddenly remembered. I told an official who spoke Spanish that my huaso, my hat, was missing. She let another officer know. The officer made a phone call. “Go find some wa-zoo hat,” he ordered somebody. Nothing turned up. I had moved on to notice the impressive exit signs with their wishes of success.

I was in New York City. My mother stood above, waving from a viewing station overlooking the customs desks. I recognized her face immediately, a
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glowing, welcoming smile. We hadn’t seen each other in over a year. My
mother’s first action was to walk me into the city, to 32nd Street, where
we’d hitch a ride to the top of the Empire State Building, something I’d
seen in the movies, with Deborah Kerr and Cary Grant kissing.

“How was your plane ride?” Mother asked.

“I barely slept,” I said. “I kept playing with all the buttons, then I read
all my magazines, Archie comics, Batman, Lone Ranger, and Barrabás (the
Chilean cartoon about an indefatigable soccer team). Then the mean stew-
ardess came by and turned off my light and told me to sleep, but I couldn’t.
I looked out the window and stared at the moon and the clouds the entire
night.”

It was the longest trip of my life, in child’s time, which slows down to
the minute and split seconds. Awake and aloft while cruising through
clouds, I was an introspective child, ascertaining the meaning of this new
life, imagining who knows what—excitement, glory, glamour? I felt no
sense of loss. I didn’t miss my native country. I didn’t think I had left Chile
forever. People talk about their exile, their need to abandon their home-
lands, perhaps for political reasons, perhaps risking their lives on rafts or,
worse, walking by foot through a desert. I had left Chile on a joy ride, with
a full set of papers because my mother had planned it that way. Luck had
allowed it to happen precisely as she planned it. Boring immigrants, that’s
what we were, ones who came without the drama of danger, risk, potential
oppression, or alienation as “illegals.” We felt the welcome and the trans-
formation of a new life. Our optimism was probably justified—although
today I have learned enough skepticism to ridicule it myself before others
do. We were trained by Julie Andrews to think of our favorite things, and
even our local church in Santiago had adopted the song in a Spanish trans-
lation. The American nuns who presided over the church kept up the
Maria von Trapp allure of thinking good things. “Raindrops on roses,
whiskers on kittens.” Not much of a believer nowadays, I’m still grateful
for the songs and the music the nuns gave us, like gifts wrapped in good
wishes. There was something unhip about us, immigrants who actually en-
joyed their immigration. I’ve learned today, through my academic friends,
that a rosy disposition is considered square, even reactionary. In intellec-
tual circles, I’ve learned to turn on the heavy sarcasm and irony, if only
to hide a Catholic childhood in which we could sing songs such as “My
Favorite Things” without being ridiculed.
In Maryland, we were newcomers, and yet we felt, of all things, at home. Mother and I shared a sense of excitement and adaptability. The first lesson: other immigrants complain about everything; we annoyed them by liking everything. What better lesson than to find the *West Side Story* soundtrack in the mobile library that parked in front of our building every week. A mobile library was exciting enough—did we also make people sick by being excited by that, too? There were no public libraries in my neighborhood in Santiago at the time. The only library was the used book and used magazine store we ran ourselves. We were the facilitators of culture in the La Palmilla neighborhood at a time when television hadn’t yet established itself in Chile. We didn’t sell books. We rented them along with magazines. That was the essence of the economy. People were too poor to buy them, and the content was populist—cartoons, serial illustrated romances, movie gossip. But in Bethesda, the library came to us with books, for free.

“There are some books in Spanish in the back,” I remember the librarian saying. Was she a librarian or just a driver? I didn’t know the difference. There were indeed children’s books in Spanish, which I checked out. But I plunged into English-language books at the same time. I didn’t have to know the language. I wanted to stare at the words and the illustrations and try to match them. My first “Cat in the Hat” books were a surreal experience, drawings of a funky cat with language that expressed who knows what. The early playwright in me was writing his own script.

But much more important for the long-term imprint upon my imagination was another finding: the soundtrack of the Sondheim/Bernstein/Robbins musical *West Side Story*.

“I like to be in America,” said the lyrics. One group of immigrants yearned to go back to San Juan, and the other wanted to give them “a boat to get on.” I have spent the rest of my life acting out those lyrics. My mother was Anita, the lively Puerto Rican woman in love with Manhattan, singing about how much she likes to be in America. The rest would be the other people—the morose, the pessimists, the realists, the academics—who tried to point out all the problems with life in the United States.

“But there is a reason why we came,” Mother said. Gatherings included friends from Peru, Mexico, Guatemala, and other Latin American countries. “Let’s not forget that we left behind countries that had no future for
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us” (in Sondheim’s words: “Always the hurricanes blowing, always the population growing”).

This basic lesson was never lost on me. Our native countries would fall into the hands of dictators throughout the 1970s, one by one, with the help of the CIA. The economies could not catch up with the basic human yearning for some breathing space, even a small touch of magic, of hope for oneself and family. Out of frustration, people rioted or joined revolutionary movements, in which case the ruling class cracked down, imposing curfews, then dictatorship. The pattern repeated itself over and over again throughout this period. Relatives from Chile wrote short narratives, a paragraph here and there, revealing food shortages, riots, police brutality, and eventually the tragic military coup.

My mother had no time to look back. For her the United States was the place to dream first and then to work to pursue those dreams. That night at the Empire State Building, she laid it on the line: “Ay, pero mira esta gran ciudad, how the lights shine upon into the night. People who worked hard put up those buildings, not some flojos who do nothing all day. You build it day by day, brick by brick; it’s about the choices you make every single day, from the moment you wake up.”

It dawned on me that she always introduced a new task in the context of play. A free afternoon? Why not go over the abc’s? Or the multiplication tables? Or use that new movie with Liz Taylor to talk about the history of Rome and Anthony and Cleopatra? A certain dutifulness came attached to the everyday life, but she always made it seem as fun as riding the elevator to the top of the Empire State Building.

In looking back, I questioned her tone, her tendency to dismiss people as flojos the way some Republicans dismissed “welfare queens.” I understood eventually why she didn’t consider herself a Republican and still voted for Reagan. She resented the people who she thought dismissed hard work and who supposedly glorified dependency. I never met a “welfare queen” personally. But my mother recognized that I couldn’t get an education without government aid, and that free lunches helped us make it through the day without experiencing hunger. She was a hard-working woman, but she could certainly use the subsidy. It became simply a matter of style—it was optimism that got you through the day, and the mantra was obligatory. Make fun of that optimism, and María made the unsuspecting
victim get back that dismissive attitude Anita perfected so well: “I know a boat you can get on.”

I still didn’t know exactly what success entailed, but I knew early on in my first days in the United States that all the exit signs wished it for me. It was time to exit the building and start living out there in the new country, and to start getting the translations right.

Ten years go by. I am in the Café Figaro of West Hollywood, a fixture that has since disappeared. In my neighborhood in the 1980s, it was the precursor to Starbucks. Devoted to espresso, yet with a larger lunch and dinner menu than the current ubiquitous chain, not to mention an actual bar, Café Figaro fulfilled my fantasy of a literary life—books, notebooks, espresso, and a pen in hand to capture the moment, but also booze as well, if necessary. To others, it may have been a restaurant, but in the late afternoon, as the lunch crowd thinned, idle writers moved in to camp out for a couple of hours. I was one of them, and it behooved me to look debonair and witty when I was actually trying to write into a notebook. Conversations with the servers soaked up time, but it helped me stay for hours, and it broke up the monotony of actually getting some writing done. A Saturday afternoon around three p.m. was perfect for the cappuccino and the slice of chocolate cake. Death by Chocolate, they called it, a thick concoction, more dark chocolate cream than actual cake. I had picked up the habit of carrying both a notebook and a journal in Italy. The notebook was for dialogue and scenes for plays, sometimes short stories. The journal was to record experiences, ideas, sensations. An actress/waitress approached me one day. “UCLA, right?” she asked. “I saw you in that scene in drama class.”

Yes, I’d done a scene from Sartre’s No Exit, playing the bedeviled hero. For the first time since Charo in Chile, I’d kissed a young woman. The director made me get on top of her as the psychotic lesbian character bid me to penetrate the younger woman—at least that was our interpretation. I gave it my all. I crushed the poor young actress writhing beneath me, and she looked like she enjoyed the endless humping the director made me do as the aggressive female character bid me to take her. One of the young men in the class analyzed our scene afterward, saying that her breasts threatened to pop out of a tight outfit giving “new meaning to the term
dramatic tension.” But the professor gave me a B anyway. I didn’t get sufficient credit for the tension: people were too focused on the breasts.

“You were great,” says the waitress. I didn’t believe her. I still remembered that class as a nightmare, and a death knell for any acting ambitions. Another director cast me in a scene as the aggressive black soldier in David Rabe’s Streamers, yet another case of miscasting. “It’s a stretch,” the director told me, “but it’s a class. You might learn something.” I failed to play a homicidal deranged black soldier even though part of me wished I could have pulled it off. I got another B. My heart was somewhere else. I was not an actor, just a theatrical person, perhaps a literary one. I told the waitress I was writing—well, taking notes about writing—a play about Sal Mineo.

She didn’t seem to know the actor from Rebel without a Cause, but she still smiled and tried to look interested.

“You see,” I told her with great earnestness because I believed a play could actually result, “since I was a teenager, I’ve been told I look like Sal Mineo, and I figured I might as well write a one-man show about him and star in it. He was killed in my neighborhood.”

“Oh, no! Recently?”

“No, not recently, but in 1976 only a few months before my mother and I moved to Los Angeles. We were originally from Chile, but we lived in Arlington, Virginia, and suddenly I’m living in L.A. and every day I walk by the apartment building where he was stabbed to death by a perfect stranger, and I just think, there’s something to that story.”

There was definitely a one-man show in Mineo’s biography, but I could not bring myself to write it, let alone star in it. Still, I was proud that I was talking about my ideas and getting to a point where I could one day start and finish something. We were in Hollywood after all, albeit West Hollywood, another city altogether. But it still helped, when the waitress recognized you—you felt you belonged there. Singer Belinda Carlisle sat on the table beside me one afternoon, as she shared coffee with a friend. She was someone recognizable, and I even avoided staring at her. When you belonged, you didn’t need to play the role of the fan, but of the disinterested insider. It made sense somehow, my life in West Hollywood, even though I was only accomplishing the successful writing of notes, and lots of them.

“When will it happen?” my mother asked. She sat me down shortly after I returned from Italy. I had colorful Italian clothes hanging in the
closet, but I had no job, and I was sleeping in her living room on a foldout bed. We were still using one after all these years, and my mother was understandably concerned. “When will you get a job and start doing something with your life?”

I wasn’t done with school yet. I didn’t know what the hurry was. It’s true that I’d stretched out my requirements into a fifth year. But the fifth year had ended, and I was enrolling for one more quarter, my sixth year at UCLA. I was making a career of being an undergrad. But I was also genuinely trying to write. How could I prove it to her?

“We didn’t come to the U.S. to live like this,” she said. She was blaming it, her life, on me. It was clear I was meant to be a success at twenty-three, and I was meant to be her redemption for the life that she was failing to lead. Carmen’s parents had left their Florida retirement home, and they were staying with us in the one-bedroom apartment. This meant that for a couple of months, the old folks slept in the one bedroom, and Carmen, María, and myself camped out in the living room. Third World conditions. Carmen couldn’t stand it for long and made her parents move into their own apartment in the same building, now owned by a Korean man, who also didn’t like all the crowding of forlorn immigrants around him.

The problem was that we were still living like this. We had moved to Los Angeles to avoid a static, crowded life in Arlington, Virginia. We felt restless again. The nomadic instinct took hold of us one more time in the summer of 1976. Mother could not stand the repetitive task of filing for GEICO. She had previously left behind maintenance because that was not good enough for the enterprising immigrant. A government-sponsored course to teach immigrants English and basic office skills lifted her out of that one socioeconomic tier only to make her a clerk, which Mother immediately found constrained her instinct to move, to see America, to make it in America (hacerse la América). Rosa, her Peruvian friend, had already moved to Los Angeles, which gave us an excuse to invite ourselves along. That summer we had also had a slight problem with the landlord in Virginia. He came knocking on the door one day when I was alone and asked me questions.

“How many people are living here?”

There was my mother and I, my aunt Nelly had moved in, as had a friend of my mother’s, Carmen. Four people in a two-bedroom apartment. This was shocking to the American landlord. By the standards of his
privileged First World view, this was overcrowding. He came in when I was alone, and I kept my eyes down, ashamed, berated by his bullying tactics. He inspected our place as if we’d been transients camping out illegally, trespassers in his private property. My mother had ceded one of the bedrooms to me. I had a room to myself for the first time in my life. She and Carmen slept on a foldout bed in the living room. Aunt Nelly enjoyed the other room by herself. This was a standard arrangement—for immigrants. “It’s unacceptable,” he said. “What time does your mother come home?”

The landlord called at night to speak to the women of the house. Somebody had to leave. Three people were the most he could accept. Mother said fine, we will all move. All the way to California. Aunt Nelly, ever the cautious one, was shocked at Mother’s impulsive decision and stayed behind. Carmen, who enjoyed a similarly adventurous spirit, joined my mother and me. She owned the one car in the household, an old Pontiac that survived the wear and tear of the cross-country trip, but only just. We rented a U-Haul trailer that followed us to California like a faithful pet, attached to the Pontiac. My mother hadn’t yet learned to drive, so Carmen drove the whole way. I had the back of the car to myself, where I read Jacqueline Susann’s neo-pornographic *The Love Machine*. It’s educational, I told my mother, who wasn’t buying it, but I was a teenager by then. Better that I read about it than actually perform it was her rationalization for my newly adult tastes in reading. Off we went, driving through Lee Highway until I saw my favorite school—Stratford Junior High—disappear in the rearview mirror. We were leaving behind the good, steady but boring life of settled immigrants. I welcomed the drastic move. I didn’t think of its effect on me, my psyche, my strangeness. I knew we weren’t sedate, average people. I knew we could pick up any time and go. It was part of the freedom of living in the United States. Until then, we had refused to stand still, so why stop now?

I must admit to one cruel trick that I played on my various schoolmates throughout the D.C. area. The first time I played this trick was on boys in the locker room at my Silver Spring junior high school. Instead of telling them I was simply moving, I told them I had testicular cancer and that they wouldn’t see me again. They laughed and dismissed my folly, but they never saw me again because we moved. I wanted them to come to school and begin to ask. Not that they would be worried about me—the boys I targeted were the type most likely to bully me around—but I wanted at the very least for them to consider the possibility that I didn’t lie.
The second time I played this same trick was during the summer of 1976 when we were about to leave Arlington for Los Angeles. I ran into some schoolmates, two teenage girls, at a local drugstore. With a straight face, I announced again with great serenity, even acceptance, “I have cancer, so you won’t be seeing me much longer.”

They looked altered somehow, not quite believing it but almost, as if not wanting to dismiss the truth. Yet, these were friendly girls. They’d never done me any harm. There was no reason for me to get even with them as I wanted to against the boys in Silver Spring, and yet I thought I would test it out one more time. The girls walked away, not knowing what to think.

A few days later, I got a phone call from my history teacher. “Kids are telling me you have cancer; is this true?” I couldn’t lie to dear Ms. K, but I did anyway.

“We’re moving back to Chile,” I told her, “so that I may die among my relatives.”

“I want to speak to your mother,” she said.

“She’s not here, I’m sorry,” I answered, and this time I managed to cough, confusing cancer for tuberculosis. I was clearly acting out the Camille role. Few people knew of my role-playing upon meeting my father in the summer of 1975, when I created Aunt Augusta. But this time, I was looking for a grand, dramatic excuse for us moving as opposed to admitting we were being evicted for overcrowding. That would have been so Third World. I was all about avoiding embarrassments at that age. What was one more lie anyway? My schoolmates believed my father toiled as a well-paid diplomat for Generalísimo Augusto Pinochet in the Chilean Embassy in Washington. There was no reason why I shouldn’t be going back to Santiago. Most diplomatic appointments ended, and now I was struggling with terminal cancer. My teenage life had become fiction, and it saved me from the flat reality of our immigrant lives. I had found an odd, cruel way to skip town.

Out of this nomadic life, Mother felt the need to build a home in Los Angeles. Years later, she was complaining. How come we’re living like this? But this was our purpose, I wanted to say. We never put that much emphasis on settling down, furnishing a place and staying put. In the D.C. area, we moved from Bethesda to Silver Spring, Maryland, and then to Arlington, Virginia. Mostly because we felt like it, because we thought we’d find
a better life crisscrossing the Potomac River until we finally quit. In L.A. we’d moved from our apartment off Sunset/Hayworth to Sunset/Formosa, with only a subtle difference in size and quality. We moved several times again through the years until Mother ended up in Portland, Oregon, and I in Arizona. So I felt the blame that morning.

“When will we stop living like this?” She was accusing me of not being the breadwinner, of not buying her a home, or not providing a better way of life. “You should be out there doing something in Hollywood.”

“Hollywood?” I asked. The word had become threatening, something to be used against me.

“We drove all the way out here from Virginia.”

“So that’s why we drove out here?” I asked. “I thought it was because we wanted to be free, and see the country, and get away from our boring lives in Virginia.”

“Yeah, but we’ve been in Hollywood for seven years now, and what have you done?”

“I’m not an actor.”

“You were going to be an actor once!”

“Well, I’m sorry! I can’t be that type of son.”

Unfortunately for my immigrant mother, I was a humanities student. Therefore, I wasn’t going anywhere. All those books—drama, poetry, criticism—and the occasional polemical book—by George Orwell, Ayn Rand, Bill Buckley—pointed in one direction only: debt. School loans needed to be repaid. What would I do about that? We didn’t come to the U.S. to . . . It’s an immigrant mother’s eternal lament to realize success was not guaranteed. Her son had grown up, and he now read books. That’s what he did with his spare time. Could there be a greater punishment? Yes, her son could be queer, but my mother couldn’t admit to that yet, and therefore she was in for a long period of adjustment. Her dilemma was clear: how to accept the overall disappointment a struggling writer represented. I, her only son, her insurance against bad times, was burdened with the responsibility of lifting us out of poverty. Why were we living like this? I had once followed Fred Silverman’s career in the magazines and newspapers. He had graduated from Ohio State, gone into programming, and become the head guru of all three major networks. He’d re-created television by solidifying hits such as *All in the Family*, then creating the spinoffs that moved memorable characters into our living rooms and our imaginations: Maude,
and the Jeffersons, Mary Richards, and Rhoda, all of them our virtual relatives. At ABC, he'd do the same with *Happy Days*—Ritchie Cunningham became a cousin, the Fonz our best friend, and Laverne and Shirley and Mork and Mindy also emerged to play parts in our lives. Silverman had been my hero of sorts because pop culture fulfilled my own need to populate American culture with characters and situations. Yet I had fallen in love with serious literature instead. I was clearly not following in the steps of the successful network boss, no matter how fascinated I was by programming and counter-programming. My mother had been thinking in terms of Ritchie Valens, the son of a Mexican American, farm-working mother. A couple of hit songs like “La Bamba,” and he’s buying his mother a home. Luis Valdez’s film of Valens’s tragic life didn’t help any.

“What was all that education about?” asked María when she seemed to be giving up on me. My talents, whatever they were, didn’t flourish in the teen years. Writers needed time, sometimes decades. The talent I was aiming for required the patient nurturing of language, words, and the ability to discover a voice. A young man rarely possessed an immediate, accessible voice. Of course, I wasn’t about to tell her that my contemporary, Bret Easton Ellis, had already published his first novel, *Less Than Zero*, chronicling the lives of spoiled Beverly Hills brats. Youthful writers could establish themselves and make some sort of impression on the culture. I wasn’t headed in that direction. I was lucky my mother had not read about Ellis, a best-selling author in his twenties.

I heard my mother’s thought process, the wheels turning. If her son wasn’t about to make a bold move, she would. This led my mother to make a crucial decision. She would marry my soon-to-be stepfather, Osvaldo Campos, as an odd business arrangement, but it was clearly one way to get her closer to one of her dreams, her own house. Her son was no Ritchie Valens. I’ll show that writer, was her attitude. Of course, that still left the matter of what I would do with my life. If anything.

Whether my mother considered writing to be real work or not, I insisted I was doing plenty with my life. I found a coffeehouse, a different one every day, one in Westwood near the university, another one in Kerckhoff Hall inside the university itself, and there was still the Figaro. I moved into West Hollywood—you might say—to be near it, and to streets that were walkable and reminiscent of a European lifestyle that I still missed. I shared an apartment with Montgomery, a friend I’d met in Italy, now a law student.
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at UCLA, and Jonathan, an MBA grad from UC Davis, who had secured a position with Cedars-Sinai in management. Jonathan's parents were wealthy Beverly Hills socialites. Their cast-off furniture remade our living room, turning it into something plush and sociably agreeable. I shared a room with Montgomery, so there was no private space, but I was no longer sleeping on a foldout bed. I had lucked out. I worked part-time for the UCLA Latin American Center, filling out book orders in their publications department, and the rest of the time I was somewhere in the city writing stories or reading.

Mother had reason to worry. I was clearly not enterprising. My personality was dim. I failed to do the networking necessary to meet people and get ahead. I was not involved publicly with any one organization. I was on my own out on the streets, walking, since I didn't have a car, or a driver's license, and I would stop somewhere for a cappuccino, which I could always somehow afford, and write.

"Why are you living like this?" Mother asked. It was no longer us, it was me. She had married Osvaldo, the Chilean immigrant who'd help her buy her house in the Valley. She was making progress, of sorts. But she still lived ten minutes away from me in Hollywood, and her phone calls were always about what I intended to do to get my house in order.

"I am a writer," I said with great confidence. "That's what I'm doing, not just intending to do."

She wasn't buying it. Mother was always, partly, right about these things, which exacerbated my moods. Why indeed was I living like this? I questioned my own goals and ambitions but never found the way to betray them. I stuck it out because there was no other way of life for me. It was not possible that I would surrender my books, my notebooks, and the countless ideas for plays, novels, short stories, and screenplays that populated my mind in a chaotic world of riches. All I had to do was extract narratives from my imagination, learn to put them on paper, and sell them to somebody, and to whom exactly? I didn't know anyone.

After the Italian adventures, I settled into a life of relative solitude. I wasn't dating. My roommate Jonathan picked up strangers at the local bars at a feverish, almost daily pace. The befuddled men he brought home found me reading a book, preferably of some literary worth, a Eudora Welty perhaps, or later, Barbara Pym, the British spinster who seemed to peer into my bizarre twenty-something-year-old's soul. I knew what it was
like to be surrounded by sexually and romantically active people while staring in the background as the average Pym heroine might do. I was a most unusual West Hollywood gay man. I was capable of going out and having drinks with friends and my roommates, but I avoided becoming romantically and much less sexually involved with anyone.

My mother’s worst fears about me were true. I was calling myself a writer without writing for anyone or any one goal. I was getting by on part-time work while living fairly well thanks to the relative prosperity and success of my roommates. That they put up with me was their contribution to the arts. No, we hadn’t come to the United States to live like this. Writers like Hemingway had left the country to live like this elsewhere, but Paris had become too expensive to maintain a bohemian lifestyle, and I wasn’t about to be down and out like Orwell. The irony was that I was living well in an expensive American city, but I still walked in the streets without a clear direction in the world, as a drifter would. Unlike Kerouac, I didn’t set out to live on the road. In L.A., without a car or a license, my aimlessness was marked by the path of my feet walking, riding the bus, peering from its windows at the landmarks of Hollywood success.

I began to write laconically, with a sense of loss perhaps. My characters were Barbara Pym light. An early novel, *Miss Lilly’s Last Stand*, features a bumbling heroine, a lively spinster involved with a religious fanatic who wants to bomb an abortion clinic. I never developed it beyond a first draft, but I still remember the enthusiasm I felt for this dark comedic tale. I wrote it in record speed over a couple of weeks, and then I inexplicably abandoned it, out of an inner fear that it wouldn’t survive a rewrite, that I would find a way to ruin it. It haunts my imagination and has become a permanent fixture of my files, but I have resisted the temptation to look at it again. The style was clumsy and youthful, but the story itself had its charm. Miss Lilly is an affable, awkward woman who wears hand-knit sweaters that smell of fresh wool. Her teacups are more important to her than whether a man finds her attractive, and when one eventually does, she falls in love madly enough to ignore that he’s a terrorist until it’s too late.

It was another bumbling, charming, middle-aged woman who led to one of my first publications. “Miss Consuelo” was a short story about a Mexican immigrant woman trying to write a romance novel that reflected...
that particular anxiety expressed by my mother: “We didn’t come to the U.S. to live like this.”

My mother had by then enrolled at Los Angeles City College, and my short story portrays a middle-aged woman who becomes a romance novelist while attending the same college. My mother never entertained writing ambitions, but amid our many conversations, she mentioned reading Mexican illustrated romances. The heroine was often an innocent country bumpkin who arrives in the city, gets defiled by some handsome but deceitful ruffian, and then gets even by becoming a big success by opening up a successful restaurant à la *Mildred Pierce*, for example. “I could write one much better than that,” she said with a condescending tone.

“Oh then maybe you should,” I said. I made her tell me her ideas. A beautiful heroine arrives to lord over an avocado plantation in California in the days of the Spanish colony. But then she couldn’t expand upon it.

“Look, I’m not the writer,” she said. “You use it.”

I didn’t know how to write about an avocado plantation without cracking up. To me, it just seemed funny to associate romance with avocados. My earnest mother may have regarded plantations as the right setting for that type of steamy tale. But I imagined a heroine running through a forest of trees with ripe avocados falling on her head, ruining her hair, and staining her many outfits. The images were clearly comedic, and that was the spirit in which I eventually wrote the story. Consuelo pens a tale, “Romance of the Guacamoles,” for her creative writing class, and the teacher, who prefers somber, Updike-like scenarios of middle-class marital disasters, ridicules it. He advises her to get in touch with her immigrant angst. But Consuelo feels she has to remain true to her instinct for passion. By the time I finished the story, I was acquainted with *The Writer’s Market*, and its companion volume, *The Fiction Writer’s Market*. On Saturday mornings, I walked toward the local post office on San Vicente and Santa Monica and sent off my submissions to the various literary journals that populated the land. I was determined to have them publish me whether they knew it or not. Dozens of rejections began to arrive, sometimes with hand-written comments and words of encouragement. I rarely spoke of rejections. Even acknowledging them would curse the roll I was on in writing short stories. I was enjoying myself altogether and continued to write at a furious pace. My roommate Jonathan, after saying goodbye to a trick, would sit down and help me through the grammar.
“We have to tame the Chilean accent,” he said, the one he detected on the page. He was a bright, educated young man with an MBA, whose addiction to porn, sex, and pot seemed like the perfect contrast to the more ascetic lifestyle I led down the hallway in the other room. The keys of my old typewriter made a racket that penetrated walls. Jonathan and his tricks banged into the wall with heavy sodomy. But Jonathan seemed as devoted to editing my short stories as I was to writing them. Yet, instead of being grateful, I was also judgmental. I was annoyed by his tendency to bring strangers into the house. I liked him. He was warm and personable, but I didn’t like the men he picked up on the streets. When our new roommate, Sean, came to live with us in fall 1986, he immediately noticed Jonathan’s habits when he heard a disturbing argument between Jonathan and a young trick who wanted money after their encounter. The argument escalated, and Sean feared they would start a fight. Finally, the young trick settled for some undetermined amount and walked out in a fury. But it came close, Sean reported. My need to remain alert became acute after that. Jonathan was picking up dangerous hustlers instead of just average Joes. I also didn’t appreciate Jonathan showing me his collection of pictures of all the men he’d picked up in the past couple of years. He had stashed in a shoebox Polaroids of men posing naked, sometimes frontally, other times with their buttocks to the camera. He kept them the way others might keep baseball cards, and he often felt the need to show them off to me. As much as I appreciated Jonathan’s help with my writing, I felt threatened by someone who was sexually active. It was either my own hang-up or just a gut feeling that Jonathan was playing with fire. Who was I to judge? I was the asexual artist next door. I continued to bang away at my typewriter, he banged away at strangers, both noises for neighbors to complain about.

Sean brought much-needed sanity, the right mix of someone who was involved in the gay community, and who dated often but without the excess I saw in Jonathan, and without the recourse to illicit drugs. Some time in late 1986, Sean gave me a message from an editor at Puerto del Sol, a literary magazine from New Mexico State University. I called the editor back, and he wanted to make sure my story “A Spring Color” wasn’t being considered by anyone else. I could barely contain my excitement and sound professional.

“Yes, you may have the rights to publish my story,” I must have said, sounding mechanical, and emotionless, figuring you’re not supposed to
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scream, “Oh my God!” at an editor when your first acceptance arrives in the form of a phone call. I sounded sober, smooth, and in control. The story was a rare Joycean tale of a child roaming around a house in Santiago, a barely fictionalized glimpse into our home at La Palmilla. After reading the first couple of pages of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, I figured I could write that. This was my first acceptance outside the university, where *Westside*, a UCLA journal, had published a short story in 1985 as I was graduating, after years of rejecting me. Another tale of growing up, the surreal “Uncle Memo,” was accepted shortly afterward by the *New Mexico Humanities Review*.

Then, the editor of the Arte Público Press decided one day to publish “Miss Consuelo,” along with two more stories, “Pinochet in Hollywood” and “Patroklos,” in the now defunct quarterly *Americas Review*. Written more or less at the time I was preparing to apply for graduate school, all three stories would be published after my graduation. It took that long to get them to print. I managed to prove to my mother I wasn’t simply sitting out in coffeehouses pretending to be writing. I had acceptance letters to prove it. Much to my chagrin, my mother couldn’t read any of my stories. The English was too advanced for her, but in my attempt to share “Miss Consuelo” with her, I later adapted it to a play, something Mother could experience through the visual aid of actors playing out the dialogue. Later, “Miss Consuelo” was also published in the twenty-year retrospective by *Americas Review* and was picked up by National Public Radio’s short story series, where it aired on New Year’s Day in 1993.

The stage continued to lure. I admired the actors. They seemed audacious and brave enough to face up to rejection. One audition in high school and another at UCLA’s theater department exhausted my ability to withstand public ridicule. I could not bring myself to audition again. Literary rejections, at least, occurred in the mail. Yet, actors attracted me, and I found myself thinking I could somehow cling to them, that their beauty and appeal reflected upon me, that I could seduce them with words. The stage, rather than the screen, also proved safer to someone easily intimidated. I couldn’t walk into an agent’s office and convince him of my worth, my bankability, the inevitability of my success that would help him collect his 20 percent cut. Selling oneself went against my personality, hampered as it was by diffidence that was blatantly pathological. My inability to speak to strangers, let alone promote my talents, derailed any Hollywood
ambitions, so it made sense to try to write for the theater. It seemed to be populated by something other than egotistical, hysterical, angry people. I was wrong about that assessment, but I believed it enough in the 1980s to think I had some sort of future in the more genteel and less threatening world of the live theater.

In time, I met a man, Michael Kohl, who worked with the Celebration Theater, the only gay-themed company in Los Angeles, which continues to thrive today, and which later proved crucial to my ambitions. Kohl had become involved in the company in the early 1980s and in time became its interim artistic director. I met him, however, when he was the only non-Latino in a mountain retreat of gay Latino men. On my return from Italy, I visited the Gay Community Center in Hollywood, which announced a retreat for Latino gays and lesbians. I had never attended a retreat, nor had I identified specifically with the Latino community nor, for that matter, was I active in gay circles, seeing myself as a loner. Solitude and curiosity made me enroll; I figured I might even learn something about myself. I discovered that I was, in fact, a Latin American of some sort, that I had no business feeling I was detached from this particular community, but that I had returned from Europe as either a true loner or a snob. Ironically enough, I befriended Michael Kohl, the only Anglo who showed up. He was more supportive of Latino identity than I was.

He wrote musicals, directed them, and stated that the Celebration Theater was open to new plays. He gave me his number. Once we returned to the city, I called him, and he put me to work. He was involved in a reading of a play for another local theater company. He needed help and solicited mine. In a few days, I was substituting for his lead actor at a rehearsal. Professional actors were cramped in his living room reading a play by a local playwright. I didn’t think of myself as an actor, but I was a warm body—I could substitute and read out loud. In a few days, a public reading would help the playwright hear his work in front of a public. At the reading I passed out the program and made myself useful. I don’t recall the content of the play or whether it was well received. I was thrilled to be involved. Michael was an energetic, tall man who had pictures of himself smiling next to Tennessee Williams. The great late playwright had come over to his apartment one night with a group of friends for some late-night partying. The picture, along with the ambience around the theater, made sense to me. Michael had been touched by Tennessee, who was nicknamed the magic bird.
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I asked Michael if he would read my plays. We met at a local diner where he lectured me for three hours on the strengths and weaknesses of my efforts. He also urged me to write gay-themed plays so that Celebration Theater could consider them. I thought such a thing would prove embarrassing to me, and to my mother, and to my entire father’s family in Santiago, which was busy pretending I didn’t exist. I held on to the hope that I would one day exist in their eyes, denying myself the right to exist in the here and now. Michael could see how these issues and the diffidence that plagued my personality affected my writing, and he urged me to start from a place of truth. I knew no such place. I was writing to come across as clever, witty, brilliant, debonair, European, and many things that I wasn’t. I didn’t identify with gay issues, and while I could write a part for a gay character, I didn’t think of my work as being about gay identity. I had problems with both Latino and gay identities. I was writing for an abstract general public that could identify with the overall human experience without ever getting too specific about mine. My identities embarrassed me. I ran from them.

Michael proved to be invaluable in encouraging my work, and the privilege of watching actors and directors work in various productions at the Celebration, housed in a tiny space in Silver Lake, kept me engaged and stimulated. Yet, it would take a long decade before I returned to the Celebration and watched one of my plays debut.

Another small theater on Wilton and Sunset Boulevard, the Nosotros Theater, was founded by the legendary actor Ricardo Montalban to promote Latino talent in Hollywood. It featured a playwrights’ unit in addition to an actors’ lab. I joined both. I began to write scenes for the actors’ lab and enjoyed watching actors memorize my lines and interpret them. More importantly, I wrote my second full-length play for them.

The ongoing turf wars of Nosotros Theater kept us all guessing about the organization’s viability. Would it be there the next day? A meeting of the board and its members led to shouting matches and death threats. The board members hired security guards, fired the artistic director, and brought in a new one. He taught at the local Los Angeles City College and had great ambitions to turn Nosotros into a regularly producing theater company, as opposed to a support network for actors. He was looking for a play to do. The director of the writers’ unit pointed to my play, Exiled from L.A., about an errant Mexican family that moves around, in this case
from L.A. to D.C., the exact opposite of our family’s journey. One phone call, I hoped, would transform my life. I called my mother. “They’re going to do my play!”

“That’s wonderful, but are you sure it’s ready? Are you sure you’re ready?”

“Of course, I’m ready!” I said. A young playwright will always say this, but I was terrified.

I hadn’t been offered a production. I had been asked instead for rewrites for a possible production. I had interpreted the phone call as a tentative acceptance, a mere formality that would become the real thing. The artistic director needed some rewrites, which was natural. I would provide them, and the production would happen. I started to alert my friends that the Nosotros Theater would be producing my play. In a few weeks, a flyer would be forthcoming, I announced. For an entire week, I skipped work. I made serious cuts, reshuffled scenes, took out characters, added one or two. I was convinced I’d transformed this simple family comedy into a precious, promising play that would alter my life for good. Things were looking up at the Nosotros. The infighting that had threatened to dissolve the theater went into temporary hiatus. Ricardo Montalban blazed into a meeting one night like a knight, descending from his limousine, and accompanied by his own set of security men. With all the members of the organization present, I among them, he made the feuding board of directors embrace and publicly apologize to one another. Wearing one of his dapper suits, this overpowering gentleman, superstar of Latino actors, with his suave, sophisticated voice and charming accent, spoke of the importance of unity. The organization he’d founded threatened to evolve into trench warfare, but Mr. Montalban’s charisma allowed for a truce in the constant backstabbing that went on behind the scenes. I introduced myself to Mr. Montalban as a playwright. He shook my hand and said, “I hope there’s a part for me in one of your plays.”

“Always,” I said.

In truth, there wasn’t a part for him, but that was all speculation anyway. Next time the playwright’s group met, the head of it informed me the artistic director had found another play, a trial drama that better suited his needs.

“So you’re saying you’re not going to do my play?” I asked.
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“Well, who knows? Maybe in the future, but not now,” he said. “You’re young, though.”

Young and devastated. I went into a depression that only a kid high on his horse of invincibility could plunge into. It was difficult to eat for an entire week. It was difficult to go to work and smile through my pain. Telling my mother meant further humiliation. I made a quick phone call and simply let her know the facts and tried not to show any emotion.

“They’re not going to do the play,” I said, and then cut it short.

“I’m sure other things will turn up,” was all she could say.

I left it at that. At work, it was back to the book orders for the Latin American Center. I asked myself if I’d spend the rest of my life there. It wouldn’t be a bad prospect if I became a full-time clerk, with health benefits, and a possible retirement fund. I found some level of satisfaction taking care of my books, as I saw them, as if they’d been pets and I worked at the zoo feeding them. Johannes Wilbert, the head of the center, had written an entire series of lore books, among them the Folk Literature of the Selknam Indians, and the Chamacoco Indians, and the Toba Indians, and other such titles that published the mostly forgotten literature of Indian tribes in South America. I never read them entirely because I tired of creation tales, wise-talking animal spirits, and other such spiritual niceties. I needed more modern psychological perversities in my reading (Dostoevsky and Camus, for instance). But Professor Wilbert gave me a copy of Carl Jung’s Man and His Symbols, and I was mesmerized by the discussion on archetypes, which enlightened me at last about the purpose of characters in a story. The professor didn’t realize that I took reading seriously—enough to threaten my clerk duties. I read more books on the Latin American Center’s dime than I should have, but I hope today that they’d appreciate that the ambience—along with the professor’s gifts—helped me develop as a writer.

Only a few weeks later, in early 1986, the Los Angeles Times featured an article that changed my life: a report on the state of Latino theater in Southern California, of which there was a dearth in contrast to the huge burgeoning population of both immigrants and native-born Latinos that was transforming L.A. into a virtual Latin American city. I learned that the South Coast Repertory Theater, an important regional theater in Orange
County, was sponsoring the Hispanic Playwrights’ Project, a unique project that aimed to develop Latino playwrights and Latino-themed plays, coordinated by a young director recently graduated from UC Irvine, José Cruz González. The article listed an address for sending submissions. I had nothing to lose, so I sent them *Exiled from L.A.*, the play that the Nosotros had briefly considered, then dropped.

A couple of months later, I got a phone call from José Cruz himself. Three playwrights had been chosen to present their plays as part of the project. I wasn’t one of them, but three more playwrights were invited to participate during a week of conference talks and readings. The artistic committee at the South Coast Rep was improvising; and how grateful I was that they were. They wanted to be inclusive without necessarily opening the doors wide to all playwrights who had submitted material. They decided that this project would benefit from other voices, particularly from the participation of younger playwrights. They would *pay me* to attend this conference and house me. Since my own mother had trouble housing me, a hotel room felt like a luxury, a prize won on some TV show that came with exotic travel to Orange County.

My mother drove me to Orange County as if to see this for herself. She dropped me off at a local hotel, a modern lavish one across the street from the South Coast Repertory, where the Orange County Arts Building was being built. “Your cousin Catalina should see this,” she said. Catalina had begun to fail in school, and my mother was looking for some inspiration, but I didn’t think a young writer’s accomplishments were of interest to my cousin.

“Mother, what does she care about any of this?”

“Because she needs to see it for herself. If you work hard, you get invited to participate in things like this. What is this exactly? What will you be doing with them?”

“Oh, talking about my play, I guess,” I said, rather uncertain, but I felt the need to strengthen the argument. “And interacting with important people in the American theater.”

She left me at the hotel, satisfied. Yet another point for me, I figured, something to remind her when she brought up the fact that we were still living like immigrants.

Three playwrights—Eduardo Machado, Lisa Loomer, and Arthur Giron—presented their plays, and I watched them work with professional
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directors and actors. Actor Danny de la Paz had recently starred in the film Boulevard Nights, and I spoke to him between rehearsals of a play by Giron. Seeing a film actor live still seemed to have its own cache. I was pleased at Danny’s approachability. He eventually read my play, Exiled from L.A., and tore it to pieces with an irate tone of voice. But a movie star was good enough for me, and when he decided he didn’t want to drive back into L.A., he went up to my hotel room and slept on a foldout. I wanted to volunteer my bed, but he was humble enough not to displace me. I had a film star in my room, and it seemed, well, cool for once.

I observed the rehearsals for Giron’s play for another reason. The director was Jorge Huerta, who’d written a book—at the time, the only book—on Chicano theater. He encouraged me to continue writing. Like Michael Kohl before him, such encouragement made a difference to a self-esteem-deprived young man like myself. Jorge exuded so much warmth that I couldn’t help but feel a magnetic pull toward him that would last for several decades. He was a middle-aged Chicano who came across as sophisticated and dynamic, yet blunt, plain-spoken, and humorous. I was clearly in awe of him and of the affection he showed me. I readily accepted any affection, particularly when it seemed real and not a product of lust, which I secretly hoped was present as well. But just as I let an actor sleep innocently in my room during this conference, I harbored an aversion to even the idea to seduce. I lacked the skill, let alone the confidence, to seduce a scholar/director such as Jorge, a professor at UC San Diego. Over dinner he told me plainly, “We have a playwriting program at UC San Diego. Why don’t you apply?”

The next morning, from the hotel, I called the office at UC San Diego and requested an admission form, nine months before it was due.

At the conference we read the plays by the other participants. This also meant reading Exiled from L.A. out loud. Jorge praised its dialogue but said I didn’t have a plot. Everybody agreed. I had no sense of dramatic structure. Situations arose and then went in different directions all at once. No sense of unity. I would hear this complaint long into the future. I was much too carefree and improvisational up until then, not putting in the serious framework for developing a story with a beginning, middle, and end.

I returned to Los Angeles, ready to start a new play, The Seductions of Johnny Diego, which highlighted the seduce-able and seductive nature of a mysterious Vietnam War vet who returns home to Los Angeles to break
hearts and take over the appliance sales company of his in-laws. As I saw it, the mix of grand ambitions and the banality of selling appliances to middle-class people created a world of tragicomic possibilities. This play proved problematic in its many versions. The main character’s Chicano identity was inspired by Jorge’s book and personality. It was as if I’d imagined the younger seductive Jorge Huerta and placed him in Los Angeles where Jorge had grown up. This became a trend: I would use my writing to initiate affairs on the page, my own way of capturing attractions and chaste love without the fear and the implications of touch.

At work, the mail carrier came in every day and initiated small talk. I took care of the Latin American Center’s mail, distributed it, and kept the ones related to publication orders, which I filled. The carrier, a vivacious young man, Mark, wanted to know more about my private life. I didn’t have much of one, but I volunteered that I was same-sex inclined, if not active. I told him I wasn’t dating anyone.

“We’ll see what we can do about that,” he said.

A few days later, Mark called me at home and asked me if I minded Vietnamese men.

“I don’t care,” I said. I had no aversion to any race. I also just needed a warm body at that point. “Whatever works!”

Mark asked me to designate a meeting place. I didn’t hesitate: Café Figaro. He said he’d send over a young man called Tyler. I showed up a few evenings later on a Wednesday night when nothing else was happening. I expected a brief encounter, an awkward routine of strangers meeting blindly, and then walking back to my apartment alone. When Tyler appeared, I sat up. Way up. Mark had described him as young, fit, and handsome, but I knew he had to say that to get me to show up. I was surprised that not only had Mark not lied, but Tyler looked like a Vietnamese prince. He had a lean swimmer’s build, a smooth, medium dark skin, and a striking way with fashions, simple yet elegant, wearing black leather pants that highlighted his thin, shapely figure and a white shirt that was unbuttoned and showed a tight yet lean chest, muscular without being bulky.

I was speechless. He was a friend of Mark’s lover, also a Vietnamese young man. Apparently it was his duty to introduce all Vietnamese gay men to available young bachelors like myself.
Tyler spoke English well enough for simple conversation, with a rather charming accent. He sold cars in Anaheim, Orange County. He wasn’t happy with the job but thought he’d eventually get something else.

“What would you like to do?” I asked.

I don’t recall the answer. Tyler didn’t have the ambitions that would alter the world. I suggested he should become a model. He smiled nervously at the suggestion. He had made some head shots like everyone else in Hollywood, he admitted, but he had no agent. He didn’t think of himself as an actor. He had been an extra in a film, but whatever worked, he’d do. You never knew when the industry would put out a call for a handsome Vietnamese stud to stand somewhere with his shirt off. Tyler had escaped Vietnam on a fisherman’s boat with hundreds of other people, mostly men, perilously crowded and in unsanitary conditions. He had worried throughout the voyage that the boat might sink. The men were found after a couple of scary days at sea by a Thai vessel and taken to a refugee camp. He was accepted into the United States as an exile and headed for Orange County, where a substantial Vietnamese community had settled and prospered in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

I didn’t know what to make of him. He was impressed that I was a writer, but he had no questions about my work. I said I was originally from Chile. He didn’t know where that was on the map.

It didn’t matter. For the next few months, I spent time with him in my bed, enjoying his presence and the geography of his body. For the first time in my life, I touched a man with a firm swimmer’s build. When he went into the bathroom, I watched him move, admiring the perfect structure of his body.

Jonathan was impressed. He had not seen me bring anyone home before.

“I guess you were holding out for somebody special,” he said.

Special indeed. There was so much lust expended in that short period of time that I knew it couldn’t last. Tyler wanted it to last. He called me every day and mentioned the need to have a lover, to be with someone for life. I decided I needed somebody with whom I could speak about topics that went beyond our simple backgrounds. I wanted him to read a book. I didn’t know Asian literature aside from the Japanese epic *The Tale of Genji* and some of Mishima’s novels. I knew nothing of Vietnamese literature. I
wanted to find something accessible in English. I settled for *The Good Earth* by Pearl S. Buck, a novel that had inspired me as a sixth grader; more importantly, I had watched my grandfather cry at the movie version when I visited Chile in 1975. The Louise Rainer character reminded him of his peasant mother. The tale had legs, as the executives said in Hollywood. Tyler was delighted about the idea of reading the novel. He hugged me when I presented him with the gift and seemed genuinely moved. We made love that night. The next day, he went home and completely ignored the book. Next time I talked to him, he said he had read the first couple of paragraphs and then fallen asleep.

“How can I be involved with someone who doesn’t read?” I asked Jonathan.

My roommate stared at me, perplexed.

“He’s hot,” he said. “Don’t give him a reading list; fuck his brains out.”

I was a purist. Instead of being grateful that Tyler liked me and was willing to sleep with me in spite of what I considered to be my bodily flaws and deficiencies, I found ways to distance myself from him. I couldn’t possibly build a life with him. I couldn’t keep him around for long. Our conversation had become stultifying and repetitive. I wanted him to come back with a full review and appreciation of *The Good Earth*.

I was invited to the South Coast Repertory, only a short drive away from Tyler’s apartment in Anaheim. When Tyler heard I was staying at a hotel in his vicinity, he wanted to come over for the night. Instead, I went with him to a Vietnamese restaurant and then spent the night at his place. I sensed that it was over. He didn’t. He was talking about moving to the L.A. area, to be closer to me.

The following night, I attended one of the readings at the South Coast Rep. I allowed Danny de la Paz to come to my room, as if expecting something to happen. I was already breaking up with Tyler. I had spent a week enjoying stimulating theater talk with directors, playwrights, and actors; what I wanted more than anything was to be in the thick of things, in the midst of theatrical chatter. I failed to return Tyler’s phone calls; at last he began to get the hint.

I did not appreciate what Tyler had brought into my life, including the physical beauty he possessed. I was bored with it, not because I was really wiser and brighter, but because I didn’t know how to speak to him at a less
pretentious level. I wanted someone to match my literary pretenses. Sex with beauty didn’t seem as important as my need to do literary chatter. Now I read the *New York Times Book Review* by myself, but I don’t expect all my friends to do the same. My inability to be loose and free, and relaxed, made me calibrate the value of a relationship in terms of how it catered to me. I wanted my potential lover not only to reflect my interests but to adhere to them as well.

That night, over dinner in Anaheim, Tyler revealed to me the details of a previous relationship. He had dated an older American man—in his early forties—who had become so obsessed with him that he learned Vietnamese. He wanted Tyler to come over and help him practice. That was his tactic for bringing him into his life. An ingenious ploy. Tyler said he appreciated it; even though he wasn’t terribly attracted to this man, he saw him for over a year. He could at least practice his native language and share it with somebody. Later, I realized that I hadn’t made an effort to find a common ground. For somebody who was otherwise curious about languages and international cultures, I saw nothing but failure in our other cultural divide—the one based on literacy, or literary pretensions. Perhaps Tyler, too, should have made an effort, but I could have used my educated instincts to find some other solution. I still regret my avoidance of him, and the complete solitude that followed this affair, which lasted some three whole years aside from a one-night stand. Gay friends seemed surprised to hear me say, “It’s been three years since . . .”

A young man is not supposed to do without sex for three years in West Hollywood, or in modern America, for that matter.

When I returned from Orange County, there were several messages from Tyler. Jonathan was giving me that look of suspicion.

“What did you do?” he asked as if assuming something was wrong because of Tyler’s insistent phone calls, and that I was to blame for anything that went wrong. “Did you pull out your reading list again?”

“No, no reading list this time,” I said. “I just didn’t call him back when I was too busy meeting important figures in the American theater.”

“What a jerk!” he said. “You should have brought him along, paraded him in front of everybody, and people would have turned around and envied you. That boy’s a catch.”

“I should have thought of that, but I only thought about how limited our conversations are.”
“So you get the worst of both worlds—you end up without the sex and without the ability to brag and promote yourself. You’re hopeless.”

“Well, maybe there’s more to this world than just bragging and promoting yourself.”

“At least keep him for the sex.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

I phoned Tyler back and told him I couldn’t see him any longer. I didn’t explain why. Jonathan’s assessment of my problems made me more defiant. I couldn’t readily admit that he was mostly right.

Tyler attended a party I hosted a year later and he looked as stunningly beautiful as ever. He had a new American boyfriend, a gorgeous blond boy from Alabama with an aw-shucks smile that confirmed he was enjoying his sensual encounters with my lost Vietnamese prince. I was, and remained for a long time, alone.

I was too much in love with my pretenses and my claim to a literary lifestyle, enamored of being at Café Figaro reading Anaïs Nin, drinking cappuccinos. I don’t know if this was the worst of times or the best of them. I was young, enthusiastic about learning, and collecting books from the Bodhi Tree Bookstore on Melrose across from my apartment building, augmenting a bibliophilic lust for more words, my own and those of others. My records show I was reading *Does God Exist?* by Hans Kung and *Démocratie et Totalitarisme* by Raymond Aron in French, along with Dickens’s *Little Dorrit*, Márquez’s *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, and *The Rise and Fall of Athens* by Plutarch. Yet, I couldn’t communicate with strangers, or keep beauty in my life, and I didn’t feel confident that I was appealing to most men.

“Tyler found you attractive.”

Jonathan continued to offer his unsolicited assessments of me. He urged me to go into the streets of West Hollywood with him at two a.m. as the bars were closing. He said that’s when the men were most available.

“If Tyler was calling you, and you agreed he was hot, you should have taken that as a compliment. You’re not that ugly, see?”

“I just don’t see the world as you do,” I told him.

“No, that’s why you don’t get laid, and you blow your own chances. You should go out with me.”

“I’ve got the new Barbara Pym to finish.”
“That’s for old ladies.”
“No, it’s not. She’s a major witticist.”
“Oh, great, try fucking that.”
“And then I want to finish a new short story.”
“That typewriter is going to drive the neighbor crazy. You need to get a
PC and join a new age.”
“I’m slowly getting there. I just need time.”
“It’s nearly two, and I’m outta here.”
Jonathan lived in West Hollywood. I was paying a visit.
One day, Jonathan succeeded in pulling me out of the house to attend
a performance of a couple of artists I had never heard of.
“Oh, you’ll see, they’re fabulous, they’re provocateurs. They’re boy-
friends, and one of them at least gets naked.”
“On stage? Live? Do I want to see that?”
Apparently, I did. I followed Jonathan out that day, and he drove us to
the little Cast Theater, where Tim Miller was performing a revealing
monologue show with his then boyfriend, Doug Sadownick. I didn’t think
it was possible for an artist to reveal aspects of his private life in public, end
up naked on stage, and provoke the audience into thunderous applause. I
felt more self-conscious than the artist.
“That’s what you should be doing,” Jonathan told me at the end of the
show, just to rub it in.
“I don’t know about that,” I said. “It works for him, not me.”
Afterward, Jonathan insisted I should meet the two artists/writers, and
he enjoyed my embarrassment in front of them. Both Tim and Doug were
not simply performance artists. They also were sociable people who stuck
around to speak to the audience.
“My friend here wants to be a writer,” he told them. Both Tim and
Doug looked delighted. Doug pulled out a card.
“You should both join us for one of our parties,” Doug said. “Give us a
call. Perhaps you’ll perform for us one day.”
I didn’t call, and I never performed for them. But through the years, I
managed to run into the couple and they continued to encourage me.
Doug stopped me at the gym to give me the address to their home, where
they were holding one of their parties, another one I skipped because I felt
so intimidated by the dynamic queer duo. I feared their audacity and, par-
ticularly, Tim’s nudity as if, through some trick, they would find a way to
get me to reveal myself in public. Even twenty years later, Tim Miller showed up at Arizona State University and wanted to do brunch. I gladly took him to a local eatery. He was wearing shorts, exposing well-exercised dancer’s calves. It was a warm day in March, and I was still relishing what passes for winter in Arizona with a fashionable winter jacket. Two decades had passed, and I couldn’t help but notice his fitness and how comfortable he continues to be in his own body. Tim must have gotten the hint by then that I expressed myself in my own peculiar ways, and that I was a reticent person in contrast to his wonderfully rambunctious one. I hid it well, my personality, like my body itself. I displayed an agreeable nature but never quite my true self to him. It was something Jonathan complained about.

“You live under a strange shadow,” my roommate finally told me one day before one of his forays into the night. “What I don’t get is how calm and normal you appear to be. I know there’s more to you than all that, because I can read it into your short stories. There’s a big Chilean soul waiting to escape from the boundaries of Pinochet’s repression.”

He actually blamed Pinochet for my psychological repressions, and it was as good as any dissection of me at the time. I give him credit still for introducing me to a great performance artist, for helping correct my English, and then for psychoanalyzing me with some degree of accuracy. I wasn’t quite as grateful as I should have been. I made fun of his insatiable need for men to my other friends and moved out complaining about him, missing out on his charm and his ability to get me out into the city. I got a call a few years later from his mother, asking me how she could publish her son’s poems.

“He wrote wonderful poetry,” she said, “and I know that he valued your friendship. He said he enjoyed editing your work. It inspired him to write his own.”

I didn’t even know he had passed away.

“He had a fatal reaction to the medicine,” she explained. He had been diagnosed as HIV positive when I was in graduate school, but he never bothered to reveal it to me. He sensed that I held back, and he did, too.

After my invitation to Orange County, my mother saw glimpses of éxito in me. I had proved that I was not a dilettante walking the streets of L.A. and wasting time in cafés. Some good had come of my efforts, no matter how desolate I felt. I was much too used to being alone—and often, I simply chose this as a form of alternate lifestyle. It wasn’t a done deal that
I would go to graduate school. UCLA had rejected me twice by then, and Nosotros had clearly put my playwriting on hold. It would be a decade before Celebration became seriously interested in any of my plays. It would be a long wait for anything to happen in my writing life, and my private life had turned into another empty promise as well, and I was to blame for it, too.

I remember a strange night in West Hollywood when I couldn’t withstand the solitude that stifled my life like hot air. I needed to get out. Sean was proving himself the best of the roommates by then, a responsible pre-law student who’d eventually attend UC Berkeley and make a mark as a Bay Area lawyer. He was also generous about reading my scripts and providing valuable feedback. Jonathan continued to edit as well, so I had managed to put two roommates to work on my writing. But with Jonathan I had to cope with his unpredictable personality and the sometimes frightful strangers he brought home.

I needed to be on my own that night. I walked to the Melrose district, to a local bar. I had a couple of beers and met a young man from what was then called Yugoslavia. He didn’t want to talk, which was just as well given my bad luck with intellectual chatter, and took me to his apartment around the block. I had sex with a perfect stranger; what might have seemed an average night out for some men in West Hollywood was for me completely and absurdly unknown. I did not enjoy the sex or the small talk afterward. The young man wanted to call a cab for me; I said I didn’t need it. I wanted to get away. Once I walked outside, I realized it was close to three a.m. The streets of this normally noisy, crowded city looked desolate and threatening. A few cars drove by, but otherwise there was no one else around. I started to walk along Melrose Avenue, feeling the dread of being alone in the middle of the city. It was becoming colder and more ominous. A mugging or worse would not have been difficult to execute. I felt threatened, defeated by the city, endangered by the slow, dreaded pace of night.

I found a few coins in the bottom of my pants’ front pocket, and called home. Both Jonathan and Sean were asleep, and the answering machine picked up. I only had two more quarters, good for two more calls. The second time, my roommates again failed to pick up. With great fear, I tried my last quarter, and to my relief, Sean answered. He’d heard the phone ring twice and thought it was a crank call, but this time he had surmised that somebody was calling for serious reasons.
“I need a ride,” I said, trying not to sound too desperate. “It’s kind of scary out here.”

I stood on the corner of Melrose and Fairfax. In front of me was my former high school, from which I had graduated less than a decade before. I was not proud to be on my own, waiting for a ride in the virtual dark of night. If my mother had seen me, I knew her likely refrain: “We didn’t come to the U.S. to so-forth-and-so-forth.” The few minutes between my phone call and Sean’s arrival crept along in excruciating slowness, reminding me that I was alone in front of my alma mater, that I hadn’t done enough to be proud of my life, that I had broken up with the only beautiful young man who had expressed an interest in me because he didn’t read the same books. I had sabotaged our relationship and didn’t have much of anything to show for myself. That was not quite the message I once read on the exit signs of JFK.