Madre and I
Reyes, Guillermo

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I returned from Italy a transformed man, arrayed in a fake Armani sweater and a pair of pseudo-Versace slacks. Streaks of deep auburn highlighted my normally dark brown hair, a “step” zigzagged around the right temple, and thick gel stiffened the rest of it into stringy clumps. UCLA students refused to let go of their cotton T-shirts, sandals, and shorts. I stood out: polished, tanned, rested, and ready. Slickness did me good. A young man I met at the weekly gay student group meeting asked me if I was independently wealthy. I answered that I was independently poor. He thought I was hilarious, believed my line to be wit rather than truth telling. Wit could be enticing, erotic, appealing. I made him smile, and then he agreed to sleep with me, one of the first instances in which I found myself projecting an alluring image of some kind, at least in the United States. Solitude asserted itself quickly, as did the reality that I was still the help’s son. My socioeconomic status hadn’t changed, just the wardrobe. Still, in this period, illusion reigned: I managed to feign a life that Americans confuse for success. Perhaps that’s all success ever was: illusion. I just never knew how to project such a thing until Italians urged me to shine my shoes, and to buy new ones to begin with.

It was 1984, the year of Orwell’s nightmare. Yet I lived more closely connected to the Orwell of Down and Out in Paris and London. I was not literally homeless. My mother would not have allowed that. She was still a force in my life. I slept on her couch and let that be my shelter. I earned minimum wage as a cashier, but I would never go hungry if she could help it. She preferred Italian slickness to grunge. She wanted me to be myself,
but my Self was also a work in progress. The Olympics were coming to Los Angeles. Reagan had lulled us into complacency with his “Morning in America” commercials. Even my liberal mother would end up voting for him. I threw my vote away on a Libertarian candidate. It was a year of prosperity, not necessarily for me, but I was young, thin, and stylishly poor. Confidence made me dream of success, of love affairs, of something that might break the restlessness and eager anticipation of great things to come. My mother beat me to it. The big changes came from her, but so did the steps backward. I witnessed. I participated. I tried my best to learn.

The immigrant life continued as it was before my trip, its limitations unaltered. It was back to basics. My mother woke me up before school and asked me about my plans. My plans? I was wearing the same pajamas I wore at fourteen. I was still in school. She worried that education had become a way of life, subverting and delaying the future. I was an ass about it.

“What about your life?” I asked.

“This isn’t about me,” she said, but I was making her feel the heat. I was a true atrevido, a disrespectful brat who’d been to Italy and thought he was the shit. One good slap across that Chilean low-class face of a roto (the Chilean word for “the poor” but also for someone without manners), and she could have taken care of it. But she was more respectful of me than I was of her. I was supposed to be an adult, and she was trying to talk to me like one.

“You’re in your forties,” I went on. “Soon you’ll be fifty, and you’re still living like this. Carmen’s still your roommate and the two of you don’t do much except work at the same old thing. You’re Hollywood maids for life.”

“I’m not a maid; I’m a household supervisor.”

“Whatever you call it.”

“I came to the U.S. to work, not to study,” she said. “You’ve had all the opportunities; I haven’t. It isn’t fair for you to say these things about me.”

I tried to rein in my offense and attempted to answer her questions without lashing out.

“And I do have plans . . .”

“Such as?”

“I plan to write,” I told her. She turned away with a look of disappointment, even grief. She knew what that meant. She saw the evidence, a grown-up man sleeping on his mother’s couch. She walked away, despondent. It
was not the life she had envisioned for me, or for herself. She worked for a world-class fashion designer as the “household supervisor.” She saw first-hand what true success meant. It didn't look like this, the life I was leading.

I remained optimistic. I thought of writing as something that would free me of my immigrant past, but I had trouble regarding my immigrant reality as the stimulus for the writing. I thought philosophically and read Aristotle. I spent time at the UCLA coffeehouse in Kerckhoff Hall writing notes, profound statements about illusion and reality. My imagination took me far from the Los Angeles of the maintenance people who are my closest kin. I wanted to write treatises on totalitarianism and libertarianism, freedom and the arts, the politics of self-expression, and other topics suitable to someone who sought to perfect the masturbatory art of profundity. Mother had reasons to be worried. But she didn't know how bad it really was. I was not turning out anything of consequence yet. The collected Orwell sat on the lamp table, dog-eared and stained. I was rereading it for clues on the type of work I sought to do. Of what use would those things be to us? If I was sleeping on the couch, it was because I didn’t have a bedroom of my own. How would Orwell get me a bedroom to myself? Not even Virginia Woolf would help provide this, a room where I could write and isolate myself. I chose a coffeehouse of my own. There I found the time, and the crowdedness, needed to isolate myself in a corner surrounded by a noisy, stimulating ambience.

One day it dawned on me that I could prove my cleverness on television and earn some much-needed cash. I filled out the questionnaire for a game show in a sparkling, shiny office inside a skyscraper in Century City: it was *Joker's Wild*, a poor man’s *Jeopardy*. The pace was slower—you didn’t have to accelerate and beat your opponent to press a button. The contestants took turns answering questions. I could do that. Speed intimidated me, and during *Jeopardy* I blurted out answers that often ended up as comedic relief for people in the room. But *Joker’s Wild* accommodated my slower, more thoughtful approach. I knew I could do it. The young assistant welcomed me into a room along other aspirants and wished me good luck. I answered trivia questions within the allotted time, and I was happy to discover I scored in the 90+ percentile range. I was asked to stay for an interview with the producer. My luck had struck, or so I thought. A question about the late Chilean president Salvador Allende clinched the interview as if it had been tailored just for me. The producer walked in with the
intention of weeding out the highest scorers. Some twenty other participants had been asked to stay, people of different ages and backgrounds. I looked young, confident, cocky, the one with the black, polished shoes.

He asked me what I did and what I planned to do in the future.

“I’m a student at UCLA, and I’d like to go to film school,” I said, trying to sound cheerful like a game show contestant who’s already in front of the cameras.

“Oh? Why do you need to go to film school?” he asked. I didn’t realize it was a trick question. “I mean, you could learn to do it independently.”

“I like the learning environment,” I answered, still not realizing what I was stepping into. “And financial aid helps pay for my education.”

That stopped everyone in their tracks. The producer’s assistant looked tense, as if they knew what that meant to their boss. The producer was a relatively young man in his thirties but acted nowhere near cool or hip around me. He responded like a cantankerous teacher in a Dickens tale.

“Oh, you’re a welfare case,” he said.

I smiled. I didn’t know what to say to that.

He added, “You expect the taxpayers to foot the bill.”

“Ah, if you put it that way,” I answered. The rest of the scorers laughed nervously. I tried to laugh as well, managing a strange gurgle of a sound at best.

“OK, next,” he said, and then briefly interviewed everyone else in the room without ever sounding nearly as punishing, as if he exhausted his condescension and spite on me. I waited for him to weed through nineteen more postulants. Then he went into a room, and his various assistants followed him with a servile posture, carrying their clipboards. We waited a few more minutes, staring around nervously at one another. One of his assistants emerged from the conference room and then called my name along with three others. We were the first ones to be eliminated. I was escorted out by a security guard and left out on the street.

What the fuck . . . ?

I asked myself the question a hundred times while waiting for the bus to shuttle me out of Century City. I continued to ask the same thing riding home and the rest of the night as I tried, to no avail, to sleep. I played out the situation over and over again. I didn’t get it. I wouldn’t get it until a few years later when President Reagan announced another round of cuts in student financial aid. People who remember the gentle, kindly grandfather
figure forget that this president cut student aid to the bone (even while students voted for him). Living in the Democratic bubble of Los Angeles, it’s easy to forget people still believe student aid constitutes a waste of taxpayers’ money. I hadn’t realized that some people in so-called liberal Hollywood would think the same. Or perhaps the savvy producer who’s read his demographic studies must have sensed my attitude would turn off viewers who wanted to see reliable, enterprising, Republican-leaning racial minorities on the screen, not welfare queens. I knew I’d blown it with my words. His answer revealed a deep contempt that I eventually blamed on the Republicans. I felt redeemed when, in a frank interview, Benjamin Aaron, the doctor who saved Reagan’s life after his assassination attempt, revealed that he couldn’t have made it through medical school without the financial aid the president was trying to cut. The president had gone into the hospital bleeding, and he’d told the doctors, “I hope you’re all Republicans.” The Democratic-leaning doctor reassured him, “Today, we’re all Republicans, Mr. President.” You’d think the president would have been grateful to us welfare queens after that. I can’t blame the president for my elimination from Joker’s Wild, but I learned to connect the dots. The producer saw a Latino-looking kid who was getting educated at the taxpayers’ expense, and he chose not to put such an offensive entity on national television. I could have used the opportunity to reassure my mother I wouldn’t end up on the streets like Orwell. Anything would have helped at that point to remind her that a liberal arts education was not a ticket to poverty in America. But I was proving that argument wrong.

My mother softened up. She offered to ride the bus if I went ahead and borrowed her new Nissan Stanza to drive to school. I reminded her that if she took the bus, she would have to get off on Sunset and walk up a hill. Women walking up that hill wearing uniforms were invariably maids. She chose to be identified as such for me. That was her first new car, bought as a cooperative venture with her roommate Carmen. She had saved enough to buy off Carmen’s half and then decided to hand it off to me. This is what parents did, apparently, when they prospered. She expected me to jump for joy.

“That’s not necessary,” I said. I didn’t know what was worse, being a brat because you take your mother’s means of transportation or an ingrate because you don’t. But this was about her pride, not mine.

“University students must have a car,” she said.
“We can’t afford a second car,” I reminded her. “We’re not that type of family.”

“You can borrow it every other day.”

“It’s all right; I’ve got a bus pass. It takes me everywhere.”

I insisted and stuck to my principle. My mother was weighing the evidence: in L.A. the bus system transported the elderly, the student, or the help. I qualified as two out of three, and my mother hated that. I didn’t have a license, and I couldn’t afford a car. I took up part-time work as a cashier in a UCLA dining facility. I’m a good cashier, I figured, with an ability to close the register and balance it to the penny, but the young man who slept with me because of an Armani sweater walked in one day and saw me working there. He stopped returning my phone calls. I had not lied to him or anybody else about my financial status, but my clothes, my talk of art and theater, my Italian holiday, and the various indications that I was writing a novel or two and a play and a philosophical notebook had endowed me with a cosmopolitan flair that was illusory. Another piece of wardrobe—the dining facility’s apron, clearly non-Armani—spoiled the effect for him. I wasn’t just the help’s son any longer. I had become the help.

“I’m getting married!”

One evening that spring, my mother surprised me during supper with an announcement of rushed and sudden nuptials. Nothing really surprised me, I thought. I remained cool and calm. Secretly, I was stunned. How did this happen? It was a marriage of convenience, of course, to benefit the groom primarily. Though not a real marriage, the economic calculations made it seem like an actual Hollywood one, which technically and geographically it was. I gained a stepfather. It’s still bizarre that I should call Osvaldo Campos my stepfather. There was affection for him on my part, but it had nothing to do with fatherhood, more with the closeness and intimacy gained from an awkward but inevitable situation, the immigrant need for survival. Osvaldo stood to gain papers, those ever elusive legal documents that millions of immigrants in California lack. Hence, the wedding. A rushed one. Things worked out fairly well until Osvaldo went and got himself viciously murdered.

“Wait, Osvaldo’s already married!” I spoke up.

My mother shook her head. “In Chile, yes, of course, but in the United States . . .”
“That marriage still counts.”
“They won’t find out about it.”
“And his wife?”
“Sandra knows.”
“Well, if everyone’s OK with it, I guess.”
“I’m not asking for your approval; I’m just telling you.”
“Sorry.”
“You called me names only a few months ago . . .”
“Names?”
“You said I was headed for my fifties.”
“But that’s true.”
“It hurt. I’m getting married.”
“I didn’t mean for you . . .”
“No need to talk about it anymore. We need a witness—you and Sandra.”
“I’ll be there.”
“Wear something Italian.”

Osvaldo and his wife Sandra both entered the United States as tourists and then overstayed their visas. Sandra had a brother in the United States, but—while legal himself—he couldn’t apply for permanent legal status for his sister. The best he could do was provide moral support while she and her husband established themselves in L.A. They hadn’t completed their university degrees in Chile; in the United States without papers, they settled on cleaning offices and homes. Osvaldo boasted a more formal education. He’d married Sandra after leaving a Benedictine monastery where he had been apprenticed to become a monk. He gave that up. He surrendered chastity for marriage to the lively, pretty, and outgoing Sandra. Her father was a Jewish merchant who’d been separated from her mother in Chile. There was something exotic, even “dangerous” about Sandra, at least for a man such as Osvaldo, influenced by a celibate, Catholic lifestyle. In Chile, being even half-Jewish apparently still titillated. It was flirting with a perilous Other.

Osvaldo exuded discomfort around independent women, and he let them know it: “Too many mannish women these days, acting tough, losing their appeal.” His marriage to Sandra was hanging by a thread, but he didn’t seem to know it.

I went to visit and watched cable television, another minor luxury I couldn’t afford. The birth of MTV promoted quick bursts of titillation for
those of us with short attention spans. I emulated Madonna’s “Like a Vir-
gin” as she writhed on a gondola in Venice or exulted in Laura Branigan
joining an orgy with masked strangers in “Self-Control.” It was my at-
tempt at sublimated passion left over from my own Catholic upbringing.
Osvaldo berated me: American pop culture created eternal adolescents,
and I was the reigning example of it.

“You’re in your twenties, and you fall for that crap,” he said. “Madonna
on a gondola; give me a break!”

“Touched for the very first time,” I sang back, teasing him, and he
rolled his eyes.

I was a consumer of the filmed musical image, absorbing quick flashes
of spectacle that overloaded the imagination, making me feel overwhelmed,
even dizzy. The camera refused to stand still in the average music video.
My reading, which was once calm and linear, is now as jumpy as my 1980s
imagination, exploding in megabytes of stimulus. Reading is a form of
processing the imagery of language—as if my own thoughts were on a
screen in a music video. The music in my head has not entirely stopped. In
the 1980s, each song evolved into a short film in my head, a minor narra-
tive. Pat Benatar runs away from home as she belts out, “We are young.”
Bruce Springsteen bids us to go “dancing in the dark.” Michael Jackson be-
gins his scary ride into the darkness with “Thriller.” I was enthralled with
the illusion for hours on end until Osvaldo turned off the TV and made
me concentrate.

He wanted to talk. He continued to complain about the assertiveness
of American women. Watching them on television, he lambasted the look
of corporate suits worn by professional women.

“That’s not feminine,” he complained. “Women should look delicate
and beautiful, not hide their appeal.”

“Hey, it’s the modern world,” I told him. “Women aren’t putting up
with your shit.”

But Sandra had, until then. In the United States she had become her
own woman, something other than the missus. “She’s learning that Ameri-
can feminist talk,” he complained. “She doesn’t want to have children,
wants to be equal partners in our business, talks back at me . . .”

Conflict between them—a standard battle of the sexes—had been
brewing for a while when Osvaldo decided he needed to marry for papers. I
didn’t think María would go ahead with it, but she made it clear she would.
I continued to live in my own world of the imagination, and that summer was spent writing odds and ends, bits and pieces of unfinished plays and novels, or watching Olympic coverage and the lively Democratic Convention in which Jesse Jackson quipped the line I remember best: “I would rather have Roosevelt in a wheelchair than Reagan on a horse.” How true, it seemed. How inevitable that a progressive ticket that included a female vice-presidential candidate would defeat Reagan in the fall. The United States seemed more progressive from the blinders of Los Angeles culture than it was. For all my mother’s fears that I was becoming a vagrant, I could point to the promise of youth. A vibrant, scintillating life was moving forward, in theory, and in aspiration. I enjoyed the idea of my mother getting married, too. I liked the circus of it all.

Sandra found another friend to marry her, and she and Osvaldo moved forward equally toward legality. It became a competition of sorts. The moment Sandra obtained legal residence before Osvaldo did, she gained power over him. He so resented the idea of female domination that he must have looked for a woman who appeared vulnerable, with no real prospects for marriage. He found my mother.

My mother’s private life had stalled. Friendships abounded, but private affairs did not. She had left behind sex and passion for a life of self-abnegation. In her thirties, she retreated from any relationships and started to live the life of the spinster even while looking appealing and vivacious. The few men who courted her learned a lesson. She wasn’t interested in men from her own social class. She was an immigrant, her English substandard, but she wasn’t about to date men who shared those deficiencies. “The only choice I might have—if I’m lucky—is a bunch of foreigners,” she said. “Forget that.”

Mother didn’t marry an immigrant for real, but in high pretense. It wasn’t difficult for her to transfer hidden yearnings for a personal life into a phony marriage. There were no intimate feelings involved, just friendship, and a need to help, maybe even a touch of adventure, a feeling of underground intrigue.

Sandra, however, claims that her late husband Osvaldo was sexually ambiguous. “Something was going on in that mind of his,” she said recently. “I was too young and naive to notice. He spoke ill of gay men, but he insisted on living in West Hollywood within walking distance of all the gay clubs. He abhorred talk about sex, and yet he had a strange ear for
picking up sexual noises among the neighbors in our apartment building. He became obsessed with them. He made me go knock on our neighbors’ door and tell them to keep it down because he couldn’t sleep with all that noise. I was naive enough to obey him and go knocking on the neighbors’ door to ask them to quiet down. All that repression he absorbed from the monks stuck with him through our marriage. I suspect sexual repression, whatever his sexual identity was.”

Osvaldo and María—two Chileans with profound issues regarding sexuality and intimacy—had found each other in Los Angeles. After Osvaldo’s cloistered youth in Chile and my mother’s own upbringing by nuns, the two of them made for an ideal asexual couple in a make-believe marriage. It worked somehow, this life thus created, wearing masks like the theatrical people they’d become, taking on roles to substitute for something concrete that was missing in their lives.

The entire arrangement could be summed up as follows: Osvaldo pledged to contribute to her Hollywood rent for a year. This wasn’t a demand of hers, just his way of contributing something. Aside from a marriage certificate, nothing was written on paper. A sloppy informality reigned throughout this negotiation. A minor investigator could have blown the lid off the marriage with a few basic questions, but as things would turn out, the INS didn’t even have rank amateurs to investigate anyone. It was overwhelmed by numbers of people entering the country and then staying. Mother contributed to this growing national dilemma, but she wasn’t trying to make a statement. She was just helping out. That was a simple arrangement between friends, as she saw it. The added bonus was a bit of cash over the course of a year, but even that she would manage to pass up on as well.

Osvaldo and Mother were married by a female Presbyterian pastor in Malibu in the spring of 1984. Religion was the last thing on anyone’s mind. The choice of a female priest struck me as odd, given Osvaldo’s beliefs in strict roles for women. In making the arrangements, Sandra made the choice for Osvaldo randomly out of the phone book. Osvaldo needed his papers and chose not to make a scene over a female pastor. A lively, middle-aged woman, the pastor opened her doors to this motley crew of foreigners. I was one witness, and Sandra—Osvaldo’s actual wife—the other one. Neither my mother nor Osvaldo had practiced for this crucial day. They were dressed appropriately enough, Osvaldo wearing a dark
brown suit and a tie, and Mother a loose, spring-weather dress with patterns of red and white roses. Though the bride was in her forties and the groom in his thirties, they constituted a Hollywood marriage as phony as the rest of them. When the minister bid Osvaldo to kiss the bride, they both froze. They hadn't considered the possibility that they would have to do this. The female minister noticed the awkward pause and saw the face of panic in both newlyweds. Osvaldo made a frightened move toward my mother, and she kissed him lightly on the edge of the lips with a look of embarrassment. The minister gave them a look, tried to smile, but seemed to be thinking through this ceremony—as if she were finally figuring it out. There was something suspicious about this union. The two newlyweds looked especially nervous around each other after the kiss. It was a Hollywood wedding all right, and an immigrant one at that. She wasn't new to this, I gathered. Which one's the illegal, she must have wondered.

“I took out a new driver's license with my husband's last name,” announced María a few weeks later in the apartment she still shared with Carmen. “And I changed the name on my Social Security number as well. I'm now María Campos.”

She sounded proud, as if the marriage were real, as if she'd actually entered a new phase in life.

“When's the honeymoon?” I asked. “I mean, you might as well get yourself a husband with benefits.”

“Oh, I don’t need that anymore,” she said.

“When did it stop for you, in your thirties?”

“It never really started,” she admitted. “My relationship with men has always been sporadic.”

“You've been a saint, and I was the only sin. When was the last time anyway?”

“Last time . . . back in Maryland, it was M——.”

“The black janitor. You're very progressive.”

“I didn't sleep with him because he was black, but because he was married.”

“So they have to be unavailable just like my father.”

“I'm only attracted to what I can't have.”

“Osvaldo's married—I mean in addition to you, so he qualifies. Time to fuck his brains out.”
“No, he and Sandra might break up any day, and I wouldn’t want a man to myself; that’s a lot of responsibility. I want to be a full-time nanny, not a caretaker for grown-up babies.”

“Is that all marriage is? Caretaking?”

“Just about. I can’t be his real wife. I married him because he’s already married, y ya.”

“You’re messed up.”

“No, you’re messed up!”

My translation of Spanish-language conversations with my mother only captures part of the obtuse humor. Did I really say “fuck his brains out”? In Spanish (in Chilean Spanish at that), it sounds a bit more jovial, less explicit: “Ya, po’, acuéstese con su marido!” The word acostarse literally means to lie with someone, but the subtext and my specific intent said something else. Chileans often say outrageous things in a casual, matter-of-fact style. I’ve always had problems translating this intimate family dialogue as a playwright. Characters who should be speaking Spanish—and Chilean Spanish particularly—have to speak in English. As an interpreter, I have to translate the experience for the English-language listener or the reader. It never quite sounds like the original, and I suffer for it. The playwright Joe Orton captured the essence of outrageous conversations among working-class English characters, but he was writing in his native language. I’m not. The immigrant is at a disadvantage when working in an adopted language. This aside is also an attempt to say my entire life has required cultural footnotes to explain both sides of the linguistic divide.

The marriage of María and Osvaldo became our 1980s Ortonesque comedy, a bizarre period in which we began to lead double lives. Orton’s own biography would soon be playing in the Cineplex as Prick Up Your Ears, starring Gary Oldman. It set the tone. The system never caught on with our deception. It was perfectly possible to lose oneself in the United States, adopt a new name, and go unnoticed. Anti-immigration advocates had not yet turned angry. It was still acceptable to be an immigrant—legal or otherwise—if you contributed to the economy and stayed out of people’s way. Americans went on about their business and didn’t notice the sorry lot that made up the rest of us. My mother’s new license listed Osvaldo’s address. There her younger husband theoretically lived with a new wife and his first wife in a bigamous arrangement. My mother stayed with Osvaldo
and Sandra for only a couple of months after she impulsively decided to move away from Carmen. At the same time, Mother decided to bring her niece, Catalina, to the United States, in yet another impulsive act. Catalina’s tourist visa expired in a matter of months, and that meant yet another indocumentada living in the same apartment in West Hollywood.

I had warned my mother about the consequences of bringing her niece into the country at the same time as she was preparing to marry Osvaldo. I had moved out of her apartment and gone to share another one in West Hollywood with a couple of gay friends. One can adjust to family chaos, but my mother’s improvisations at this point had become too dizzying even for me.

“You shouldn’t be bringing your niece to the U.S. at this particular time when you’re trying to make changes in your life—changes to benefit you. This is another mouth to feed, to begin with.”

“I got married, gained a child. It’s a change of life.”

“Let Osvaldo get his papers first, then worry about your niece. Now we’ve got two people without papers, and you’re taking on both.”

“Catalina will study, and I will be helping out my brother back in Chile who can’t afford too many children.”

“Catalina’s not a little girl. She’s fourteen and may not be easily disciplined. Will Carmen adjust to her?”

“Oh, yes, Carmen. We’ll see about that.”

Carmen had been her roommate for ten years. Yet, she was never consulted about the decision. Carmen was opinionated and obstinate, and when she heard about the upcoming arrival of the niece, she did not take to the teenage burden lightly. Carmen may have been an immigrant Chilean, like my mother, but she boasted an upper-class upbringing in Santiago. She didn’t have to put up with this arrangement, having to share a small apartment in Los Angeles with low-class types from Mother’s family. Catalina landed at LAX with the marked barrio slang of a working-class neighborhood in Santiago. It was evident that the two women were not meant to share living space. Catalina proved to be an uncontrollable atrevida, and that’s not the type of crap Carmen would have to put up with.

“So I told Carmen we’ll separate,” Mother told me over the phone.

“All for your niece?”

“We can’t all live together. And it’s time to go our separate ways. Oh, we had a little cry,” she added, repressing tears. “We couldn’t say goodbye.
We’d still live in the same city and see each other from time to time. But I have to take Catalina away from that. I stopped trying to referee between those two. Catalina makes comments about black men, how hot they are, and Carmen comes from a different background, where you don’t say those types of things out loud, and it’s time anyway—time to get away from Carmen. I’m a married woman now.”

María was on the go.

“I’m one step closer,” she announced on another one of my visits. She served a fresh batch of the steamy *pastel de choclo*, the corn-and-meat pie that had become her specialty through the years, and provided insights into her world in between glasses of Chilean cabernet. Catalina and she shared a foldout bed in Osvaldo’s apartment. The arrangement was meant to be temporary. She was saving money and soon they’d have their own apartment. I often think Mother thrived on this type of inconvenience. A crowded, inconvenient place mirrored life back in Santiago, as if she couldn’t be without noise and people coming in and out. She felt desolate alone and yearned for a bigger substitute family than she could ever collect in the United States.

“I quit working for Galanos, too,” she added that day. “I’ll have my own day care center. I’ve started with two children right now.” Two different sets of parents up in Laurel Canyon had agreed to have María care for their two children in their homes, alternating the houses at the parents’ convenience. She was happy among children. She had an ease and a love for them that inspired her to have more of them—not by begetting them, but by assigning herself their caretaker.

“Galanos has been a great boss,” she explained, and caring for his house in the Hills had been an incredible opportunity for nearly six years, but that had to end, too. “He wasn’t going to give me a raise any more. His personal assistant found out I was earning more money than she was, and it offended her deeply. Apparently she told her boss, ‘Your maid earns more than I do!’ When I asked for a raise, it outraged her even more. He couldn’t give me a raise at that point. His assistant would have considered it an insult. Not my fault she went off to college and only got some measly assistant job that paid less than the help. I also called her up and told her I wasn’t a maid. My new title was a ‘key lady.’”

“A ‘key lady’? I thought you were a ‘household manager.’”

“That was a new one—I liked ‘key lady’ better. I took care of his house, I wielded the power, and, yes, I carried the keys. When he was in Italy
doing some fashion show, I was back here in Los Angeles, making sure the workers came in to do repairs, or paint or build, and I supervised things, not just cleaned. I made sure it all ran smoothly. So now that I’m married, I have to move on. I have my lovely niece staying with me, and I have new responsibilities as her godmother. Things are moving forward.”

“But then you have to come down the hill, and deal with a phony marriage, and a niece without papers—that’s so much to take on when you don’t have to.”

“And I have a son who wants to be writer,” she reminded me. “That worries me even more, really.”

“You shouldn’t worry about me,” I said. “I am a writer, whether or not I get paid for it.”

“This lawyer I saw on a talk show, he wrote a best seller, and he was able to do both. He’s rich now.”

“Good for him. Would employment do?”

“I guess, full time preferably.”

“Part time is good when I’m still in school,” I said. When September had rolled around, and a new quarter started at UCLA, I got back my cashier job. I was taking more Italian and French. That seemed exciting to me, even if my mother smelled another delay.

“You know what I mean, real work, something that leads to something.”

“But the choices you make don’t lead to great riches either.”

“I don’t speak English like you do,” she said. “I came to work, not to learn languages. I communicate with my boss, but my sentences don’t have to have perfect grammar, and that’s the type of work I can get. But you have so many options. I’m waiting for you to do something.”

She became a U.S. citizen in 1983, and while this fact made her feel she had made progress, it also paradoxically convinced her she was falling behind. Other friends who had migrated around the same time were buying homes, partnering up, and having children.

“That lady who lived next to us all those years at the Formosa apartment? She was an ‘illegal,’ too! Well, her husband bought her a house. They got to move out. They’ve fixed their papers and have a new baby. Her two grown-up sons are going to USC, and one is talking about marriage . . . oh, I don’t know, they’re just doing so well, I hate them.”

“Well, you’re a married woman now, so there’s no need to envy them.”

“Yes, but they’re really married, they’re a family, and they’re normal in
every aspect, and I don’t live like that, and I don’t know . . . I have to wonder why they have it all, and I live in make-believe. I hope one day you’ll have something closer to the truth.”

I wanted to ask what she had in mind exactly, but I didn’t want to envision something I knew I couldn’t yearn for, a traditional marriage or an idealized version of it. How odd, it seemed, that my mother, who never settled into anything like a conventional life, seemed to think there was something missing in ours. The adventurous choice of migrating to the United States had excited her imagination and led her to break from a more sedate life back in Santiago. Yet, the neighbor had emigrated from Mexico, illegally at that, and found herself married, her papers fixed, her children looking “normal.” Then my mother would turn around, and there I was. There was something missing in her family, and particularly in me. Once in the mid-1980s she was astounded to hear Rock Hudson publicly admit he was dying of AIDS, but she never expressed any particular fear that I would be exposed to it. She saw me as her asexual son. I didn’t make time for sexuality, or companionship, or even for friendship. I thought of weekends as writing time, and that worried her just as much as any extravagant lifestyle. She worried more that I would be alone, and sensed that I wasn’t socially active, let alone sexually. She feared she, as an unmarried woman, had provided a bad example.

“One day you’ll marry and do better than I ever did with that,” she said. I was too busy discussing the plays I was writing, and my plans for graduate school. “I just hope you’ll find what you’re looking for, and I won’t mention it again because I know what it’s like to have parents rub it in your face. My mother worried about me, too, but instead I left the country.”

Marriage to Osvaldo afforded her the satisfaction of being able to talk about a husband at least and to think ahead toward the day when he’d help her buy a home. If she had her own personal needs, she couldn’t bring herself to express them. She never told me she wanted a husband, or even a lover. She could make crude jokes about sex, particularly around other women, such as the one about the Spanish Civil War and the nuns who are disappointed that Franco’s soldiers ravaged the town’s women but didn’t get to them. A sick joke about mass rape. That was my mom and her Chilean friends after a few glasses of wine. But she could never seriously discuss with me any issues of desire. She revealed that she felt woozy, nearly fainted in a screening of Picnic in Santiago. That’s because the actors
William Holden and Kim Novak do a slow bossa nova as they stare at one another with a scandalous look of yearning. The younger sister played by Susan Strasberg nearly throws up, crying that she feels sick. We watched it during the late show in Hollywood some time in the late 1970s. “I was such a young girl myself,” María said. “I felt sick, too, just like Susan Strasberg. I almost fainted. Isn’t that silly now?”

Yes, it was silly even in the 1950s, but she never seemed to speak of desire again. It made her uncomfortable during the rest of her life; that’s apparently why jokes about nuns wanting to be raped struck her as hilarious.

It mattered little that, in Hollywood, we lived in an environment of open sexuality. The disco 1970s, the Hollywood scene, and the neighborhood of Hollywood with its Sunset, Santa Monica, and Hollywood Boulevards and its prostitution, sex shops—these were not places one could easily avoid or ignore. We did just that. My mother and I were both innocents in a sea of decadence. If that made us chaste in the eyes of some, it also created a strange dissonance in our lives. I was able eventually to act out on some sexual needs, but my mother—I believe—expressed none whatsoever for most of her life after her mid-thirties. As a family we had redefined normality. There was something strangely quaint about it all, this strange innocence in the midst of the sexually abundant world around us.

“I’m moving back with Carmen,” she announced no more than six months since she had left. “And Carmen’s all right with that. She needs someone to share the rent, and none of the roommates have worked out.” She hauled her niece back in with her. If the younger woman didn’t get along with the older one, too bad. They’d have to cope with it this time, and she would work to keep them apart.

“I don’t understand,” I complained. “You talk about progress, and then you go back to living with Carmen?”

“Oh, it’s OK,” she said. “Carmen and I are friends.”

“But you said . . .”

“I said a lot of things, I’m sure. We weren’t getting along. We weren’t making any progress at that point.”

“And now?”

“The old rules don’t apply. We have to stick together, pay bills, do what we must to make ends meet, and progress . . . well, I have to make progress my own way. I can’t just leave my friends behind. I have to take
responsibility for my niece, too. I’ll be a role model for Catalina: I’m en-
rolling in community college,” she added.

After she reinstalled herself in her apartment on Formosa and Sunset,
she enrolled in courses that would lead toward certification as a day care
provider.

“Osvaldo says we’ll look into qualifying for a loan for a house eventu-
ally, and I’ll use it as my home day care center. His business is doing well,
after all, and he is legally my husband. See? That works. What about you?”

It was a day for comparisons.

I was rejected by UCLA for graduate school, but it made no sense that
I should have applied to film school. My sample writing was a play, not a
screenplay, and my playwriting professor, Carol Sorgenfrei, let me know
my chances of getting into the MFA program in playwriting would be
good, if I bothered to apply. So, I didn’t apply. I thought film school would
be a greater challenge and allow me into that charmed world of Hollywood
moviemakers, except that the MFA in screenwriting got hundreds of appli-
cations, and I hadn’t even written a screenplay.

“Why don’t you just follow your teacher’s advice? She seems like such a
nice lady.”

“You don’t even know her.”

“I mean, she took time to counsel you, and you’re not even following
her advice.”

“I wanted something else! Film school! Why can’t I do that?”

“Then you’ll need to write a screenplay.”

“I can do that. But anybody can do that.”

“Anybody? You can’t afford to be a snob.”

I had taken one class, written a short screenplay, but it wasn’t particu-
larly effective. I thought of the screenplay as a lower form of expression,
and that my playwriting allowed for a more poetic sensibility. I sought en-
trance to a screenwriting program in which the admissions committee
would recognize my loftier artistic goals. My supposed refinement would
bring greater sophistication to the screenplay form, poisoned by the Holly-
wood mentality that I would expose in graduate school. I was stubborn
ever enough to think I could get into UCLA film school with a sentimental
play called *Flute of the Andes*, with Chileans turned into Peruvians, as a
form of national cover up. It was my way of putting distance between my
background and the characters, creating an alternate family, dramatized, idealized, entirely gracious and winning. Once rejected, I applied the following year with the same play and was again turned down. My stubbornness backfired. My attitude as a fake-Armani-wearing, step-haired, gel-heavy, college-educated, condescending snot of a kid had slapped me in the face just as the producer of the Joker's Wild had for other reasons. I started writing short stories. I completely changed my tune and followed a literary path. This was one reversal too many for my mother.

“You’re all over the place!” María cried over the phone when she heard about what I was doing. “You’re writing plays and short stories, and yet you say you want to write screenplays, but don’t have a sample script to show. You’re avoiding the main problem.”

“I’m not!” I denied the assertion, although I was proving it every day with erratic choices.

“That’s it,” she said, giving up. “Talk to your stepfather, for once, now that you have one. Maybe he’ll give you some advice. You need it; you’re crazy.”

Advice? He was a foreigner, he didn’t understand the university system in the United States, and he worked in maintenance, far from the literary world I thought I needed, or deserved, to inhabit. Anaïs Nin’s world made sense. In her diary, she was living on a houseboat and hosting—having fabulous sex with—Henry Miller. Now that was a grand literary life. This was the first time I remember my mother using the word stepfather. Tu padrastro. I had trouble getting used to it, but I began to suspect this marriage might mean more to her than circumstances called for. In our strangely farcical existence, this marriage could become genuine.

If he never became a de facto father, let alone consummated the marriage, Osvaldo became at least a good friend during this period. Closer to me at least. He became more my friend, I believe, than he was to Mother. He was physically attractive, thin, short, petite, but his sexist beliefs made me wince. I often wondered what might have been. Given his wife’s later suspicions, I wonder what might have happened had he worked through the sexual repression allegedly guiding his life. What if he had “come out”? “An affair with my stepfather?” My youthful imagination invented erotically charged, if irreverent, scenarios, better accommodated in fiction and in
drama. A new rule imposed itself upon my land of propriety: *thou shall not fuck your stepfather*. Osvaldo did develop the protectiveness of a stepfather. He would come to offer me financial help as his fortunes improved.

Osvaldo and Sandra moved into my neighborhood, West Hollywood, and started a maintenance company of their own. Incorporation meant taking on a professional role. They were no longer simple immigrant workers. They were the owners of a business. They put together a brochure of their services, printed business cards, opened up a phone line, placed a listing in the yellow pages, and ran several ads in the free weeklies that were delivered to every home in the neighborhood. As the business began to grow, they needed somebody who spoke—and wrote—English. They turned to me. I was graduating from UCLA with a humanities degree in Italian literature. I had no immediate offers of work. Other kids graduate from college with business contacts, parents eager to place them in entry-level positions with, say, prominent talent agencies. My “contacts” were all in maintenance, not in the film industry. I was not sociable. I did not network. I avoided the idea of soliciting people for anything. When Osvaldo needed help with basic editing in English, he wasn’t shy about asking for help. My first job out of school was translating and then fleshing out Osvaldo’s copy for promotional materials. I added some flair and style, a colorful adjective or two to make “environmentally friendly cleaning materials” sound appealing to a liberal Hollywood crowd of customers. American employers preferred to deal with intermediaries. They were one step removed from the unpleasant task of hiring illegal folks who actually did the cleaning. Osvaldo and Sandra contracted the workers, and the employers dealt only with the owners of the service. The middleman provided all the maintenance to the companies without their managers having to sully their hands with phony papers. Osvaldo’s business thrived. Reagan was president, and the Camposes—one husband, two wives, one stepson—found a form of prosperity in this epoch.

My mother was livid at my involvement. “I didn’t emigrate from Chile for you to be working in maintenance,” she said over dinner. “That’s for immigrants; we’re citizens now. You’re supposed to be educated. You have a bachelor’s degree. You should be doing something else with your life.”

“I’m only writing his promotional copy,” I said. “It’s writing of some kind; I’m getting paid for writing, see? Finally.”

Mother gave me her look of exasperation, perfected over many years of
dealing with me. “You know what I mean!” She added, “And I wouldn't call that writing. Do you understand the importance of this?”

“Do you feel betrayed?”

“It’s not progress.”

“Well, maybe progress is not the right word. He’s paying me, and I don’t think it’s wrong to provide a service.”

“Talk to me when you’ve got something to make me proud.”

“What exactly would make you proud?”

“A full-time job—almost anywhere, as long as it’s legal.”

“But if I took a job with Osvaldo’s company . . .”

“There is no such job! He hires illegals; they do the work. There’s no full-time job with his company.”

“He’ll need a promotions manager.”

“You know what I mean! You know precisely what I mean! You can’t work for Osvaldo’s company, and I don’t want you wasting time even writing his brochures. It’s not real writing; it’s not creative writing. It’s not what you were meant to do in this world, and I am not going to argue with you anymore about this. Just stop doing it; don’t go near him! Find something else to do with your time.”

Osvaldo believed he could get “a better class” of workers, and he offered to take me cleaning. He didn’t always like the people he hired and was under the illusion that he could find people with a more cultured, educated attitude. Customers who never stopped to talk to workers would have the opportunity to converse, even bond with these English-speaking workers. It was a new angle in his attempt to sell.

“English-speaking workers will make the customer feel more at ease. They’ll pay more for the service.”

I had trouble cleaning for myself. I wouldn’t go near a mop, even if Osvaldo offered to pay me well for it. His business began to have problems with employees, often people who were hired without references, and certainly without background checks. One of his workers, a young woman, lifted expensive jewelry from the home of an FBI man. The FBI officer told Osvaldo his worker had twenty-four hours to return the jewels or suffer the consequences. The worker delivered the diamonds to Osvaldo, who returned them with humble apologies. Osvaldo had no choice but to fire her. He called me to tell me what had happened, and asked if I would go with him to clean offices and empty trash cans as an emergency—for this
time only. I turned him down, but my mother heard about it and delivered another harangue.

Living in my own apartment with a couple of friends in West Hollywood, I became a temp for UCLA’s personnel services. Within a couple of months, the Latin American Center, which hired me via the temp services, employed me for good, and I became an official clerk for their publication department. I took orders from universities across the country, including orders for the Hispanic Periodicals Index, and other research materials. It was a better or more “prestigious” job than working for Osvaldo’s cleaning services, though it’s possible I would have earned better money working for him. I had a concerned mother looking out for me, and her sense of immigrant progress did not include her son doing maintenance, let alone the promotional material for it. Working for the university was at least a step away from mops and brooms. This mattered to her deeply.

I continued to write, even finishing my share of “first” novels (I wrote five of them during my undergraduate years), along with countless short stories and plays. I wasn’t submitting much of the work, but a semifinalist letter came from the Sergel Prize for the saga of Peruvians in L.A. called *Flute of the Andes*, the same play that had not impressed the UCLA Film School. This was enough validation to keep me going. In sixteen years, the Sergels would publish my play *Men on the Verge of a His-Panic Breakdown* through their Dramatic Publishing Company.

I wrote endlessly, without understanding the entire process. I felt inspiration and hard labor would get me somewhere, but logorrhea isn’t the same as inspiration, as I discovered. I toyed with Serious Lit concepts, existential scenarios, the anxieties of a young repressed Catholic man growing up in Hollywood in the midst of heathens, among other such contrasts, and writing about sex made me as uncomfortable as the real thing. However, my most gregarious short story, “A Pope, a Mom, and a Peter,” was risqué, and I feared submitting it altogether. As John Paul II drove into Los Angeles waving from the bullet-proof bubble in his Pope-mobile, I conceived of the story of a closeted gay man who has an affair with a Protestant boy the night before the Pope’s arrival. He wakes up with the Protestant boy’s penis stuck inside him. They attend the pope’s welcoming committee dressed as a two-headed altar boy until they can get the erect penis out. It was probably the funniest, bawdiest tale I had written up until then—and I shirked away from publishing it. I read it out loud to friends at a party—mostly gay
men—and my words managed to draw loud, spasmodic guffaws. With my delivery, I discovered a performative skill. I didn’t know that humor was physically forceful, and that it had the ability to lift people from their seats. I no longer felt as short, or as quiet. Armed with the right language, I could have an effect on people. But given the bawdiness of the tale and the satirical angle, I feared my own capacity for sarcasm. My friends found it funny, but I didn’t have the confidence to share it with others. I stashed away the story yet again, reinforcing my highly developed skill for overall repression.

My first one-act play had been produced at UCLA upon my return from Italy. I landed at L.A. airport with a rewritten version of the Cubans on a raft play that I’d developed before leaving. When I went to UCLA to catch up with the theater department, I found a notice posted on a bulletin board by a student director, saying he was eager to read new work for the student one-act series. Two days after I left him my script, he called to tell me he’d chosen to direct my play. I became hooked on the process—of putting on a play with actors, a director, lights, costumes, and sound. That first play, The Sickle and the Hammer, was my attempt to copy, perhaps even outdo, Jean Paul Sartre’s No Exit in portraying a Latin American existentialist world. My main character was a woman, an ex–Communist Party official in Havana who’d had an affair with a married man and who was now leaving Cuba behind for good. On the boat she was stuck with her ex-lover’s wife, who reminds her of her past sins. She thought she was running away by getting on a raft to Florida, but she was really committing suicide for being a ruthless government henchwoman. The boat is actually a ride on a moving, purgatorial land that floats through existence. This bizarre mix of elements created an entertaining dark comedy for the audience, but some people were not amused. One particular UCLA professor, who’d been blacklisted during the McCarthy era, stopped me in the hallway of Melnitz Hall (where the theater department was housed) and told me that my play promoted an anti-Communist view of the world that Ronald Reagan couldn’t have expressed better. I smiled and told him I was sorry if he took it that way; I didn’t mean any harm. But perhaps I did. Surely a satirist seeks to provoke some sort of reaction from people, but I didn’t want to argue with a professor who’s seen his share of persecution. The Cuban boatlift had been on my mind since 1980, when it first began. Reading No Exit had helped me
coalesce two images, the entrapment of people in their respective destinies in hell and under dictatorship. I was fast and loose in my denouncements of dictatorships. My play in 1996, *Chilean Holiday*, which denounced the right-wing Pinochet dictatorship, got me tagged as a “left-wing radical” by a few patrons of Actors’ Theater of Louisville, who filled anonymous feedback forms after the performance. “Why don’t Communists like Reyes write about oppression in Socialist countries?” one of them asked.

At UCLA, another evaluation came from one of the creepier film school students—a young man who attended all the critiques and didn’t seem to have much of a life otherwise. His take on *Sickle/Hammer* addressed the market value of the work: “It was mildly entertaining, but not commercial. Politics, philosophy, homosexuals and Hispanic characters—nothing that’ll make money.” He spoke with a calm, cool demeanor during our one-act forum when we dissected the productions and the performances, as well as the writing. A couple of Reaganite students complimented me for drawing a negative portrait of communism, which made me want to write *Chilean Holiday*, since I didn’t think of myself as partisan so much as “pro-human rights.” I didn’t want partisan people hijacking the play to promote their politics. Yet, being told my work was not commercial seemed like the ultimate form of rejection in a mercantile society such as ours. I had brought together on stage elements of politics, sexuality, and Latin American history that interested me, and already the film people were telling me I needed to learn to entertain without those elements. I am still being told the same thing by people who judge my work: too many ideas, politics that offend both left and right, Hispanic people, and clearly not enough commerce.

That I had stirred some debate among my peers and managed to entertain them made my mother and her friends look at me in another light. María, Carmen, and other friends drove over to UCLA to see *The Sickle and the Hammer*. They didn’t understand all the dialogue, but they heard the applause. I was the promising young writer at last, although my mother continued to harass me about proving it with money. Years before I could do anything with my promise, *The Sickle* helped establish my mother’s support, no matter how tentative and concerned (and even condescending).

My mother decided that she didn’t need Osvaldo’s help with her rent, as had been part of their arrangement. Osvaldo had been saving up to start monthly payments in 1984. My mother said she wasn’t in a rush; he could
take his time. When he finally decided to start paying her to fulfill part of the deal, in early 1985, she decided that a more appropriate beneficiary would be me. Osvaldo surprised me by coming over to my apartment in West Hollywood. I thought he needed help with a translation of another document. He was paying a social call.

“And by the way,” he said, “your mother thinks I should give you this.”

He handed me an envelope with $250 in cash inside.

I was astounded to be holding that much money in my hand.

“From now on, I will deliver my monthly payments to you until next year,” he said, describing the arrangement casually.

“Oh, OK,” I said. What else could I say? I had forgotten the shame of being called a welfare addict by the producer of Joker’s Wild. I was working for UCLA, and I never would be on welfare. Student aid was not welfare, I wanted to shout at the few people who would listen at a time when all government subsidies (except to the wealthiest sectors of society) were under attack.

Over the next year, Osvaldo gave me money owed to my mother to pay part of my own rent. This became my unofficial subsidy as a writer. No government arts grant—which I did not get at that age—could compare to this minor miracle. I had no qualms about accepting it. I just wanted to make sure I put the money to good use, to buy myself time to write. It helped to have a father after all. Now I knew how that thing called fatherhood works. It’s about support and favors, even guidance. The money freed up my time, the most precious thing a writer could ask for.

I continued to work at UCLA, but I negotiated a day off. I would work only four days a week for thirty-two hours. This extra day bought me a much needed respite and a three-day weekend in which I didn’t do much else except write. It was the first break I got in my life as an artist. My mother had made her marriage of convenience work for the benefit of her son. “I never gave you a father,” she once told me. “Osvaldo is the closest thing to it.” Osvaldo seemed to agree about being my benefactor at least. I had the responsibility now of actually becoming a writer.

Osvaldo’s business continued to prosper. It was time to start spending money after years of deprivation. He wasn’t a particularly showy man, and he wasn’t about to buy diamonds and furs for any of his wives. But along with my arts subsidy, he helped my mother qualify for a home loan.
“It looks like I’ll be buying myself a house in the Valley,” announced my mother. She quit working for the designer Galanos and enrolled at Los Angeles Community College to pursue a certificate in child care.

“What do you mean, you’re buying a house? You’re no longer working full time, and now you’ve gone back to school!” I said.

“It’s a house owned by Sandra’s brother in North Hollywood. He’s going to rent it to me first so that I can start my day care center, but after that, I want to buy it. With Carmen’s help, we’ll have two incomes. Osvaldo’s name will help secure the loan, but I’ll pay the mortgage. Part of our arrangement.”

“You’re the one who told me to stay away from him.”

“I meant from working for him. He had no business trying to offer you a job.”

“But you have no qualms about using his name to qualify for a loan.”

“And why should I? He’s technically my husband. And Sandra’s leaving him.”

“Is she really?”

I shouldn’t have been surprised. Constant phone calls from Sandra kept me abreast of their struggles. Sandra had enrolled in a computer course at a private college where she’d been working on a business degree. She invited Osvaldo to a get-together of the students, where they clashed over Osvaldo’s anxiety disorder around strangers.

“He didn’t want to talk to anybody,” said Sandra. “He broke out in a sweat. He just couldn’t handle being around my new friends. He didn’t know anybody there, and words wouldn’t come out. His English deteriorated, and he was suddenly shy. Since when is he shy?”

I hadn’t imagined Osvaldo at a loss for words, but I understood the dilemma of certain immigrants. Loud and rambunctious in their native language, in English they will crawl in embarrassment into their little shell, often unable to speak at all. I had experienced a similar phenomenon in my summer alone in Paris when I was taking French lessons, and it took two months to form coherent sentences in French. I would withdraw from conversation, even run back to the tiny apartment I had sublet. There is a certain panic when words fail, and I was able to understand what had happened to the big shot, Osvaldo, at a party in which Sandra gathered with her friends and conducted herself with great skill. Sandra spoke English with an
accent, but nonetheless nobody stopped her from expressing herself. The party was one more sign that the time had come to leave Osvaldo and strike out on her own. Maybe she’d figured to leave him to his new wife, my mother, except nobody seriously thought those two would actually get together as husband and wife.

In spring 1985 Osvaldo and Mother received the letter giving them an appointment at the downtown L.A. offices of the INS for their final interview.

“This is it!” Mother called. “The final step—I need to look young and sexy! I’m going shopping.”

I stood outside Osvaldo’s West Hollywood apartment on San Vicente Boulevard, leaning over his old Chevy, waiting for my mother to emerge. Osvaldo came to join me to wait for his wife to finish her final touches of makeup. There was some small talk about future plans. I spoke about grad school, in spite of two rejections in a row to film school, and Osvaldo looked amazed. How much more education do you need? he seemed to ask. It had taken so long to finish up as an undergrad; now I was thinking of applying for yet another degree, this time in playwriting. He looked supportive, but skeptical.

“You have that American drive, of always wanting more.”

“Well, you’re not doing so badly now; you obviously got it, too.”

“Another degree may not be the answer for you, though.”

“No, but it’s precious time to practice what you really want to do. And time is precious, isn’t it? You ever thought you’d be in your mid-thirties married to some middle-aged woman and deceiving the INS just to stay in a materialist country making more and more money?”

“True, it wasn’t that long ago, I was in a monastery thinking I would practice celibacy the rest of my life and devote myself to nourishing the spirit. So, anyway, let’s get this over with.”

“How much time does your mother need?” he added.

“She’s almost fifteen years older than you. You need her to look convincing.”

“I could have been a monk by now.”

“Not as much fun, I’m sure,” I said.

“Instead, I sell maintenance and I have a fake marriage because I can’t get papers any other way. There’s something unholy about our lives. It’s about money, and making it, and not much else.”
“Well, you need papers; you’ll figure out the spiritual shit later.”

“If I ever get the time to read my old books again, St. Thomas of Aquinas, St. Augustine, I might be able to recapture what I had once. I spend the day shuttling illegal immigrants around.”

“We all make choices,” I said. “And staying in the U.S. is better than going back to a dictatorship you hate.”

“True, Reagan’s an asshole, but not a dictator. I have made a choice. I’m not complaining about living in the U.S., just that at one time, I thought . . . well, I believed celibacy would be the answer. To what? I’ll never know.”

María emerged from her hiding place wearing a flattering purple dress, her decent legs exposed slightly above her knees.

“Wow!” marveled Osvaldo. “Hot legs!”

High heels lifted her up to her husband’s height and rejuvenated her look. She wore make-up, a rare thing, and her face radiated luminescence and vigor. Next to the rather boyish Osvaldo, who looked youthful, thin, and pretty in his own right, she stood as the sensual, slightly older woman. They made a handsome couple, highly convincing as the real thing. There was no reason why a straight man wouldn’t have made moves on his lawfully wedded wife then and there. They drove off like honeymooners, Mother waving back at me as if she were heading for a Mexican resort.

“There she goes, Foxy Lady,” I thought. Obviously, the folks at the INS did, too. In spite of a fifteen-year gap, the couple looked great together. There was no point asking serious questions. Their papers were immediately approved. The interview was over. Hollywood illusion worked.

The letter came from the Admissions Office of UC San Diego. I was one of two students accepted into their MFA playwriting program.

“Hey, your mother told me!” Osvaldo called a few days later. “We have to go out and celebrate!” Osvaldo had met a young woman from El Salvador. She was moving in. The man now had two wives and a live-in girlfriend. Sandra and he hadn’t finalized their divorce papers, but how exactly did that work? Would a record of the second marriage show up? How would the Chilean marriage be dissolved? Would the state ignore his marriage to my mother? Apparently, it did. They were living apart, and Osvaldo was moving in with a new young woman. The arrangements
had become routine, hardly news for us. The only papers I needed were from admissions. “How should we celebrate?” he insisted. “You tell me.”

“I don’t know. You’ve done enough,” I said. The monthly payments had stopped. I no longer needed them. But one year had been helpful enough and a boost to my confidence. I had written enough new plays for one of them to get me accepted into graduate school. This was the earlier version of a play that became in the 1990s *The Seductions of Johnny Diego*, to be developed at UC San Diego and then later in the Mark Taper Forum New Plays Festival. It wasn’t a masterpiece, but it showed early signs of raw wit with its emulation of Joe Orton in a Latino, Mexican American world. Grad school, I hoped, would help me concentrate exclusively on my writing, and that’s all I wanted at that point.

Osvaldo bought a pickup truck, a red tanklike creature that intimidated its way down the street like a snarling bull. He drove to my apartment to show it off.

“Get in, let me give you a ride,” he said as he pulled up outside my building. “We really need to have a drink, not only because of your acceptance to grad school, but because of . . . everything.”

“Everything!” I said. “That’s impressive.”

I wasn’t impressed by cars. I still didn’t drive. In Los Angeles, I walked or took the bus. Osvaldo’s former spiritual values had turned, big time, into family values—home, business, a gas-guzzling pickup truck, and a girlfriend and wives galore.

“It’s too big,” I told him, but for some people, there was no such thing when it came to cars and trucks, and Osvaldo was becoming this type of American. Bigger, better, mightier. I enjoyed the height and the elevation of the truck and could look down onto the smaller cars beneath. The driver felt empowered and proud. Osvaldo was eager to go somewhere and celebrate. I suggested the reliable Café Figaro, still my favorite West Hollywood hangout, for a bite and a cappuccino. He agreed; it was his treat. He was in a joyous mood.

“Without your mother, I wouldn’t have made it this far,” he said. “Without you either.”

“Oh, please,” I said, getting grumpy about this, even cynical. “You would have found somebody else to marry you for papers.”

“I wanted it to be your mother,” he said. “She’s a pretty lady who deserves better. I’m not sure why she never married for real, but that’s how it
goes sometimes. I really wanted to help her get her home loan. She told me she wanted you to have a home, something she could never give you on her own. And to give you, of course, a father, too.”

“She actually said that, that she wanted to give me a father?”

“She talks a lot about you. Face it; you are her whole reason for living.”

“Ah, well, I wish she’d find herself another reason because I’m getting a little tired of being somebody’s sole reason for living. It comes with strings attached. I’m not allowed to fail, for instance.”

“You’re not failing.”

“I’m almost twenty-six and a part-time clerk. Mother has seen me as a failure for a long time. Grad school may not fix that. She knows that it’s more education. She doesn’t trust that. She knows it’s not what Americans would call success, and more education may well be a delay tactic from confronting the market place of ideas.”

“Just write popular movies. Why can’t you do that?”

“I don’t know. I end up writing about history, politics, Latinos.”

“Boring. Write about detectives, and car chases and smash-ups. You know, stupid movies that make money. Why can’t you do that?”

“I bet I could, but it’s not in my genes.”

A UCLA classmate of mine, Shane Black, had recently written a chase thriller called Lethal Weapon, filmed and released with Mel Gibson. I had quietly and shyly admired Shane from a distance as a promising, handsome actor (about as handsome as Gibson himself), but he found his calling in life with a humorous take on the chase thriller. I’ve been asked so many times (not just by my stepfather but by any concerned friends) why I couldn’t follow that lead. I wondered if it was in the genes, the urge to tell that type of rambunctiously loud story with conviction, with manly guts. I knew “manliness” had something to do with it, and, again, the lack of it in me was one more fault in my literary makeup. I had no convincing language for sissiness and feared the ability to express it on paper except through highly indirect means. I couldn’t share or explain this to Osvaldo, or anybody else. I did not discuss my personal life, notwithstanding the fact that I had trouble getting one to begin with. Whatever went into my writing was an observation of other people’s lives; I had little interest in delving into my own. Shane had found a commercial venue for expressing something that apparently masculine men felt, a need to express their hormones through rage, guns, adventure, and lethality. I couldn’t explode on the page.
“Your mother is worried about you—and I hope I have been able to help somehow.”
“Uh, sure, you’ve been helpful.”
“She loves you. She wants you to do better, and she feels she hasn’t done enough for you. That’s why she wants you to have a father.”
“We survived without one, and my mother’s always been an independent woman. We didn’t need a father.”
“Everybody needs a father.”
“Maybe, but guess what? You’re not my father.”
This wasn’t about him, he made clear. He insisted my mother was trying to constantly move us in a direction toward progress—or an illusion of it. She wanted me to enjoy the blessings of home and fatherhood; Osvaldo was part of that new mission. He knew precisely what she was up to and even embraced it as noble.
“She always talks about her regrets, about how not giving you a father helped make you so . . .”
“So different?” We never talked about sexuality, his or mine, but the subtext was clear: fatherlessness equals homosexuality for a young man. The pop analysts on television still repeated that old mantra.
“Well, as if there were something important lacking in your life,” he finally said, avoiding the real topic. “When she suggested I should turn the money I owed her over to you, it made sense. You’ve never had a father give you money, but now you do.”
“My actual father—Guillermo Reyes—gave me his name,” I said, lest we forget that my late father had never denied his paternity. “He also kept up child support until we left for the U.S.”
“I didn’t mean anything against your father.”
“I just want to make sure my real father doesn’t get pushed over in this equation.” Not that I had thought much recently about my actual father, but I felt the need to fend off this intrusive stepdad.
“But I’m the one who’s taking responsibility now,” he claimed, and this seemed like too much of an impertinence.
“But it’s not real!” I reprimanded him. “It’s not a real marriage. You’re not my actual stepfather; it’s all make-believe. It’s my mother’s way of creating a family she could never quite give me for real.”
“Don’t be an asshole. It isn’t easy for a single mother to marry. We men abandon women. We always end up with younger ones. We don’t like
them aging even when we get old ourselves. And single women with kids—they have trouble remarrying, I read somewhere.”

“I don’t believe this,” I told him, amazed. It just didn’t sound like the old Osvaldo I’d gotten to know, the one whose political views once annoyed me. “You’re sounding like a feminist. I’m just not used to that.”

“I’m clearly not a feminist, but I think I understand a little better what women have been through, especially the immigrant ones. Most women that age have enough trouble getting married, but when they can’t speak English well, and everything begins to sag . . . well, you know how it goes. I have tried at least to show my appreciation and gratefulness to your mother for helping me by helping you.”

“OK, that’s fine, that’ll do,” I said, embarrassed, my eyes buried in the foam of the cappuccino. My mind was cluttered by so many things—the future, the aspiration to write, the need to get away to grad school, to leave these people behind. How pathetic they all seemed. To me, this was a phony marriage, and a phony Hollywood lifestyle. We had failed to make a real life for ourselves in the United States. Our lives had become an arrangement. I didn’t think of it as a triumph. I thanked Osvaldo for coffee and desserts. One thing at a time: the real gratefulness that I felt would have to be expressed somehow much later, after his brutal death.

“Well, time to go,” I said cutting things short. I could have stayed longer, talked about other things, but I was impatient, as if I needed to get on with my life then and there. I was bothered by him and my mother and all the immigrants in Los Angeles hedging their bets on something like a marriage of convenience.

“I’ll drive you home,” he said, resigned to my brattishness, as I behaved like a teenage stepson he was impelled to care for. He dropped me off in front of my apartment, and I barely waved goodbye. I’d never see him again.

The confrontations with my cousin escalated. My mother managed to arrange an abortion after her first pregnancy, but after that she refused to fly back to Chile and ran away from home. She was a strange presence that first Thanksgiving of my graduate school years when she arrived at my mother’s apartment while we were eating dinner with Carmen’s family. My mother made Catalina stay at the door, and once she walked back inside, prepared a paper plate with turkey, mashed potatoes, yam, and cranberry
María’s Wedding

sauce and then stepped out to hand it over. Dressed in a black dress with high heels and frizzy hair, Catalina looked like a woman on her way to a cocktail party rather than the seventeen-year-old ingénue that I still remembered. She smiled and waved back through the window at the rest of us with a sincerity I found askew. She was living on her own with a boyfriend we didn’t know, and although she had come asking for food, she was capable of smiling as if she were leading the life she had chosen in high spirit. It was sad that she could walk away with this carefree quality about her, carrying a paper plate covered with aluminum foil, pretending nothing was wrong with that picture.

“I only brought her to the United States to study,” María said that night to Carmen’s sisters, Carmen, and myself in the afterglow of the Thanksgiving binge. We drank coffee and tried to eat pumpkin pie despite being satiated. “But she didn’t want to live around too many old ladies.”

“And we’re supposed to be the old ladies?” asked Carmen. “Who does she think she is? Es una atrevida. No digo yo?”

“Young people want excitement,” Mother went on. “But she didn’t know how to get it out of school . . .”

“She got it after school obviously!” said Carmen.

“She’s young; she chose the wrong company.”

“She got pregnant!”

“I know that! And there I am, a Catholic woman who has to pay for her abortion, but I figured I was to blame for bringing her here, so what else was I supposed to do?”

“Have her deported.”

“I tried.” My mother revealed that she had gone to the INS to consult about her niece. She was hoping they would deport her, since she had failed to put her on a plane back to Santiago. “They said they can’t be chasing after runaways. Can you imagine that? I bring them a tip about an illegal immigrant, and they can’t do anything about it. In fact, they asked me about my papers. I told them I was a U.S. citizen. In this stupid world, they wanted to deport me, a hard-working taxpayer, instead of the troublemaker.”

I began a short play, “Deporting Perla,” in which a woman tries to get her niece Perla deported, but the INS agent falls in love with the niece and has the aunt deported instead. I never finished it, but I was slowly beginning to get the point that our strange lives were worthy of interpretation.
“I’m responsible,” my mother continued. “I didn’t realize some young people don’t really want to study even when we try to make it possible for them to do so. I assumed everyone was like my son here.”

The women turned to stare at me. That angelic smile on my face hid the strange alienation I felt. Sometimes you do have to run away, but I interpreted that as a need to rebel against one’s elders in a symbolic way. It’s a rite of passage to grow up and assert one’s own independence, but it’s also disastrous if it’s all about frustration and the venting of rage, and you don’t have the skills to back them up. My severing ties started with a need to go to UCLA and then to UC San Diego as a graduate student. I didn’t hold that need against my mother. She had encouraged it. But that type of thinking also made me seem so conventional and “straight,” part of the equation against which Catalina rebelled. I was the cousin who studied, read books, behaved properly, and was ultimately the bore. I didn’t envy my cousin’s fate. She eventually broke all ties, not only with us but also with her family in Chile. She gave birth to two children whom she abandoned on my mother’s doorstep. My mother drove those children to their father and left them with him. Catalina’s actions became an unsolved mystery for us. Her family in Chile has never heard from her. My mother did not understand this type of failure.

I went into a new stage as a playwright grappling with the need to interpret, and then “translate” for an American audience, an immigrant experience they otherwise didn’t witness through television, film, or theater. It seemed like a good mission, but it came with its own struggle. Anglo Americans aren’t always compelled to enter into our world; they see the immigrant as someone who adapts himself or herself into their world. Unlike my UCLA classmate Shane Black, I didn’t know how to interpret this reality with a car chase and massive weapons. My experience had been defined by the feminine, by women struggling for survival in a foreign country. I went back to San Diego that Sunday after Thanksgiving with the understanding that I would make my experience somehow accessible. I had some ideas, but it would take years to do anything with them.

I graduated from UC San Diego with a degree in playwriting in 1990. I had lost track of my arts patron, my stepfather, who had helped buy my mother’s house. In three years, I had spoken on the phone with him barely a couple of times, but another trip to Europe, a summer internship in San
Francisco, a heavy load of course work, and a tendency on my part to limit extended visits to my mother’s home prevented me from seeing him. Then Mother called from Los Angeles.

“Osvaldo is missing,” María said.

On the night of September 14, 1990, his girlfriend, the Salvadoran young woman whom I hadn’t met, waited for Osvaldo at the apartment she co-habited with him. She had received a phone call from him as he was about to leave one of the office buildings that he and his workers cleaned, not too far from where he lived. Half an hour went by, forty minutes, an hour. She fell asleep on the couch and woke up past midnight. There was no sign of Osvaldo. She decided to give it more time and woke up with the light of dawn. He hadn’t come home that night.

She called up the people she knew, such as Sandra and Sandra’s brother. They called the police.

“They say he’s missing,” my mother told me. “He probably took off on a trip to show off his money,” she added. My mother was trying to find the humor in the situation, so certain that it would end with a funny anecdote, some last-minute adventure, a flight to Mazatlan, beaches, girls, another girlfriend perhaps, a need to get away from the current one. You know, Osvaldo and the ladies. “Se hace el interesado—he’s making himself seem so important.” A nervous laugh accompanied the statement. That Osvaldo, such a clown. “He’ll show up a week later with hickies on his neck.”

A week later his body was found inside a trash can in an office building. He had been severely beaten, his head bashed in. His pickup truck was gone. A search through credit card records revealed a charge for gas at a station in Arizona. The Arizona police arrested the group of teenagers driving his truck.

The sordid details of what happened came from Sandra, who heard it from the police. But the police got their story from the killers, a suspect source. No one could tell the victim’s side of the story. Osvaldo allegedly picked up a teenage girl on some Hollywood corner and drove to a parking lot to have sex with her. Two male teenagers followed and pulled him out of the car before he touched the girl. They attacked him with baseball bats. The girl was their accomplice. The three of them absconded with the truck and drove out of state.

The Osvaldo I knew had almost become a Benedictine monk and wasn’t in the habit of picking up teenage prostitutes. Yet I’m not sure any
of us questioned the police report. We accepted the alleged facts and decided not to discuss what, if anything, they meant. We believed the story and found it too embarrassing to discuss. The Osvaldo I knew was sexually repressed and despondent about prostitutes, gays, and “loose” women. Perhaps because of that, he may have crossed a line to taste his share of temptation, to be a “john.” Without the facts, I don’t believe what the police told the family. I don’t believe the young killers who took his life, and I don’t consider them reliable witnesses to Osvaldo’s final moments in life. If there’s a secret life, we’re all entitled to one, as I see it. But having to hear it from those who killed him . . . that’s not my idea of proper closure. I fear he never got one.

“Don’t come for the funeral,” said my mother over the phone. “I’m staying away.”

“Now what?” I asked. “Why can’t I go?”

“The INS will deport me!” she said.

“Where did you get that?”

“I talked to the father of these children I care for. He’s a lawyer. He said marrying somebody for papers like Osvaldo did is a federal offense. They could deport me!”

“Mother, you’re a U.S. citizen; they can’t deport you.”

“They could revoke my citizenship or they could send me to jail.”

“Mother, you’re not being rational.”

“Stay in San Diego. I’m not going to the funeral. We can’t be involved with Osvaldo any longer; it’s dangerous.”

Mother implored me to stay away, and so I did. I regret it now. It was a safe choice, but the wrong one. Sandra was still his first wife, and the only valid one. She had been a partner in the business, and she claimed the property. The new girlfriend might have been entitled to a share of it, but my mother didn’t feel the need to get involved. Two wives and a girlfriend—who knows how the law would have judged that? As long as people left alone her house in North Hollywood, still partly in Osvaldo’s name, that’s all Mother was concerned with. Sandra took his ashes to Chile, where they were delivered to his mother.

The panic over a phony marriage prevented me from paying my respects. I didn’t find out about my actual father’s death because the family in Chile either didn’t want to contact me or didn’t know how. Again, I missed the opportunity to mourn a father—or a father figure, my first “arts
supporter,” whether he realized it or not. Mother and I had achieved the American Dream through a phony arrangement, and we’d managed to create some sort of family unit out of it. I shared more time with Osvaldo than I did with my real father. For theatrical people such as myself, the illusion worked. I mourn him now.

A Memory: Closing Time, Last Chance for Romance on the Border

The millennium draws near.

“Only a few more hours and all the computers will stop,” my ebullient, adventurous ex-roommate Manuel cries out. He’s kidding around. He doesn’t believe the millennial hysteria about the malfunctioning of computers, provoking a shutdown of the world’s infrastructure. He makes plans to party instead. He has invited me to spend New Year’s Eve in San Diego, where he’s doing a postdoc in ethnomusicology at my alma mater, UC San Diego. A few months later, Manuel will leave for India to join a Buddhist monastery where he’ll embrace vegetarianism and celibacy. Meanwhile, I made the drive from Phoenix to San Diego in a quick five hours. We’ll cross the border into Mexico to celebrate the dawning of the new millennium in a Tijuana gay nightclub.

“I’m the one who should be joining a chastity cult,” I tell him when I hear about his plans for abstinence in the Himalayans. But he won’t have me tease him about his future plans. He’s interested in meditation, in a life away from the temptations of the flesh, but only after the new millennium.

“Well, I believe in debauchery,” I say, “that is, if you can get it. So let’s get it in Tijuana before the Y2K strikes, or before closing time at least.”

“Agreed, let’s go.”

Manuel drives to San Ysidro and leaves his car on the U.S. side of the border to avoid paying for Mexican insurance. We walk from the parking lot into the gated, fortified border through a turnstile. Not far from the border awaits el Extasis, the rambunctious nightclub teeming with Mexican men who aren’t shy about befriending a stranger. I welcome a smile, but I’m not used to it. In bars and nightclubs in Los Angeles or San Diego, I’ve always sensed more hostility from gay men than anything resembling flirtation. I affect a cool facade. I take on the air of the single bachelor out on the town, but it’s not a convincing act. I live on a defensive mode, influenced by an
anxiety disorder that tells me my act's not working. I blame aspects of myself such as my immigrant background. In the United States I’m still a foreigner. If that was ever exotic and hot, it’s now belittled. The anti-immigrant rallies have made us suspect. Even legal immigrants were bashed in the California hysteria of the 1990s. In Arizona that issue has become even more contentious, and it surely must affect the dating prospects of someone like me. If that’s not the issue, is my personality the problem?

“Relax,” says Manuel.

“Oh, I’m relaxed. Don’t I look it?”

“No. Have a drink.”

In Tijuana, men talk to me. I’m ever more defensive: what on earth do they want? My wallet? My passport and social security card? But it usually turns out the young man in question just wants to talk, perhaps flirt, and dance. I am surprised by the friendliness of Mexican men. Lights flare, men dance on the floor to a techno-disco beat that pounds at my eardrums, and liquor makes the experience visceral and tactile, open to the senses. I am dancing with a young Mexican man, maybe even more than one. The experience is exotic, strange, and utterly foreign to me.

That night, a man of about forty approaches me, and says, “My friend wants to meet you.”

“Huh?” I have trouble talking all of a sudden. This is where my suspicions begin; what friend? Is he sure he means me? Is there a mistake? I turn around to look for the person he really meant to talk to. No, he insists, he is talking to me. “My friend, over there.”

He points him out on the dance floor, a short young man, dark, surprisingly handsome with a vivid smile. Why would he want to meet me? I’m not convinced this is on the up and up. Who is this older man? A pimp, trying to sell me one of his boys? How long will it be before he asks for money? The young man, Armando, approaches. He’s not as young as he looks at a distance, perhaps mid-twenties, which is a relief. He smiles, but looks mature and stable. Nothing boyish or giggly about him. He works at a travel agency. He’s short, comes up to my shoulders (I’m 5’6’’), and he is friendly, with a touch of diffidence about him, no arrogance in sight. Armando sounds genuine, surprisingly real, without the ulterior motives I had imagined.

“I saw you come in earlier, and I waited . . . your friend didn’t seem like a lover. He went dancing with someone else. That’s when I asked my friend to go talk to you.”
“Why your friend and not you directly?”
“Oh, I’m not good at that. It worked, didn’t it?”
“Yes, it did.”

I’m delighted to hear him admit shyness, but my sense of survival is keen. I’m still suspicious. I’ve seen Hold Back the Dawn; I know how it works. In this 1940s film, Charles Boyer plays a French man stuck in Tijuana who is desperate to enter the United States. He seeks a lonely American teacher, played by the unassuming, naive Olivia de Havilland. He feigns interest in her, motivated by the need to find an American wife to get U.S. papers. By the end of the film, to the delight of war-time moviegoers, they fall in love, and the lonesome teacher—at first suspicious of the man’s ulterior motives—finally has a claim on genuine romance. The movie, for all its charms, reminds me to be cautious.

We begin kissing on a couch. I haven’t kissed anyone in three years. I haven’t had “real” sex in about as many years as well. The first years of my appointment as a professor of theater at Arizona State University have been spent mostly on accomplishing steps toward tenure—production and publication. I’ve been good at it. I’ve been less proficient as a lover. Well, I admit, there was that one encounter in the dark room in Mexico City, but I don’t remember any kissing. It seems to matter to me that what counts as a love life should include lips and tongue. Partners who want access to genitals need to work for it—well, I’m not always consistent with the policy, but the ideal reigns in my imagination.

Armando’s skin is dark and smooth, and his lips are like a magnet. They cling to me. He stops and feels compelled to tell me the oddest of compliments: “I like men who are whiter than I am.”

“What? Qué dices?”

It dawns on me that in Mexico, I am a light-skinned man. In the United States, I am part of a “nonwhite minority.” I was also brought up to think of myself as white by my mother’s Spanish half of my family, while my father’s darker side expelled me altogether for being illegitimate, so I never had a claim on mestizo consciousness, let alone Indian identity. But now I live in the United States, and white Americans define “whiteness” very differently than Latin Americans do. What you see you don’t get from me—I am apparently a white person trapped in the body of a mestizo, but white Americans don’t know it, and it took this young Mexican for me to remember what I am, depending on the borders I have crossed in any given day. I am white
for now, at least to him. In Mexico, plenty of darker people such as Armand o also live out the internalized racism that makes them admire whiteness, and they say so explicitly. He would not be the only Mexican man to ever say that to me, but that was the first time I heard it, and it made an impression.

I don’t question the motives. I take what I can get. To somebody out there, I will, for once, be considered “appealing” or “attractive,” never mind the reasons. This had never happened before, that all these issues should crystallize in one night in the arms of a young man as handsome as Armando, who thought of himself as “too dark” and, therefore, “not as attractive.” Finally, my ethnicity works in my favor. I have found the heart of the borderland that so many poets have tried to define for themselves like Gloria Anzaldúa, who wrote about the bleeding wound of *la frontera*. Some of us are smack in the middle of it, our hearts exposed to its perilous divides. White enough for Mexicans, not white enough for Americans.

“Why do you say that?” I asked, not meaning to question or interrogate him. He’s not ready to say more.

“It’s true . . . eres güero. You’re white.”

I embrace him and kiss him again, and hope he won’t take it back. I know that once I walk back through the border turnstile, I return to being “non-white.” I am *el güero* for this night, and don’t anybody tell me otherwise. What’s next? Being called *el gringo*? It could come to that.

Prince’s song “1999” comes on.

“This is it,” I tell him. “It’s the only chance we’ll get in this lifetime to bid farewell to a millennium and welcome a new one with Prince’s tune.”

“Ah, that’s what it’s about,” he said. He had grown up listening to the song, and as with most English-language hits on the radio, he simply absorbed it for its rhythm. “Now it makes sense.”

After the dance, we sit down again, and I find the words to counter his.

“You are dark, and you are beautiful,” I say. I sound awkward, but I’m glad I didn’t say, “You are beautiful anyway.” I almost did. He looks at me skeptically as if he has rarely, if ever, heard beauty and darkness together in the same sentence. What can I do to convince him of his own appeal when cultural standards in Latin America conspire against him? Indigenous blood darkens his olive skin, which feels smooth to the touch. I am enthralled by it, and the only way to prove it is to act upon it, with more kissing and groping.
Hours go by like this. It’s nearly four a.m., quite early into the New Year and a new life. Gore will be elected president the following November, I project ahead, and the new millennium promises great new beginnings for us all as a country and for me as a lover.

Manuel wants to drive back to San Diego. Nightclubs close somewhere between five and six a.m. in Tijuana. He wants to avoid the rush back to the border. The teenagers who cross over to Mexico in order to legally party in nightclubs will create a traffic jam that will have us waiting till dawn. I explain the situation to Armando.

“I’m sorry we have to go, but I will drive back all the way from Arizona to see you, I promise,” I say. “You’re the best thing that’s happened to me lately. I have to start the year right.”

“The best thing?”

“Yes, yes, the very best.”

He looks skeptical but gives me his number on a piece of paper.

“I try not to fall in love with those who live al otro lado,” he says. “But you never know; I might take a chance on you.”

Love? He’s already talking about falling in love? I’m the one who started it after all, with the boundless enthusiasm I’ve shown through the course of the night, and with my offer to drive across the desert to see him, but my mind has begun its usual inclinations toward suspicions. Who is Armando, and why is he talking about love if he isn’t part of a conspiracy to kidnap American professors, preferably short wimpy ones, and turn them into some sort of money-making scheme in, say, the illicit trafficking of organs? Perhaps I will never return to Tijuana, I tell myself. Gay men do not talk about love—not often enough to me—so there’s got to be something wrong with this picture.

Manuel and I make it across the border before sunrise. I am celebrating the new era, crooning “Let’s Get Loud,” in which Jennifer Lopez sings a duet with her future husband, Marc Anthony. I am enthralled by the possibility of romance, by the sudden outbreak of it. How will I bring Armando to the United States?

“You think I could smuggle him in?” I ask.

“You’re drunk.”

“I am not,” I say. “Come on, three beers?”

“You’ll sleep it off,” he says.
But I wasn’t so sure.

I call Armando from Phoenix for the next two months. I miss you, says Armando. He sends me cards; “for my love,” they say. How can he use that type of language: *para mi amor*? Based on a few measly hours of kissing? I want to believe it, but I don’t. I gather my friends Trino and Daniel in Phoenix. They’ve seen me stumble with men and make a fool of myself many times before. But this time, they think it’s great, if it’s real and genuine, and they urge me to go for it, to drive across the desert, then across the border, and see if it’s real. But my doubts continue. The man who introduced us—I still insist—could be the head of some crime ring, and he uses those boys to attract romantic, easily deluded fools like me from *el otro lado*. They will take my car and my wallet, perhaps a kidney or two. It’s a carefully concocted plot. Trino looks at me like he’s heard all the scary stories about Mexico and still doesn’t believe that people living in the United States, with one of the highest murder rates in the world, still find Mexico scary. As a Mexican-born immigrant himself, he resents it. Is this what I think of Mexico and of Mexicans? he asks. Is this what I think of a young man who took a liking to me and made me feel special? I’ve heard all the stories, I tell him, feeling guilty and embarrassed to have brought it up. Trino tells me to stop thinking like a gringo.

“I’m not thinking like a gringo, but like a spinster;” I say. Like that’s any better. My friends shake their heads. They find me lacking in something. Some people are naive when they travel abroad; others are so suspicious that they forgo all sense of spontaneity. I show perplexing elements of both: naive enough to fall in love, but suspicious of the lover’s intent. Dare to take a risk is the general consensus.

During spring break, in March 2000, I drive myself with my faltering 1995 Toyota Tercel all the way to San Diego, where Manuel has left the keys to his apartment with a friend. Armando has renewed his day permit that allows him to cross the border legally. I drive for more than five hours to the San Ysidro border crossing, where I nearly collide with the San Diego light rail train. If the conductor hadn’t chimed his bell, I would have ploughed into it. A complete stranger saves me from a serious crash, and then I go obliviously on my way to the pick-up/drop-off spot outside the customs office. Armando awaits me with a smile on his face and an overnight bag. He gets in, and I hug him. I kiss him lightly on the cheek, and a cop shines his lights at us. We’re not allowed to dawdle at this stop. “Let’s get
out of here,' I say, pressing on the pedal. I drive him off to the city of San Diego, where I have reservations at a Spanish restaurant. I treat Armando to tapas and sangria, and then afterward, I take him to Manuel’s apartment.

An entire night and then another day of lovemaking ensue. We wake up early, around nine a.m., and go out to breakfast, but then we come back and continue our bedroom antics for the rest of the day until it’s time to go out to dinner. We go back to Hillcrest for a quick meal and then later watch All about My Mother at the Hillcrest Cineplex. A Spanish film by Almodóvar, the film’s tragic consequences for its HIV-positive characters don’t register immediately. I am only in the right mood to absorb the film’s sharp, often dark humor. I pick up Almodóvar’s references to All about Eve and A Streetcar Named Desire, and I know that the queer director and I are on the same page. The mother and son are an inseparable team, watching All about Eve on television, debating why the literal translation Todo Sobre Eva sounds awkward in Spanish (“Me suena muy raro”), and then the two go watch Streetcar at a local theater, where the young writer will meet his tragic fate trying to chase after the play’s notorious star, Huma, through the rain for an autograph when a car ploughs him down. The mother is left to wonder what might have been, for her and her son, product of a liaison with a transgender man who has since impregnated a nun (Penelope Cruz), who has contracted HIV from him. At the end, after Cecilia Roth’s character has learned to live with her various losses in the film, Huma recites lines from Blood Wedding in which she enacts the stern Spanish matriarch’s lament for her dead son. It’s a touching reminder of how theater mirrors these people’s tragic yet strangely humorous lives and transforms them into art.

I am holding Armando’s hand, and the warmth permeates my senses. Armando’s presence keeps me grounded in my reality, within my flesh, sweaty and altered, and yet vibrant and alive. I respond to his breathing and to the feel of his skin. The film’s message will hit me later when I have to bid farewell to him and drive back across that long, hot desert.

I don’t know this young man well. For an entire day we’ve spent most of our time in bed, clinging to one another until we get to the part of sexual consummation, but our bodies respond better to the intimacy and indeed the romance of kissing. I know he’s Mexican. I know he’s lived in Tijuana most of his life and works as a travel agent, except he can rarely afford to travel, earning enough to get by. His mother seems accepting, but they don’t talk about it, his sexual identity, the unspoken element of their lives. He
lived once with his godfather, who took him in when he needed to be away from home and explore his identity. The two men became lovers. The relationship with this older man, his father’s age, made him comfortable enough with his sexuality to take off and be on his own for a while. But he couldn’t afford independence for long.

He’s back to living with his mother, but still, he’s romantically on his own now, working at his travel agency and hoping to find somebody with whom to share his life. He’s a young man with a plan. I’m barely fourteen years older than he, and still young enough not to fall into that trap of the older man/younger man syndrome. I am not looking to maintain anybody. I am not interested in a “kept boy.” But I still quiz him over dinner; why did he make that remark about liking men who are white or light-skinned like me? Because it’s true, he says, he’s not attracted to darker men like himself. Now I’ve made him feel uncomfortable, and he even sounds defensive. I want to analyze, but he clearly doesn’t. He doesn’t think of himself as self-hating. That’s just his preference: whiter men and slightly older. That’s me. So why question it?

I ask him something else: “What about this new movement toward gay marriage?”

“What about it?” he wants to know.

“Would you marry a man?”

“I don’t know; under the right circumstances, maybe,” he says.

“If we lived in the same country, you and I, and if the circumstances were right, would you marry me?” It’s a bold question on my part. But he got started with all that love stuff only a few hours after we met.

He stops, thinks, and answers, “Yes, I probably would.”

If the border lends itself to impulsive heterosexual lovers who go to Tijuana to marry overnight, it simply won’t do the same for gay lovers to do the same, not tonight, not that year. A marriage certificate, recognized by the federal government, would have made Armando eligible to cross the border as my spouse, like Charles Boyer in Hold Back the Dawn. Without this motive, I begin to conclude, calmly now, that Armando can’t be trying to set me up. Maybe he actually really does like me, but why? I am not convinced he finds me attractive, as I find my looks deficient. I am mesmerized by the experience, perplexed at the strangeness of this affair, not altogether believing it. I’ve also read Henry James’s Washington Square. The film version, The Heiress, also stars Olivia de Havilland fending off a young man, a handsome
Montgomery Clift, conniving to marry her in order to inherit her father's wealth. But, in my case, there is no inheritance for the illegitimate son of a teacher in Santiago. My professorship is middle class at best, and I am not tenured yet. He has made the wrong move, if indeed it was a “move.” Even my credit card is maxed out, and I pay for our dinner with cash. Surely, he’s noticed.

It’s time to head back to the border. We’ve been at it for over twenty-four hours without much sleep, packing a lifetime of sensation into one day of sensual delight. I drive him back to Tijuana and leave the car on the border again. We are together at the Extasis, this time as a couple. I meet his friends, young men also seeking their share of romance and passion. They seem quite proud of Armando, with his weekend fling with a professor from Arizona.

It’s past midnight, closer to one a.m., and I am feeling the panic. I need to return to the United States. I can’t bring Armando with me, to live with me, to share my life. Armando walks me back to the border and asks when I will return. “I don’t know,” I say. “But soon, certainly during the summer.” Perhaps I could rent a place in San Diego and spend most of my summer crossing back and forth to see him. “That would be nice,” he says. “That would be great. I love you,” he adds. He kisses me in the middle of the bridge that leads back toward the crossing point. It’s a public kiss, and I am not afraid, for once.

I let go of him and walk back. I am distraught. I feel the loss already. The border divides us, keeps him al otro lado. I live across it, in my little world made up of dramatic fantasy. There’s no cure for this divide, nothing that will bring us together. I walk forward through a line without wanting to move toward the guards. I am not thinking clearly. Ahead of me, young, blond boys who’ve been out in Tijuana drinking the night away are laughing at their lame jokes, calling each other “dude,” and making a ruckus. They are going through a turnstile, and nobody’s even checking their papers. The border patrolmen are letting them cross because they “look American.” I am right behind them. Then I go ahead against my better judgment and cross the turnstile, and suddenly—as if an alarm for a border crosser has gone off—a patrolman screams loudly, startling me. “Hey! Where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

He and two other beefy, tall men run over to control me. The white blond boys have just gone through the same turnstile without being
checked, but I’m the one who gets stopped, in a rude, even violent manner. They put their hands on my shoulders to constrain me.

“I’ve got papers!” I tell him in perfect English, but I realize “papers” is the wrong word. I’m a citizen; I don’t need “papers,” but I don’t have time to say this.

“Well, you get back in line! You hear me?” he screams.

I’m about to speak up, say something, ask why the white boys were allowed in without their papers being checked. But in the United States you don’t ask such questions. The border patrolman who shouted at me himself looked like a “Latino,” so the issue went further than racism. He himself had bought that the blond boys “looked American” and didn’t descend upon them with the ferociousness and anger that he heaped upon me. I got back in line and pulled out my U.S. passport. I had to prove my Americanness to these people, and I’m perfectly fine with that, if all crossers were required to do so. After September 11th, that type of episode—I would assume—would be less likely. Still, I knew a young Chilean woman living without papers in L.A. who went regularly to Tijuana to party with her friends. She was a blonde from a Chilean white family and spoke unaccented American English. Nobody required her to show her papers, as if Americans could never put two and two together: that you could be white and “look American” and still be an “illegal alien.” By now, I’ve learned that the real lesson of being an American who “doesn’t look American” and living on the border is to learn to run for your life—to be savvy and aware at all times when you cross a crucial turnstile about how you’ll be perceived. Our borderland bleeds, and for a frustrated lover like me, it bled all over my private life that winter of my discontent.

I never saw Armando again. My summer plans went in a completely different direction. By then, he wasn’t accepting my phone calls. Earlier, during a long phone tryst, he promised to come see me, and he called me once saying he wanted to take a flight from San Diego and visit me in Phoenix. I told him I’d love to have him visit, that I would even pay for the plane fare, which he said wasn’t necessary, but I insisted. When I revealed that my mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer, he expressed sincere regrets and then made a sweetly comic statement: “My poor mother-in-law is sick!” When I called him back to make the arrangements for his visit, he didn’t return my call.