Madre and I
Reyes, Guillermo

Published by University of Wisconsin Press

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

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

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=22503

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
I was sleeping in a house of dying people.

It was August 31, 2001. Mother had been diagnosed with cancer and sent to Hopewell House, a hospice in Portland, Oregon, where people deemed terminal live out their final days. The hospice included a guest room upstairs for relatives or loved ones. One room out of twenty or so. I was the occupant for that night and the only one officially not dying.

Breast cancer had spread undetected until tumors grew on her spinal cord, sending paralyzing waves of pain up and down her back. She collapsed one morning in January. I got a call in my office at Arizona State University. One of her employers found her stretched out on the floor of her apartment, afraid to move. She had left a note for me, apologizing that she wasn’t leaving me money. “Your mother is irresponsible,” she had scribbled on a piece of paper after her collapse. “I cried last night, not because I’m going to die, since after all I’m going to rest. I cry because I won’t be seeing you again.” It was a nightmarish week. Carmen had collapsed a few days before with appendicitis, and then Mother succumbed to the pain wreaking havoc on her body. In her note she adds, “I’m alone. Carmen’s in the hospital, although she’s recovering.” The two women were in separate rooms in the same hospital, and their friends got an opportunity to see both on one visit. My mother found that funny and cracked a joke or two about it. “I chose the wrong week to get cancer,” she said. There she goes again, I thought, referencing Ronald Reagan in his assassination attempt comment, “I forgot to duck.”
Carmen recovered. Mother was sent to radiation and chemotherapy treatments. Rounds of chemo prolonged the unpleasantness. Since the doctors had told her she was terminal, she decided not to continue with either radiation or chemo. Pain medication sedated her. She was given a few months to live.

Eight months later, under medication, her condition stabilized. The chemo had worn off, and she began to thrive again. A period of adjustment, and unexpected calm, ensued. My mother, a Chilean immigrant, sixty-four, was expected to die any day. The doctors kept her at the idyllic Hopewell House, a home ensconced in a wooded area of the urban jungle, a place of tall pine trees, bird houses populated by yellow-headed blackbirds, squirrels in trees, and kind-hearted caretakers—a place in which one might choose to die. The pleasant ambiance allowed my mother to feel alive. One goes to a hospice to die, not to live in relative comfort. More than six months had passed since she’d arrived at Hopewell, and she wasn’t dead yet. The authorities expelled her from the hospice. The director announced the decision with a caring smile on her face. María was welcome to come back any day when she was truly dying. I had to find a dying woman another place to live. I flew to Portland with this singularly bizarre task in mind. I got in late that evening, barely had a chance to say good night to my mother, who’d gone to bed, and went upstairs to the hospice guest room to rest up for a long day of house searching.

It felt soothing up there on the second floor of the hospice right above all those dying people, with the peacefulness of both the cradle and the grave. The weather was perfect: cool, breezy, Oregonian comfort. But at night, the demons are easily unleashed from the feverish imagination of a writer who thinks about civilization and death (Herbert Marcuse paired eros with civilization, but I for some reason—not well trained in eros perhaps—seemed to study the cataclysmic end of it instead). In a deep sleep, my mind drew up an infernal, foggy world with a noisy, violent scenario: The nation was under attack from the air. The aliens had captured Senators Hillary Clinton and Nancy Reagan (she had been elected to the Senate in my dream; Hillary’s election didn’t need my playwright’s enhancement). The invaders used pterodactyls dropping bombs from the sky. A state of emergency was declared. I was huddled in a basement with other strangers, listening to news on the radio. The pterodactyls kept coming, pummeling the city with their bombs in the shape of prehistoric boulders.
The wave of kidnappings meant that our legislators were disappearing one by one, leaving us without a system of government. What was to be done? We, the citizens, were trapped in our hiding places. The radio broadcasts came to a sudden halt, but the bombing continued. There were no signs that anyone would come to our rescue. An epic struggle, the war of the worlds, had begun.

I woke up suddenly. My eyes opened to the peaceful night in Portland, a window overlooking the woods, cool air—continuing to provide comfort and pleasure in the midst of summer. It wasn’t just a dream, I thought. Every civilization becomes threatened sooner or later. Pterodactyls themselves became extinct. So why were they being used by this new enemy? Who was the enemy? An attack from the sky that leaves us without a functioning form of government—that seemed paranoid. It couldn’t happen here. I went back to sleep.

In the morning, I did a reality check: I was a Chilean native. Planes had roared onto the capital of Santiago on September 11, 1973. Planes bombed the presidential palace, and the military shut down Congress and all other aspects of government. Every Chilean I met, even abroad, associated the day with attacks from the sky. At every anniversary, some riot would break out, as demonstrators clashed with police, and even U.S. papers—usually oblivious to Latin America—would cover it as long as the riot proved deadly or bloody enough. For weeks, it had been in the back of my mind; another anniversary of September 11th approached, and I wondered what type of riot would break out this time. I had no idea that somewhere in Washington, counter-terrorism czar Richard Clarke had raised the alarm to President Bush, Condoleezza Rice, General Colin Powell, and the rest of the administration, many times that same summer, that a terrorist attack was imminent. Given my annual reminder of the Chilean September 11, I still insist I dreamed the catastrophe that awaited us in the United States within a few weeks.

An anecdote after 9/11 struck me as the type of dark humor I often end up incorporating into my work and my life: the U.S. Coast Guard hired Hollywood screenwriters to conjure up scenarios of future terrorist attacks. Imaginative people were asked to project ahead and figure out how a terrorist might plan new attacks. I felt left out. I am imaginative and possess enough historical baggage with the Chilean past to know how twisted minds work. I, like the bizarre pre-cogs of Steven Spielberg’s *The Minority*
Report (based on the short story by Philip K. Dick) felt convinced that I was developing an ability to dream this stuff. That’s my Minority Report, another Latino dramatist getting left out of a national debate.

I can smile now at the strange coincidences of history that coalesced that summer to make me dream of the future by way of the Chilean past, but that summer while my mother was dying, my dreams felt strangely real to me. My heart was beating fast when I woke up inside the hospice in Portland.

“There is no emergency,” I told myself that morning. “It’s a peaceful day in Portland where people are quietly dying. My mother is alive and relatively healthy; that’s why she’s being kicked out, the best possible reason.”

I had to get up and prepare my mother for her house search. She could move well, and walk slowly, holding on to my arm. The rich cocktail of medicine, which included marijuana pills, kept her stable, almost fully functional. She wished to drive, but I insisted she shouldn’t. Her pain had faded. The tumors had responded to radiation therapy. She had defied diagnosis. The doctors had made a turnaround and determined she would live much longer. The same doctors had told us she only had a couple of months to live. So we packed up her things back in April and held a garage sale. Her belongings were mostly gone. She no longer had a place to call home. The hospice gave me addresses of rest homes or foster homes where she could live.

“I could die tomorrow, and all this effort would be for nothing,” she said, cheerfully.

“But you could also live another three years, so it’s best to plan and think ahead.”

“My son is practical.”

“And my mother is so alert and cheerful. No wonder they’re kicking you out of the hospice. You’re supposed to be dying.”

“I am, but the marijuana keeps me going.”

“A real life saver, that marijuana.”

“Maybe it’s the Paxil.”

“Whatever they’re giving you, it’s a winning combination. It keeps you happy!”

“I’ve never smiled so much in my life.”

“That’s nice: a smiling, dope head of a mother.”
The first home brought out the worst in her. Too much cheerfulness was no longer an issue. Set in the northwestern end of Portland, it was a home for financially challenged people. My mother didn’t want to think of herself that way. She didn’t like the “look” of the people living there. “Too many poor people,” she complained.

“It’s well kept,” I told her to at least give it a positive spin. My attempt to sound too cheerful didn’t sit well with her.

“You just want to dump me off anywhere and take the first plane back home.”

This hit a nerve. It was partially true. I wanted to get this over with, but I didn’t want to dump her anywhere. The first place we went to see didn’t strike me as being altogether bad. She called it a dump. I didn’t know what we could afford, and although Oregon along with Medicare would pay for most of it, it wasn’t clear to me what “most” of it meant.

Two more homes; no better choices. One place looked like a madhouse, with lonely cubicles for rooms where older people were kept and heavy doors to lock them in for the night. In another home nuns lived among the elderly and the dying. Mother did not have pleasant memories of the nuns who cared for her during childhood. She still didn’t trust them. We went back to the hospice marveling at the safety, the cleanliness, and orderliness of it. Why couldn’t I stay there? she whined. Hopewell House was a tranquil, attractive place for anyone. I had to remind her it was meant for the dying, not the living. We called it a night.

I lay awake for hours. I did not want to get back to dreams of alien invasions, or historical or futuristic cataclysms of any kind. I thought about taking my mother to the movies the next day. That put me in the right mood. She had been asking to do so, but first we needed the time to look for homes. The movies were the perfect escape. That helped me sleep. The next day, however, we chose Pearl Harbor. The historical, romantic epic had opened earlier that year on Memorial Day and was now running in the cheaper, neighborhood theaters over in the Hawthorne District. Ben Affleck and Josh Harnett fight for the love of Kate Beckinsale. That was the selling point. The Japanese invasion only crowded up my mind with more images of assault.

“Why were they asleep? Why weren’t they prepared?” asked my mother. I didn’t have an easy answer. The United States was officially neutral, and
the isolationist movement fought to keep the country out of the war. The Japanese staged a surprise attack, but conspiracy theorists still believe the Roosevelt administration tempted the Japanese in order to justify U.S. involvement. I couldn’t whisper all this into her ear.

“I’ll explain later,” I said, but I never did. My only aim that afternoon was escape, not further immersion into the nightmare of the past. September 11th was only a few weeks away then.

Mother and I found a place in northern Portland by the airport, essentially a senior living center. It was modeled after a modern hotel, with all sorts of amenities, a pool, a sauna, and, more importantly, medical care on the premises. A nurse would check on her once a day. It was an attractive place without the stigma of poverty as in the previous home we’d seen, and the manager reassured me that Mother’s social security check would be considered payment and that Medicare would pay the rest of the bills. Mother was satisfied. No poor people, except for herself. I felt relieved. She was at ease and seemed eager to live again with a semblance of normality. Her friend Carmen even got her—of all things—a part-time job. Carmen would pick her up, and the two would go care for children at a local church’s day care center. This new period of relative calm, when her life would get a second wind of hope and physical energy, lasted less than a month.

Only a few weeks after my strangest of dreams, the attack came, like a bad plot twist on the twenty-eighth anniversary of the Chilean military coup. The pterodactyls, like the stars, aligned to deliver the blow. The fossilized minds of religious fanatics led them to assault us with the equipment of the modern transportation system—and used it with sophisticated precision. The World Trade Center, symbol of our modern economy, was pulverized, along with one of the wings in the Pentagon. Other targets included the White House and the Capitol where, as in my dream, Hillary Clinton (but not Nancy Reagan) would be found. If successful, the enemy would have wiped out our legislature.

That morning, after hearing the news, I rang my mother from Phoenix to check up on her, but first I called one of the nurses at the rest home to see if she could curtail my mother’s television viewing for that day. I knew she watched television night and day. It was too late.

“They’re having a revolution in New York,” she said, trying to form some sort of coherent thought after her morning medicine. “I’m scared.”
“Mother, nothing’s happening in Portland. You’re safe there,” I told her. Her Chilean friends rushed in to be with her. I was in Phoenix, thinking ahead to my next flight to Portland. All flights had been cancelled, and there was no word yet when the airports would re-open.

In the Phoenix area a group of friends decided to hold a town meeting at a well-connected friend’s house, a woman who usually opened her home for fundraisers and receptions. It was as if we were holding a wake for the death of our complacence. The Sunday after the attack we talked about our fears and anxieties.

I seemed to be the least surprised. Since January I had been living under the shadow of death, my time organized around trips to Portland to check up on my mother’s condition and to witness a process of gradual deterioration for myself. Some of the members in the gathering speculated about future terrorist attacks. Would they start bombing airports or train stations? What about supermarkets and malls? Would we live from now on as the people of Israel did, with the expectation of a domestic attack any day? An older man showed up who harked back to Pearl Harbor. “Been there, done that,” he said, and warned us we should expect war.

A month later, Bush invaded Afghanistan. Anthrax was selectively sent to news media outlets such as the *National Enquirer* and also to postal workers, some of whom died after exposure to the substance. Our world was under siege. Attack of the pterodactyls. It was no longer a dream.

Three weeks later, a nurse found my mother in her room babbling incoherently. She had soiled herself and then lost consciousness. She was rushed to the hospital. The doctors declared her dying once again. I was summoned back to Portland to put Mother’s affairs in order and to arrange funerary services. She was given a few days to live and ended up back in the same hospice—and the same bed—she had previously vacated. This time, they told me over the phone, it was for real.

My mother lived one more year at the hospice, breaking records for longevity in a place where you’re not supposed to be doing well. The nurses at Hopewell became friends and adopted her as a resident straggler. She began to get up again. Friends came by to take her out to lunch or to the mall. She returned at the end of the day to sleep. The hospice had become a hotel. But her roommates kept dying. Nearly a dozen of them must have expired in the bed across from hers during her time there. She thrived on that strange capacity to observe the dying.
“I sometimes go up to them and hold their hand,” she told me over the phone. “That way somebody’s there at the exact moment when they take their last breath. Usually, their family comes in too late for that. I don’t want them to be alone when that happens. I certainly don’t want to be alone when it happens to me.”

She lost the fear of death, she claimed, and the feeling transferred to me. Hers had become a rather peaceful, gradual deterioration. The Oregon nurses gave her pot in small doses. Perhaps medicinal marijuana allows for hope—and hallucinations of eternity. No wonder the Supreme Court banned it. Conservatives suspect that someone, somewhere, even while dying, is having fun. I didn’t dare borrow any of her medicine, but I admired the process. I could do this, I told myself. You might say I look forward to it. If I had to choose my death, that’s the one.

In summer 2002 Mother was expelled from the hospice for the second time and went to live in a smaller foster home where a Brazilian woman took care of elderly and disabled people with that warm, Maria von Trapp–like sweetness my mother could appreciate.

Mother showed timing, even precision, in the last moments of her life. She called me from Portland that week and asked me when I’d be coming to visit. I reminded her that I was flying out that Saturday, July 20, 2002. “I think I can hold on till then,” she said, sounding slower than ever, her voice beginning to break up, but still making sense. “I want somebody to hold my hand.”

That night, she went into a semi-permanent deep sleep. The caretaker told me she woke up only once a night during those last couple of days to ask for some tea. Then, she’d go back to dreaming and talking in her sleep.

I arrived that Saturday afternoon to find my mother snoring soundly and deeply. I had nothing to do but sit by her side. A television set played reruns of *Happy Days* and *Laverne and Shirley*, but time had come to a standstill. I held her hand. She would stir and would mutter something about her mother. “Mama, mama . . .” Those were the only words that were comprehensible, the rest sounded like some profound statement in the language of the dying.

A friend of hers arrived, a Chilean woman, an immigrant, conversant in Spanish only. She relieved me, asking me to take a break. I’ll hold her hand for you, she said. Mother would know the difference, I insisted. She looked at me with understanding. Then, she’ll wait for you, the friend said.
On Sunday, I repeated the routine. I arrived by noon, held her hand for a couple of hours as I watched more television. The Brazilian woman entered that afternoon and told me, “She woke up briefly last night. It was past midnight. I told her you were here in Portland. She smiled and seemed to understand. She knows you’re here.”

A couple of hours passed, and out of boredom I left her again to a couple of her friends who had arrived to keep a watch on her. I went off to Starbucks, to read a book, *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression* by Andrew Solomon, a personal account of the author’s own struggles with the disease. I usually chose books like this, with an eye out for challenges and for hints on how someone else had faced up to his fears. A book about nuclear terrorism was forthcoming from Amazon.com. I’d rather know about it now than be surprised later. That’s how the Cassandra syndrome works. It nourishes my strange fears and inspires dreams. But something told me it was time to leave Starbucks and go back to the foster home.

When I returned, her friends had left. Mother was alone. Her breathing was deeper, a hoarse, belabored snore. I held her hand while watching television. I had begun to doze off when I heard a strange breath, a quick intake of air, then a sudden, final release. Everything stopped. I drew up to her, felt her pulse, put my hand beneath her nose to test for breathing. Nothing. I had witnessed her last moments. Mother said she’d wait for me. She had even waited for my return from Starbucks. Then she was gone, on the early evening of July 21, 2002. *Happy Days* continued in full, living canned laughter, and the Fonz gave the thumbs up.

A procession of cars made its way to a local Catholic parish. Mother’s friends included a good segment of the Chilean community of Portland. Dozens of people who formed a small but tight-knit group of immigrants, a subgroup of the Latin American diaspora, paid respect. The undertaker had dressed Mother in a purple business suit, colored and recast her hair into a fashionable combed-over look, applied blush to her cheeks, and transformed her into a dead woman who wouldn’t frighten the living. The radiance of her look struck me as fetishistic and bizarre. I did not care for the ghoulish spectacle of viewing the dead, but her Chilean friends insisted that’s how we do things back in Chile. I can at least cherish memories of a pretty woman, her arms crossed, a red rose on her hands, at rest at last.
When the time came, I delivered a memory of my mother in English and in Spanish. The words have been incorporated into this memoir: Mother arrives in the United States on her own, we drive across the country to the West Coast, she survives a potential drowning; Mother loves the children she cares for, she moves to Portland, she begins her battle against cancer. It’s the end of an American journey, an overall peaceful transformation into eternity. I did not find the tears in me to cry publicly. Mother said she herself rarely did. She only wept at movies: the end of *Casablanca*, or Captain von Trapp’s transformation into a singing trouper in *The Sound of Music*, or the death of Jack in *Titanic*. In order to cry, I need a narrative as well. Perhaps by finally writing down a narrative of my mother’s immigration to the United States, I might find the strength in me to cry. But don’t count on it. I cry at the movies, but rarely outside of them. It’s one of the strange habits I inherited.

I was now on my own in the United States. In 1980 Mother saved herself from drowning because she feared I would be left alone in the United States as a teenager, but that life seemed so distant. She knew she would be leaving behind a grown-up man, in a functional capacity, not entirely at home in his own body, but nonetheless employed and fully creative, as his talents would attest. In the 1980s Mother feared that nebulous state of mind I lived in, the young writer making notes in a journal while avoiding the effort of settling down into a full-time job and a traditional marriage. She finally told me in her usual blunt tone, half-kidding and yet serious in intent, “I hope when I die, you will at least have a job.”

I realized that day in July in Portland that I had fulfilled that hope, somewhat, if barely. I had finished six years of full-time work as a professor. Up until then, my résumé had included a hodgepodge of part-time gigs mostly because I had been a student and a freelance writer, dramatist, and, at times, performer. My way of life had alarmed her and made her fear for my future. I also wasn’t married or in a relationship, and she found that to be her own personal defeat.

“I did the same,” she once told me in the 1990s, as if ending all future prospects for romance and marriage, for herself and for me. “I can’t be self-righteous. It’s in the blood. We don’t marry.”

“Well, never say never,” I said.

“Prove me wrong then, but I say . . . there’s something about us.”

“And what would that be? A curse?”
I flew to Santiago, Chile, in May 2003. The U.S. invasion of Iraq was winding down in what was called “a quick victory.” President Bush declared “Mission Accomplished.” I laid Mother’s ashes to rest in the Pacific. My mother’s relatives gathered in the small port of San Antonio, where tourists rent sailing boats and go off into the ocean. As we were about to board, a rig stationed not far from the port became unmoored and dropped into the ocean, creating a wave that splattered over us like some school kid playing a joke. It lent the ceremony an odd, even comic uncertainty as winds picked up and the water below created a rocking motion. Mother’s ashes were compressed in a sturdy plastic bag, which I couldn’t open, not even with my teeth. A friend pulled out a Swiss knife and helped me tear it. The airport authorities had opened the container to check for explosives, but they found only the remains of a modest Chilean woman who’d gone to work in the United States as a nanny for professional American moms. The bag gave way, and as I spread the ashes into the waters of the Pacific, the wind kept shaking the boat, blowing ashes into my eyes. It was messy and undignified. Family members prayed, and some wept. My aunt Gladys accompanied me along with Aunt Chata and her daughter, who had long ago made up with my mother over their unfortunate visit to California. My godmother Cecilia arrived. She had been my mother’s best friend in her years in Catholic Youth; she now belonged to a swim team and looked fit and pretty. Her brother, Fernando, invited me to talk to his students at a private school where he taught. Also present was Teresa, my late grandfather’s second wife, looking as lively as she was penitent. Other friends and relatives crowded themselves into the rickety boat that swayed into uncertain waters. I looked awkward with ashes on my face; I wiped them away with my sleeve. We headed back to the port, with our stomachs in a knot.
I had arrived in Chile a younger man, to paraphrase the lyrics of Bob Dylan: “I was older then, I’m younger than that now.” My body, with all its perceived flaws, and a likely future victim of cancer (since both my parents died of it), had defied its own odds. The Front Runners, which I had joined in 2000, had traveled as a group to run the San Diego Half-Marathon in late April, and I tagged along. I completed my first half-marathon in two hours. I was in better shape than I was as a teenager. I was more likely to be out of the house at the Bridle Path in downtown Phoenix at six a.m. to avoid the desert heat, running six miles for the pure thrill of it.

I slept on my childhood bed that spring of 2003 in the neighborhood of La Palmilla in Conchalí, north of Santiago. The magazine trading shop had been converted back to the bedroom it had once been. Bricks and cement sealed the opening and turned the place into a private space again. Childhood was gone, but youth clung to the middle-aged body by a thread. I surprised my family by appearing thinner than I’d been as a teenager and relatively youthful.

“I already did a half, so now I’m preparing for a marathon,” I announced on a whim. I thought the half was hard enough. I didn’t know if I had the stamina for a full one.

One of my aunts wondered out loud, “Aren’t you too old to be doing such things?”

That was the assumption of my relatives, who seemed to think there were limits to what a forty-year-old could do, as if implying that at that age, I should be settling into middle-aged stasis, not preparing for marathons. But I was defiant. It was my mother’s habit to let the family know what you will do next, and then to actually do it, the same way she announced she would go to the United States and then had to live up to that dare. I slept in a bedroom I hadn’t seen since my teenage years and felt I had come full circle, a much more capable, audacious man invigorated by my own journey and the memory of the sturdy immigrant woman who had once taken me with her on her adventures into the United States. My mother’s venturesome energy, her enthusiasm, and her ability to inspire children to have fun suffused the memories of my Santiago childhood. I took, again, the same bus to downtown Santiago, to face a world of strangers crisscrossing the city on their way to work or back to their sleeper communities, streets that led to the movie theaters where Mother had exposed me to the obligatory Disney offerings or the hit films such as *The Sound of*
Music, The Wizard of Oz, Cleopatra, The Ten Commandments, and many others. A long hike on the Santa Lucía Hill reveals a fort once built by the Spaniards, with a phallically inclined cannon pointing toward the city that commemorates the Spanish colony, overlooking the snow-capped Andes Mountains, which glow into a radiant, reddish tint as the sun sets. A mural commemorates the poetess Gabriela Mistral. “We were going to be queens,” reads one of her poems, among my mother’s favorites, though I don’t know why. The spirit of it is poignant, but defeatist. In the poem, a woman reminisces about her past. She and her childhood friends spoke of growing up to become royalty and reach the sea. The years pass, and the disappointments of life have run them down. They never got to do a damn thing with their lives. What is left is the childhood aspiration: “Ibamos a ser reinas.” Mother yearned for greater things, but she never stood still. She rebelled against a stagnant life. She picked up and left. She touched the sea, and nearly drowned in it, yet she saved herself to give her son a home and a life. In the end, she returned to the sea, where her ashes remain. The unfulfilled promises of the poem strike me as anomalous to a time when women did stand still, like Chekhov’s heroines in Three Sisters who talk about going to Moscow and never do anything to get there. Ibamos a ser reinas, my ass, my mother told this stagnant world; I’ve got a plane ticket to Washington, and you’re only going to get me back to Santiago to bury me for good.

A trip to Mulchén in southern Chile also helped me complete the journey, back to where I was born, and back to where Aunt Nelly now lived with Parkinson’s. The lively, plump aunt Nelly, who had once sang her songs with the rough, throaty voice of Nell Carter, sat around helplessly as a thin elderly woman in the house Aunt Tecla had left behind, the same Tecla (my grandmother’s half-sister) who had revealed the secrets of our bastard lives to me in 1971. Thirty-two years later, her stepdaughter, Aunt Nelly, had returned from the United States to her hometown to live out her days in Tecla’s house, knowing she could count on her family to care for her. Her U.S. Social Security was deposited automatically in her account, and it paid for a nurse, and her general maintenance.

Aunt Ruthy, another cousin and Nelly’s stepsister, lived in the main house and supervised her care. She led me to a guest house on one of those cool June nights in which rain enveloped the city in this usually torrential...
part of Chile. A small wooden plank prevented me from slipping into mud and I balanced my way toward the little house to reach her. She saw me enter and smiled wanly.

“A special guest is here,” said Aunt Ruthy. “All the way from the United States . . . it’s el Willy.”

My aunt’s face barely lit up. She stared toward me, not knowing what to think.

“From where?” she asked. “De dónde?”

“From los Estados Unidos. You know, Nelly, it’s el Willy.”

“Oh, the little boy,” she said. “He’s still little.”

True, I’m vertically challenged, and I haven’t grown from my 5’ 6” frame since 1977 or so. I’ve struggled, through marathoning gigs, to prevent myself from growing sideways, but I often managed until I turned forty to come across as “boyish” or “little.” I assume she recognized me through that feature.

The magnetic Nelly, who posed with me once when I arrived in Washington D.C. on the steps of the Lincoln Monument overlooking the Washington one, now sat inside the little guest house all day, slowly, gradually watching the winter rains. I was headed south for Puerto Montt. A website for gay tourists promised the southernmost “alternate” nightclub in South America. I needed the titillation at a time when the occasion had turned somber. I wasn’t there to “party” but Nelly would have been the first to go clubbing in D.C. She was the one who introduced my mother to the nation’s capital, and she wasn’t shy about dancing with the eligible bachelors. She had managed once to keep up an affair with a hot Portuguese man whose sturdy looks made me blush in my teenage years—that lucky aunt Nelly, I thought, until my mother ran into him at the supermarket with his wife and children that he had just brought from Portugal. My mother broke the news to her, and la pobre aunt Nelly stayed in her room for several days until she put on a more calm face again and could confront the world with it. This dance is for you, I thought, partying in Puerto Montt in the middle of a cold, rainy winter. The women who had cared for me had either died or aged or become incapacitated—and I decided to let myself run to Puerto Montt and stay up late into the night to give this life one more whirl before I aged any further myself.

One last stop at Aunt Gladys’s in Santiago, and a couple of glasses of wine later, Gladys finally told me the story that had once been too personal...
to tell while Mother lived. Gladys was also grateful I was leaving her the urn in which I had carried María’s ashes before I spread them into the Pacific. She felt privileged, could bond with me then, and she didn’t think she had to hold back much longer about the secret. First, it wasn’t a complete secret: I knew that my mother had been married briefly once, to a man called Cipriano, a couple of years before she met my father. But the reasons for the quick dissolution of their marriage weren’t at all clear to me. My mother said it hadn’t worked out, that’s all. Gladys knew more. Within six months of the wedding, María acted quickly to get an annulment from the church. My aunt Gladys visited her in the southern city of Concepción during the difficult period when María was seeking the annulment, to provide some much-needed moral support, and my mother revealed to her the main reason.

“We have never had relations,” she told her cousin.

“What?” My aunt smiled, amicably, not knowing what to make of this.

“What exactly do you mean, no relations?”

“You know . . . we’ve never . . .”

“You’ve never had sexual relations with your own husband since you married?”

“I can’t do it. Don’t ask me why; I don’t know. He must hate me, this poor man. No wonder he didn’t make a big fuss over the annulment. He must think I’m a horrible person for putting him through this.”

Her local diocese required her to undergo a chastity test. A doctor approved by the church confirmed her virginity and wrote her a certificate she could show at her local parish the next time she married. She felt adamant about getting it—and today I wonder, where did that certificate of chastity go? I can’t find it in her files she left behind in Portland, and, most likely, she didn’t travel with such a thing to the United States. What an odd thing that might be to behold.

“Your mother wanted to marry through the church again, and she needed that certificate to prove her virginity. Of course, after going to all that bother, your mother met Guillermo, your father, who was a married man, and virginity went out the window. So much for chastity and purity!”

That was the paradox of our Catholic repression. My mother was incapable or unwilling to have sex with her own legally wedded husband, but found the courage to lose her virginity to a married man not her own. I followed in similar steps: I was for the longest time a technical virgin in, of all
places, Hollywood, on Santa Monica Boulevard itself, into my twenties, until I arrived in Italy, where I lost mine to a double set of Communists. From chastity to debauchery. My mother never revealed the mystery of her unwillingness to consummate her marriage, and Aunt Gladys guesses she was simply “disgusted” by the thought of it. But my father quickly came along to help her overcome that.

At Santiago’s international airport, a few family members came to see me off at three a.m. Why do Chilean authorities schedule departures at that time? Is it to test the will of the traveler’s family to see how important the farewell is? I left behind a motley crew of sleepy relatives, people not connected to me by blood, the substitute family we’d managed to create as bastard children since the beginning of our lives. Teresa, la otra, came to bid me farewell along with her son Pablo, his daughter Charlotte, and a neighbor, Nana, who’d been a childhood playmate of mine. Now a grown-up woman, Nana spoke in fiery detail of her separation from her husband and her inability to divorce him under the Chilean law (a couple of years later, the Chilean Congress would finally legalize divorce). They stayed with me until the time to go through security. I bought them drinks. They marveled at the airport’s prices, which by U.S. standards didn’t seem excessive. I paid ten dollars for the entire bill, and they thought it was overpriced. These relatives have never traveled abroad. They can barely afford to travel within Chile. Economics keep them beyond that door. They can’t afford to visit me; I must always visit them. In Chile, the airport is the one place where you will be physically cut off from your family members. They remain there, you are on the other side of the divide, and those walls may never be breached. It doesn’t take a Berlin Wall to keep you separated. All it takes is a paycheck that buys you only a few groceries that keep you going till the next check. And my relatives are not starving, they are actually “middle class,” by Chilean standards, but nonetheless they usually stay, with few exceptions, on that other side of the fence. I can’t do anything about it. My mother tried to bring her niece to the United States and failed miserably. Aunt Chata decided she wouldn’t be happy in L.A. and chose to go back to Chile. Others can’t just pick up and go; most can’t just come visit either. The plane fares are astronomical. One can get a better deal with a European package, including plane fare and hotel, than a roundtrip fare from the United States to Santiago. My Mexican friends visit their
families constantly, and some members visit them in the United States in turn. The proximity allows for some interaction and sharing. My family does not see the home in which I live, or ride in my car, or meet my friends. The movies give them glimpses, most of them distorted by fantasy. They do not see me. They do not know me.

Our world is separate and unequal. I, the writer, want to draw us closer, knowing I can’t make it so by wishing it into being. There’s still the hope that words can bring us together, as actions brought us apart. It may happen some day. I can’t live waiting for that to happen. I lead a separate life, but I am not forgetful.

I get up every other morning and take my six-mile run in Phoenix. Sometimes I cheat and take off a mile or two, or start the day with a visit to Starbucks nearby, followed by a steady run. I’m not deluded, I hope, but I sense that I have become stronger with age. I fulfilled my dare by completing the P.F. Chang’s Rock ’n’ Roll Marathon in Phoenix, my first, in January 2006 in a slow but steady five hours and twelve minutes. I broke no records, but that was not the point. I was able to train, employ my body at its fullest, and get to the finish line. That is one of the things María would have wished for, and I hope I have come to a point where she wouldn’t have worried about whether she did the right thing to bring me so far away into a foreign country or whether she failed to strike it rich, or whether she could have done something else to provide me with a real father. She held on for as long as she could, and that was enough for me to keep alive the boundlessly life-affirming memory of her.