Madre and I
Reyes, Guillermo

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As I approached completion of the first draft of this book, in March 2007, I received an e-mail from a half-brother in Santiago, Chile, that opened up the floodgates of new information and revelations. I decided not to pursue them in this book, which would remain true to the spirit of the mood in which I started it and to the worldview—the bastard’s raison d’être—that explains or justifies my various prejudices, hang-ups, and anxieties. The new information would have to queue up and, properly, wait its own place and time in the scheme of things.

Gonzalo Reyes, my half-brother, wrote in Spanish: “Estimado Guillermo, . . . we think you are our brother, and we would like to get to know you better and be in contact on a more permanent basis. . . . For me, it’s extremely important to meet you since we only found out the facts about you when our father was very ill, and he told us of your existence. We, your family [emphasis mine], are united, and we love each other as brothers and sisters, and hope that one day we’ll be able to embrace you and give your our familial affection.”

Gonzalo revealed I have three brothers and two sisters, one of whom (Ximena Reyes) lives in Islip, New York. Shortly thereafter, I spoke on the phone with Ximena, who revealed that she tried for years going through the Los Angeles phone directory and calling every Guillermo Reyes listed in the area, to no avail. Only my mother’s name was listed whenever I lived with her, but even now, in Arizona, I make a point of not listing myself, and who knows why exactly? The university’s the appropriate place to find
me, I suppose, which is where Gonzalo Reyes finally did reach me with the help of his Internet-savvy daughter, Javiera.

That spring as well, a student director, Fernando Contreras, of New York University, decided to produce my play *Deporting the Divas*, in a student-driven forum for October 2007.

“Edward Albee refused to give us the rights to do one of his plays,” the young director told me over the phone. I felt obliged instead to give my consent. I even announced I would gladly go see it. “I might even meet my sister,” I added, sounding casual, leaving the young director a bit perplexed. My double-tasking must seem annoying to people who want my undivided attention. But the thought had dawned on me: the double feature of watching my play and meeting with my sister seemed like the right form of drama for one short weekend.

In this book, I have chronicled what I knew about the two families that reared me, the Cáceres and Bravo families, but I remained mostly ignorant of the Reyes family that gave me its name. I am clearly not ready to accept legitimacy and to embrace the idea of belonging somewhere. To do so would spoil a worldview that embraces marginality and outsidersness. Gonzalo’s e-mail certainly didn’t change that view of my growing up. When I decided to write about my family, I thought I might find through the act of writing some sense of purgation shaped by language. I didn’t expect the words alone to make me feel legitimate, or to expunge the solitude I felt as an only child. My half-brother’s e-mail didn’t reveal how the family would embrace me, or regard the many unsavory revelations in this book. When I wrote them, I didn’t think it would matter to them, but this e-mail and later my phone call to Ximena made me realize that it probably will.

The one thing my brother’s unexpected communiqué helped me do in this book is soften the language in the first chapter where I had referred to the Reyes family as distant people who didn’t want to know me. A brief conversation with Ximena over the phone and my subsequent e-mails about my visit to New York erased that impression.

During the Halloween weekend of 2007, I flew out to New York City to see *Deporting the Divas* at New York University. I flew out there as the generous playwright who had given permission to have my work performed. Life, luck, and fortune had not given me the airs of Edward Albee, who could shut down any production because he disapproved of
the interpretation. I was not quite the “legit” playwright in the American theater, and I was the bastard son in the Reyes family—altogether, I was quite consistent in the scheme of things. Not embraced entirely by the theater community, or by my family, it all made sense. But to actually experience acceptance at some level would change the scheme of things. I found myself feeling resistance toward change.

There is only one established Chilean restaurant in all of Manhattan, and that’s Pomaire on Restaurant Row on West 46th Street. I chose to eat early because I knew I had a play to get to at NYU, and I found myself as the only customer at four that afternoon. I waited with a glass of Chilean wine and my favorite Chilean appetizer, the beef empanada, and wrote upon a journal about this visit to the city, even though there was nothing new to report yet. The waiter had no one else to spy upon, and I briefly told him I was meeting my sister for the first time. The only thing I had known about her once was that she was named after the love interest for El Cid, in the epic poem my father cherished and had taught to his adult school student, my mother. The waiter looked impressed, but perhaps a bit intimidated about the revelation of family drama, and left me to tend to my journal, where such things belonged. About twenty minutes later a woman more or less my age coursed in a bit out of breath, having walked all the way from the train station in cool weather, parting her hair from her eyes. She was visibly nervous.

The agreeable waiter stepped forward and knew just how to welcome her, pointing at me, the only customer there. “Mire, señora, su hermano está ahí. Your brother’s right there.”

Ximena walked over, sat down to share a glass of Chilean wine, and then began a lifetime of conversation that had to be rushed into a couple of hours. I told her not to despair. We had nothing but time, and whatever we missed on this occasion, the talks would continue for years to come. I was even writing a book, I told her. Why, our father was a writer, too, she said; he even wrote plays. I didn’t know that. She picked up a glass of the Chilean cabernet, and we knew there were more surprises ahead. The pre-Broadway dinner crowd had only just begun to come in. Our voices began to fade into the crowd.
In this moving and funny memoir, award-winning playwright Guillermo Reyes untangles his life as the secretly illegitimate son of a Chilean immigrant to the United States and as a young man struggling with sexual repression, body image, and gay identity. But this is a double-decker memoir that also tells the poignant, bittersweet, and adventurous story of Guillermo’s mother María, who supports herself and her son cleaning houses and then working as a nanny in Washington, D.C., and eventually in Hollywood.

In one memorable scene, after realizing that her friend Carmen is cleaning the house of one of the producers of Annie Hall, María recruits her to take her picture as she poses dramatically with Mr. Joffe’s Oscar in hand. It is María’s defiant yet determined attitude amidst her sacrifices that allows for Guillermo’s spirited coming of age and coming out.

“Guillermo Reyes’s memoir is an endearing story of ‘one mother and one son’—a pair of Chilean outsiders navigating the world together but looking at the landscape through diverging lenses. She, in search of activity and adventure, and he, getting stuck on his fears and obsessions. Their common ground is the drama of their encounters with discovery, heartbreak, and passion—the explosive emotions that light up the stage of their two-actor theater. Full of compassion and humor, Madre and I is a love letter to a woman’s extraordinary vitality, staying one step ahead to pave the way for her timid boy to become a man.”

—Rigoberto González, author of Butterfly Boy: Memories of a Chicano Mariposa

“Candor, great wit, and humor.”

—Horacio N. Roque Ramirez, University of California, Santa Barbara

Guillermo Reyes is associate professor of theater and head of the playwriting program at Arizona State University. He is author of Men on the Verge of a Hispanic Breakdown and other plays.

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