

The Anglo-Saxon Conspiracy

Willy Lizárraga

Son of Chuquín

I often wonder who I would be without this stubborn, perennial image—my mother in bed in the dark, lying like a corpse, only her eyes and her mouth moving, talking to me as if reminiscing yet at the same time prescribing a course for my life, perhaps anticipating losing me sooner rather than later, suspecting that our voices playing in the dark were all I'd be left with to explain my most intimate sense of loss.

“Think big, now, Quique. What would you like to study?”

“I don't know, Mom. I already told you so many times.”

“Well, something has to come to your mind, right?”

“At school, they gave us a test last week. It said I'm supposed to be an architect or a coach, a tennis coach, I guess.”

“I don't see the relationship between those two options to tell you the truth, dear.”

“It said that I should look for a profession that combines science and art.”

“Well, I just don't see where the science or the art is in being a tennis coach.”

“It actually came out as choreographer, but since the teacher and I didn’t know anything about choreography, he said it could be interpreted as some sort of coach. And since he knew I like to play tennis...”

“So the teacher modified the results of the test just because he didn’t know what a choreographer is?”

“I guess so.”

“That’s kind of nuts. The real problem, though, is that he didn’t give you any options.”

“Architect is an option, isn’t it?”

“Maybe in theory. In practice, the architects I know don’t make any money because they’re just drawing stuff for engineers; they’re the ones who have the resources to actually build.”

“Maybe I should be an engineer, then.”

“That’s a wise choice, dear. A very wise choice, don’t you think? ’Cause I don’t think you want to become another Chuquín, do you?”

“I guess not.”

Chuquín was my tennis coach. Actually, he was more than that. As a joke, although more like an insult, my friends called me Son of Chuquín. I was supposed to feel ashamed of him (and my connection with him) because he was dark, short, skinny and rather peculiar. “A cocky, puny little thing of an Indian,” my mother used to say. Chuquín, by the way, was used to being mocked. And to make sure everybody knew he didn’t care, he walked with the most

upright, super-erect posture in town, his chest leading the way like a puffed-up pigeon marching in front of an imaginary military parade.

Having been Chuquín's tennis student since I was six, I was more than aware of his peculiar side. Somehow, though, I never gave in to the pressure to ridicule him. He had a way of teaching, not only tennis, but his own defiant version of how to respond to "the cruel laughter of the world" that, as a clandestinely rebellious kid, I found admirable. Even my mother, despite her unwavering prejudice toward dark-skinned people, had to respect him for that.

You could blame my father, I suppose, for bringing Chuquín to our lives. They weren't exactly friends, but they were born in the same small town in the highlands of central Peru and considered helping each other "in exile" a moral duty, which given Chuquín's starving tennis-coach lifestyle and my father's solidly established businessman credentials meant that my father could play his favorite public role with Chuquín: the generous sports benefactor, always ready to donate trophies, uniforms and footwear to all sorts of teams, tournaments and coaches.

Where did my father's fondness for sports come from? I still wonder. He was the most unathletic person I'd ever known. Walking the three blocks from our house to his import-export store was nothing short of "a cruel and vile form of punishment," as he liked to say. The only plausible explanation I could come up with was that he'd somehow figured out this was a most cost-effective way of promoting his business in town.

In stark contrast, my mother cared nothing for sports or sponsoring them. What attracted her to tennis was its potential as a vehicle for social advancement. She had a college degree but no money. My father had money but very little in the way of formal education.

Tennis was supposed to help with this imperfect union. Sending me to the only American school in town was also part of her upwardly mobile master plan.

“I just want you to grow up to be a successful professional, dear,” she would say to me, trying to justify why I had to learn tennis. “It’s the perfect sport for a promising young man; you learn a lot from hanging around the right people, you know.” And if she felt the need to buttress her argument with an actual reason that couldn’t be contested, she’d add: “You have to be proud of your English roots, okay? Tennis is part of that.”

To push things even further along this God-save-the-Queen direction, Chuquín happened to be as obsessed as my mother with everything English, although he couldn’t claim a real or imaginary genetic connection. For him, it was enough that England had invented tennis, “the most civilized of all sports.” Ergo, England had to be “the most civilized of all nations,” which made him, according to his unique logic, a lot more than a tennis coach. He saw himself as a crusader. He was helping to bring civilization to Peru.

Despite my mother and Chuquín’s serendipitous Anglo-Saxon convergence, though, there was one critical difference between them. My mother’s belief in England as the bastion of civilization was tempered (Chuquín would’ve probably said corrupted) by her preference for the U.S. As she liked to say to her faithful cadre of girlfriends over Darjeeling tea and homemade butter cookies, “I think we can agree that the English Empire has been successfully replaced by the American, which lacks class, no doubt, but it’s decisively more future-oriented, don’t you agree?”

Thus, by training with Chuquín, it’s not presumptuous to say I was being prepared to be the next Peruvian tennis champ and “a perfect English gentleman,” two things I couldn’t have cared less about. What was important to me, and probably the only reason their Anglo-Saxon conspiracy worked so well, was that nothing in the realm of physical activity, aside

from masturbation and cumbia dancing, gave me as much pleasure. Call it a precocious, perverted proclivity toward banal hedonism, but getting up at six every morning to run after a ball had to be one of my most consistent sources of joy as a child and teenager. And although I often pretended to be annoyed by having to be up and ready to walk out the door by Chuquín's second ringing of the bell (daylight not yet the victor over darkness outside my bedroom window), I looked forward to playing tennis every morning with undiminished enthusiasm.

Before the actual tennis lesson, though, the two of us had to parade. Dressed in white and wearing shorts, let's say we stood out from the other early risers "like a pair of sissies in a whorehouse," as my friends liked to say. Yet we kept on walking as proud as we could, which was the only way Chuquín knew how to walk, pretending we were strolling down the streets of Wimbledon or Oxford and that playing tennis first thing in the morning was as established a local tradition as flying kites after school in spring, escaping to the beach for the entire summer, crashing parties on weekends, flirting during Sunday communion and going back home, totally purified, eager to start sinning from scratch.

One more crucial detail, Chuquín walked joined at the hip to this gigantic two-speed bicycle packed like a burro with old rackets and dark, hairless tennis balls coming out of ripped plastic bags. And as he walked, he had to lecture me (and anybody who could hear him), about his favorite subject, the art of winning:

"I mean I'd rather lose with style than win without it, Henry. That's the truth."

I was always Henry to Chuquín. Never Quique or Enrique. Sometimes Henry V or VIII, depending on his mood.

"'Cause winning isn't really the goal. Anybody can win, really. But to do it with style, well, that's the most difficult thing to master in life, Henry. The most, most difficult."

“Grandpa Enrique was the best tennis player ever in Tacna and Arica. Don’t forget that, darling.”

“I know, Mom. You’ve told me that like a million times.”

“Well, I just want to make sure you’re a good keeper of the torch, okay? Your brother is so useless, my God.”

“You also told me he was an incredible singer and guitar player. How come you never want me to play the guitar?”

“I’ve told you, my dear. Your grandma suffered too much because of it. He’d disappear for days on end. He’d go from one party to the next, non-stop. Everybody wanted him playing and singing waltzes at their parties. He didn’t know how to say no. I just don’t want you imitating his bad side. Do you understand now?”

I didn’t.

Actually, I didn’t want to. Maybe I should say, I simply couldn’t.

By the end of high school, I was the lead singer and bass player for Los Conchesumadres (The Motherfuckers), the most foul-mouthed, underground, garage-cumbia band in the history of Tacna. I wasn’t any good at it, but it didn’t matter. We played anti-establishment cumbia. It was meant to provoke and torment. We were ahead of our time. The Brits and the Americans had yet to come up with punk rock. And I suspected she knew about my fertile underground punk-cumbia life. I also trusted she’d never mention it. We had an understanding anyway. There were subjects tacitly deemed unsuitable for our late-night conversations: my grandmother’s blackness, for example, item number one on the list; followed rather closely by Aunt Rosamelia’s sexual preference for women and my

grandfather's controversial, heroic-anti-heroic death. In general, though, anything my mother considered *distasteful* was barred from our nightly chats. As she liked to say to me in a slightly affected confessional tone, "Please, darling, just tell me beautiful, happy stories. There's already enough ugliness and tragedy in this world."

Needless to say, I dutifully, responsibly, obligingly stuck to the permissible and avoided the taboo. You could say I made an art form of it.

The Unthinkable Future, the Indiscernible Present, the Past's Insufferable Weight

"So what do you think about going to study abroad, darling?"

I always admired the way my mother could talk lying in bed perfectly still, like a mummy, a mummy who'd wait for me no matter how late I came back home, which shouldn't be understood as some sort of selfless, motherly act. She simply could never sleep. And she was irrepressibly proud about it. Insomnia, she believed, made her morally superior to the rest of us—suffering, for her, was a purifying experience—and especially to my father who slept "like a narcoleptic," an adjective she'd pronounce with evident disdain, as if there were something terribly wrong with him for being able to set his daily tribulations aside and fall asleep until the next morning at seven thirty, always at seven thirty, when he'd tiptoe to the bathroom, farting profusely while whistling and singing tangos for our morning entertainment.

He slept in a ridiculously tiny bed, too. Impossible not to notice since my mother's bed was three times as big, which in my childish imagination I interpreted as a form of punishment for his inconsiderate narcolepsy, or maybe just for being "a goddamned man,"

as Aunt Rosamelia, who lived with us, would say, so we never forget that in our household women were in charge.

“Abroad like?”

“Like the U.S., darling.”

“Really?”

“Your father and I have been talking about it because, as you know, it’s becoming more and more dangerous to be a young man in Peru. These war games with Chile aren’t going to end well. And I’d probably not care if we lived in Lima, but we live right at the border, dear. The whole town’s already become a giant military base. Now you and your classmates have to spend Saturdays in military training. And that’s just the beginning.”

“Well, all I can say is that I can’t stand how all these military guys have to do is show off their latest sport cars, flashy sunglasses, imported blue jeans and holier-than-thou attitude, and all the pretty girls just go nuts for them.”

“If there’s any consolation, darling, once the war starts, I don’t think they’ll have time to run after pretty girls. They’ll always be better off than us civilians, though. My God, where does this thirst for revenge come from? Don’t they realize that the Chileans are going to beat us to shame just like they did a hundred years ago? We’re so useless, my God. All macho pose and bravado.”

“Maybe we’ll beat them this time, Mom.”

“Look at you, talking about war as if there were winners and losers, as if you could trust anything this communist government of ours says. What does it matter if we win anyway? We’re doomed to become another Cuba, which is no fun, let me tell you. That’s why your father and I have been talking about you going to California, dear. We’re too old to start all over, but you’re at the perfect age. Remember my dear friend Martha? Remember

she has a brother who went to Australia? Well, he lives in San Francisco now. He can help you get settled. Eventually you could even bring your brother with you.”

And there you have it, the sudden opening of a foreign destination for me, which at the moment sounded provocatively attractive. The attraction, however, had very little to do with escaping being a subject of a totalitarian regime or one more casualty in a senseless war. What seemed irresistible to my seventeen-year-old self was the actual promise of unlimited adventures in a foreign land with no adult supervision. She and I, of course, had no idea that both the war with Chile and the Peruvian communistic project would be averted by yet another swift military coup a few years after I settled in San Francisco, an event that would become her most consistent source of remorse. She could just never forgive herself for sending me away “for nothing.”

Plus, she also blamed herself for not being aware of “how crazy things could be” in San Francisco in the early seventies, a craziness that I embraced with unabashed gusto—the counter-culture, post-hippie, revolutionary cauldron boiling at maximum temperature with anti-Vietnam War sentiment—probably because I was, after all, a refugee from a war that was about to happen and most likely destroy everything I’d left behind. Which takes us to the real subject of this tale.

Contraband in the Blood

So, yes, maybe all I’m trying to do here is answer one single question; actually two, but the first one, *What brought you here, man?* is the least interesting for me. What truly concerns me is

the question dealing with how we choose, from our most personal arsenal of voices, the one that would tell our story. More to the point, how is it that my mother keeps on prescribing my future while Aunt Rosamelia, who's also dead, continues to show me how I should look at my past, and how only in the undefinable interstice between them I seem to find my place as a chronicler of my life.

A mother is a mother is a mother is a mother, though, so let's not leave her side yet.

Besides, I had a plan to follow, a script to memorize.

"So are you ready, Quique? I know you're tired. But one more rehearsal isn't going to kill you, right? I'm not supposed to be nice to you, remember? I'm mean and rude. Like a grumpy cop. Let's see, young man, I see you have a tourist visa. What's your reason for traveling to the United States of America? May I know?"

"I'm going to visit Disneyland, sir. It's been my dream ever since I was a little boy. I want to visit San Francisco and Los Angeles. I want to see the Golden Gate Bridge, Chinatown, Universal Studios."

"And why are you carrying those rackets with you? It doesn't seem like you'd have much time to play tennis."

"Well..."

"Come on, dear, you know you can't pause like that. He's going to think you're lying. You're supposed to say you're a tennis champ. Americans love champs. They're totally into winners. They can't stand losers. As a matter of fact, they send them back to their countries or they put them in jail. So for Christ's sake, try to sound more convincing, okay? Let's start all over again."

Now, war hysteria aside, my mother's dedication to making sure I was optimally prepared to clear, not only U.S. Customs and Immigration, but to live on my own wasn't unique or original. Preparing your sons (daughters not so much, as my mother would always remind me) to leave town as soon as they were done with high school, especially if you had the means, was an essential part of growing up in Tacna in those days. If one stayed, one could study to be a nurse or a teacher. Those were the only college degree options, which perhaps explains why almost every adult man I knew was a merchant, a contrabandist, or both. Well, not only because of that.

According to our unique border-town mentality, smuggling merchandise to and from Chile was considered a patriotic duty, a unique way of keeping Tacna and Arica united despite the fact that they no longer belonged to the same country, a humble tribute to our ancestors who'd heroically fought against the Chileans and later endured their occupation. I suppose we're talking about contraband as a sublime form of patriotism, which might sound funny, but the subject matter isn't necessarily a shallow one. In fact, it runs deep and often undetected inside all of us Tacnenians. One could argue that we carry, ingrained in our DNA, an obsession to sneak something, anything, across a real or imaginary border, which in my case meant that sneaking myself into the U.S. as a tourist was the most logical and acceptable solution to my refugee conundrum.

That's one part of the story, the easy one. The other part, where my mother's and aunt's voices duel in a war with no end, is a more difficult landscape to navigate, more dangerous too. It implies standing in the middle of them, almost pretending not to take sides and willing to be hurt in the crossfire.

The Battle(s) for History

Fully aware of history as a transaction, and most often an immoral one, Aunt Rosamelia believed there was nothing heroic about having resisted “those tight-assed, faux Nazis,” as she called the Chileans. “Wrapping yourself in the Peruvian flag and jumping off a cliff onto the ocean, that’s what I call a hero,” she’d say as if to make sure we, her nieces and nephews, understood what her minimum epic requirements were. Then, relapsing into a more conversational tone, she would add, “I mean what were we supposed to do? This was our town. There’s no heroism in staying put. There were, of course, a few so-called freedom fighters, Grandpa Enrique chief among them, but I don’t think what he did was heroic anyway. It was plain crazy and stupid if you want to know the truth.”

Aunt Rosamelia was the oldest of the three sisters and considered herself the official family historian. She also considered Aunt Chepa, three years younger, “too dumb to care,” and my mother, by virtue of being the baby, “too young to remember.” My mother nonetheless claimed she remembered “everything.” And since her oldest sister insisted on dismissing her recollections, she preferred to leave the room whenever Aunt Rosamelia broached the subject of “life during the occupation.”

Their sisterly rivalry, though, went beyond a mere conflict of interpretation of their past. “There can be no more than one sun up in the sky,” was the way my aunt liked to put it. The past, nonetheless, and more specifically, the figure and legacy of their father, the family’s Anglo-Saxon bastion, I’d say was the fulcrum of their insoluble dilemma, which provided me with my first practical lessons on how to read between the lines of my own history. For as crucial as my nightly visits to my mother’s bedroom were in the creation of my border-town identity, my aunt’s flamboyant disregard of any romanticized or sanitized version of the past, her penchant for coarse language (something my mother totally

disapproved of), and especially her readiness to laugh at her ancestors were equally influential—all the more because she swore I was the living image of my grandfather. Hearing her tell stories about Grandpa, then, was like hearing stories about me, better yet, stories about a version of myself most appealing to my punk side, which once I became a teenager was all I cared about.

Not surprisingly, hearing my aunt's stories was the exact opposite of hearing my mother's. To begin with, instead of the intimate, secretive, bedroom-in-the-dark setting my mother and I shared, my aunt's domain was the early-afternoon-big-family lunch: the warm sunshine percolating through the vines; all of us bathed in a gentle, golden light; dishes constantly brought and cleared from the table; everybody talking loudly, preferably while laughing. And if there happened to be a few half-asleep adults in their chairs, arms crossed over their snoring chests, their distended bellies proudly revealing an overtaxed digestive system, heads bouncing back and forth, in and out of siesta oblivion, we knew that the moment Aunt Rosamelia took charge they would instantly wake up and become, like the rest of us, her most devoted audience.

“I mean, let's not forget that for almost twenty years I had to put up with being a goddamned second-class citizen, okay. Let's not forget either that my dear sister Ameriquita was barely seven when we went back to being part of Peru. So what can she really remember? And shall I mention that, when Father died, she was only six months old? I guess all I'm trying to say is that you don't have much of a choice here. To talk about Father you have to have known him. You have to have witnessed what a stubborn son of a bitch he was. I mean everything had to be done his way. Nobody could tell him what to do. Not the

Chileans or the Peruvians. For him, authority was the enemy. *They can kiss my ass and lick my balls* was his favorite political slogan, as you all know.”

“That’s right. The family mantra, isn’t it?”

That was cousin Omar, who liked to play Aunt Rosamelia’s choir’s principal tenor. Cousins Laly, Priscila, Martha, Evaristo and Hugo were part of the choir too, but Omar was the first to speak, the loudest and fastest; and the bigger the choir, the more supported Aunt Rosamelia felt, allowing her to relax the tempo, drink her favorite wine (Chilean, by the way), and theatrically get back to her story.

“My poor mom suffered terribly because of him, of course. I mean how could she avoid it? At times, she even wondered if he’d married her just as an act of rebellion and not because he truly loved her. I mean being a blond man in a brown country, and knowing how uncontrollably contrarian he was, she could never really get rid of the suspicion that he’d married her, a black woman, just to be rebellious.

“Anyway, in those days, blacks and Indians intermarried and it was no big deal. But blond and black? Privileged upper-middle class boy marrying second generation, freed-slave girl? No wonder when we walked the streets people would point at us as though we were a freak show or something.

“My father, needless to say, was totally thrilled by the spectacle we caused. He liked to say he’d come into this world to defy all rules. And he’d punch you in the face if you called him an anarchist. ‘I’m not an anarchist, a communist, an atheist or whatever you want to call me. I am who I am and I don’t need you or anybody to label who I am.’ Can you imagine what it must have been like to live with a man like him? No wonder the Chilean authorities kept a close eye on him and on his two cousins who were as contentiously insane as he was.”

“And what were the names of the two cousins, Auntie? Just for the record, you know.”

“Manuel and Alvaro, the only two male sons of Uncle Ambrosio, the best center forward in those days, a small man but mighty strong, and fast like a lizard.”

“That’s right. They called him ‘White Magic,’ didn’t they, Auntie? He could score from everywhere in the soccer field. Isn’t that right, Aunt Rosamelia?”

“That’s damned right, Omar. I’m so glad you remember his name and his amazing soccer feats, although we can’t forget he was also a terrible husband. A total Casanova. Poor Aunt Fortunata. Well, at least he was good in soccer, although it didn’t do him any good. ’Cause the Chileans hated his guts because of that and were always putting him in jail. The thing is he was blond, like your grandpa. Meaning they were both whiter than the Chileans who, racists pigs that they were, saw themselves as the superior race and felt really threatened by any Peruvian being whiter than them.

“Anyway, you can imagine how they tried to brainwash us in school to make us believe in our inferiority. They had the broomstick handy too if we didn’t accept their point of view. The worst part, though, was that I couldn’t tell any of it to my father. He would’ve set the school on fire or done something even crazier. The only person in my family I could tell these things was my mother. Bless her heart! And it wasn’t as if she had it easy. She was one of the few black women in town, and the Chileans weren’t subtle about showing her where she belonged. But just like me, she couldn’t tell my father how bad it was for her. Not that he didn’t know, but still, you didn’t want to provoke him. Oh my God, the silence we carried inside us. I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to put into words the unbearable burden it was to keep it all to ourselves.

“On top of everything, my father was just not the consoling type, you know. Any type of sentimentality was revolting to him, which is funny because he was an amazing guitar player and singer. I guess he reserved his soft side for his playing and singing. Away from his guitar, he was Mr. Macho. And his two cousins were just like him.”

The Color of the Voice

Endowed with Herculean shoulders, enormous breasts and arms to match, Aunt Rosamelia was fond of wearing at least three layers of white plaster on her face “to not look too black,” which had the curious effect of making her look “like Frankenstein’s sister,” according to my mother.

Aunt Rosamelia, however, didn’t mind the horror-movie effect. Quite the contrary, you could tell she derived an enormous amount of pleasure from it. She’d figured out a way of keeping men at bay. Although I’m not sure it helped her find girlfriends. In any case, it was her invulnerable rhetorical armor that I admired, her blunt, iconoclastic dominance of the family’s narrative, which also made her the only person in my family I could talk to about my cumbia-punk projects. Having said that, I never had the nerve to share with her any of our band’s songs. I mean *You wanna fuck me, I wanna fuck you, you wanna fuck me, I wanna fuck you* was probably our most family-friendly chorus, so I had the strong suspicion that even she wouldn’t approve of our poetic vein.

As for my mother, despite her hyper-sensitive, uptight propriety, she was as effective and inspiring a storyteller as my aunt. She just operated in a different emotional register. She wasn’t there to provoke you or make you laugh or cry. What she was good at was leaving

you not knowing what to feel. And when it was just the two of us, she always had to make sure I understood that Aunt Rosamelia couldn't be trusted.

“The thing is I just don't think the occupation was as bad as Rosamelia claims.” My mother's voice now sounded soft, tender, as if she'd just woken up from a sleeping-beauty siesta, which was physically impossible for her because of her insomnia. “We were kind of prisoners of war, sure, but it wasn't like we were living in a concentration camp. In many ways, I'd say we were better off than now. 'Cause they wanted us to become Chileans, you know, so they had the city well taken care of. The markets and stores were beautifully stocked. They'd remodeled all the schools and built new ones. And if you weren't adamantly anti-Chilean, you were treated well.

“I mean, nowadays, even though we're no longer occupied, if you go out and protest against the government, you get beat up and thrown in jail. It just wasn't that different back then, with the advantage that things were more orderly. There was no crime. The streets were super clean. If they caught you littering, you paid a fine or went to jail. And what was even better, they didn't allow the Indians to settle wherever they pleased. In fact, they allowed them in only for the day so they could sell their produce, but only if they were willing to take a shower and be disinfected. There were no shantytowns. There was opera twice a year, and the best ballet company in Santiago visited all the time. I had wonderful Chilean friends and teachers. The best.”

I wonder (have been wondering ever since) if my mother's pleasant memories of “the occupation” have to do with her being the blonde in the family. I also wonder if the Chilean authority's unabashed racism might have had something to do with how precociously she

opted for identifying as white, something her mother and sisters couldn't do by virtue of their looks.

Racial issues aside, I don't think my mother or my aunt expected to have similar childhood memories. They just didn't know how to live with their differences in public. When my mother left the room, then, to let Aunt Rosamelia talk freely about her occupation memories, it was with the implicit understanding that she was doing her sister and her audience (us) a favor. She wasn't conceding. She was simply choosing to be civil.

The jarring part for me was feeling like a traitor to my mother just for enjoying my aunt's tales so much, which might have been one of the reasons why I began to fantasize about going away so I could free myself from having to choose between them. And I don't mean to imply that my mother's and my aunt's kingdoms had (and have) equal weight in my history. Formidable as they both were, the level of intimacy my mother and I shared wasn't possible with Aunt Rosamelia. She wasn't exactly the touchy-feely type. She pushed you away, in fact, if you got too close to her. She had her own secrets to guard. So there was nothing she would reveal in the intimacy of a one-on-one conversation that she wouldn't say in public and vice versa.

"What can I say, dear. Your aunt is a performer. That's it, really," I remember my mother sort of warning me, which had the odd effect of confusing me even more since, as far as I could see, life itself was a continuous performance. It wasn't like my mother was more honest than my aunt because she could deliver her stories in a more intimate tone. It was a mere difference of style and focus.

“Oh, to be your age again, my love; to be seventeen and carefree, oh my God. Although I don’t think I was ever as carefree as I should’ve been. There was always someone in the back of my mind telling me I had a million chores to do. Maybe because from a very young age I knew I wanted to be a doctor. And since my mother couldn’t afford to send me to college, I had to plan things very carefully.

“I had to work after school from the time I was in junior high to save money, for starters. I also had on my shoulders this enormous pressure to get good grades. And I did it all very quietly, ’cause I knew what everybody thought of independent, determined girls like me, including my mother: *Why’re planning to study something you’ll never be able to practice, Ameriquita? Wouldn’t it be better to become a teacher like your sisters? ’Cause you know that no matter what you study, you’ll end up as a housewife, don’t you? Or don’t you want to have a family?*

“And it wasn’t that I didn’t want to have a family, but how could I have explained to them that I also wanted to be a doctor and I didn’t see a conflict between the two. Maybe that’s why I kept my plans all to myself. Then, in my last year of high school, my friend Martha, Auntie Martha as you call her, well, she and her family moved to Lima. And her mom, who’d always treated me like a daughter, knowing that I was dying to go to college, offered me room and board in exchange for light housekeeping. That was all I needed to believe I was going to be a doctor. And I know it’s not in good taste to compare yourself with others, but I can’t help but be a little envious at how fortunate you are, dear. You have our total support, and nobody laughs at you because you’re going to San Francisco to study engineering. And traveling, oh my God, is so much easier and safer nowadays.

“Imagine. Depending on the weather conditions and the type of ship you boarded, the trip to Lima could take up to two weeks. There were no airplanes. The roads were impassable. On top of everything, there was a war. No, not against the Chileans. Europe was

at war. The German submarines were roaming the coast of Peru. They had already sunk a few passenger ships. My mom and my sister Chepa kept repeating to me, *Death at sea means no grave. How are we going to leave you flowers?*

“And I have to say that, for all my determination, when the day to board the train to the port of Arica came, as I stepped off it, my legs wouldn’t hold me up. Thank God Rosamelia was there to practically carry me out of the train. Then, when we got to the pier and I saw the actual ship I was supposed to board, not only my legs but my entire body went limp. It was such a ridiculously puny little thing, full of badly patched holes too. The paint was peeling from it like when you get sunburnt and your skin starts to come off. Anyway, the only painted part, sort of, was the captain’s cabin, where you could read its name: El Rey.

“That’s the saddest king I’ve seen in my life. What kind of a king is that?” I remember telling Rosamelia as I burst into tears.

“I was in shock. Totally. To my astonishment, though, there were tons of people boarding. Nobody seemed to mind the boat’s funkiness. Thankfully, too, Rosamelia wouldn’t leave my side. So I eventually calmed down, although when it was my turn to walk up the ramp, my body just wouldn’t move.

“Well, I’d cried so much, I was practically blind. So Rosamelia, once again, helped me gather myself. She cleaned my face and retouched my make up while she kept whispering, ‘This is no time to wobble, Ameriquita. You’re going to be fine. You don’t need a giant boat to make it to Lima. Actually, it’s a lot safer than going in one of those fancy ships. Do you think the Germans are going to waste a torpedo on that shitty cardboard raft?’

“You could always count on your aunt, I suppose, to make you laugh at the worst moments. Anyway, I did settle down, and eventually walked up the ramp. And only when I found a place on the deck where I had a clear view of the pier, did I notice the joyous party

around me. A military band was playing cuecas, marineras, waltzes. Peruvians and Chileans were singing and dancing and embracing each other by the pier.

“I could see my two sisters and my mother from the deck, so elegant in their long, flowery dresses, under their wide-brimmed, summer hats. Well, my two sisters. My mother had made herself up, but she only wore black. ‘Like a professional widow,’ she liked to say. And I kept staring at them as they stood together, holding hands, waving their tear-soaked handkerchiefs. And I remember realizing, just before the boat began to glide off the pier, that I didn’t feel sad. Actually, I felt euphorically happy. I was crying happy tears.”

More of a Beginning Than an End

I don’t remember ever asking my mother why she didn’t become a doctor. I don’t remember her volunteering an explanation about what kept her from realizing her dream either. It may seem odd now, but it wasn’t the case back then. One more layer of selective silence between us was far from discomfiting. One more tale in which she kept the central point unmentioned was part of her signature style. Like Homer leaving the gigantic, immortal, wooden-horse decoy out of the *Iliad*.

It was a mutual agreement anyway. I never told her anything about my most intimate adventures, even when she knew the actors involved. Like my long, languid and predictable romance with Carla, her closest friend’s daughter, who would ride with me in my father’s car with the absolute conviction that we were destined to be married and live merrily ever after once I returned from San Francisco as a civil engineer.

It also never crossed my mind to tell my mother about my numerous escapades with my fellow *Conchesumadres* to the biggest whorehouse in town as a sort of never-ending

farewell ritual during our last year of high school. Silence was an essential part of our deal, a deal that often made me think I'd been raised to be a duplicitous, secretive man, someone who could only aspire to be a spy or a politician. Maybe away from her, I'd learn to free myself from my own lies and silences. Maybe then I'd be able to talk about my life like Aunt Rosamelia spoke about our family history—telling it as it is. I truly wanted to experience that kind of artistic freedom, that ease with my past.

And I have to say that I got a very first taste of it the very same night I boarded the plane to San Francisco. Actually, just a bit before boarding the plane, as I waited with the other passengers at the gate and couldn't stop looking at (as if I were looking at the spatial representation of the kind of freedom I was yearning) the playful, contorted tattoo covering almost the entire aircraft—the work, I'd later find out, of Alexander Calder, my favorite American artist because of it. In any case, it was at that moment that I thought of Aunt Rosamelia as the only person capable of telling the adventure I was about to begin. And no sooner had I thought of her, there she was. Or maybe I should say, there we were, out in the patio, the insufferable desert sun sneaking in through the vines, the dirty dishes gone from the table so as not to attract yet another invincible army of flies, the Tacnanian afternoon shining like a bright and sassy cactus flower.

“Think about it. Grandpa Enrique with his two cousins had come up with this crazy ritual. Every weekend, oh yeah, they would go out late at night to terrorize lonely Chileans, preferably cops and soldiers. They'd cover their faces and attack them like a swarm of wasps, something we had to keep secret, of course. My God, we had so many secrets.

“Anyway, I suppose Manuel and Alvaro did it out of patriotism. My father’s motivations, though, as I’ve said before, were less political. He was just a born contrarian son of a gun whose worst fear, by the way, was to be turned into a hero after his death. A hero is a political fabrication for suckers, I remember him saying. Hero or not, one thing I know is that you can’t go around beating people up with total impunity. You eventually gotta pay.”

“That’s right, Auntie. If not on the way in, on the way out.”

“I’m glad we’re in agreement here, Omar. Well, as you can imagine, word had spread around, so very few Chileans now dared to go out late at night by themselves. After walking around fruitlessly looking for a victim, then, they decided to call it a night. Before disbanding, though, they went for drinks at Don Nico, which was about two blocks away from the Chilean Prefect’s Palace. And it was there, over fried pork skin and homemade wine, that Grandpa came up with the idea of bringing down the Chilean flag flying at the entrance to the Palace.

“Now, according to Cousin Marilina, uncle’s Alvaro youngest daughter, the main purpose of bringing down the flag was to pee on it. Knowing my father, though, I’d say he wanted to shit on it. Anyway, that was the brilliant plan. My dear father only had *brilliant* plans. My God, why do men have to think with their dicks? When will they grow up? That’s why I’ll keep on saying till the day I die: if you want to make of him a hero, feel free to do so, but I don’t think peeing or shitting on a flag counts as heroism.

“Anyway, in order to shit on the flag, first they had to deal with the four soldiers guarding the palace. So they decided that Manuel and Alvaro would walk up to them, pretend they were drunker than they were, and begin to insult them, which was something that came very naturally to them. Anyhow, the guards, as expected, bit the bait and ran after

them, at which point my father, who'd been hiding somewhere, ran to the pole and brought the flag down.

“He was apparently peeing ever-so happily on the flag (he'd drunk enough wine to pee a river, for sure) when a whole platoon of Chilean soldiers came out of the Palace and shot him dead. He didn't even have time to pull his dick back. Now, tell me if that's not a ridiculous way to go. And what for? To send the Chileans a message? I'm telling you, sometimes I wonder if all the problems in the world would be solved if men were goddamned castrated at birth...”

And with her big, overconfident voice echoing inside me, filling the emptiness that came along with the taste of a new, unimaginable freedom, with the certainty that Grandpa wasn't the only possible role model for me to follow, I walked out of the gate onto the tarmac—the humid, sticky air of Lima making me feel already in a foreign land, although yet not too foreign, for at the most prominent corner of the Lima Airport terrace, my fellow *Conchesumadres* had gathered and were waving their arms. They were actually jumping around and yelling:

“Give them hell, Henry... Show them what we're made of in this godforsaken country... lucky bastard... going to the land of James Brown, John Coltrane, Bob Dylan and Janis Joplin... write us about all those drugs you'll be tasting... LSD, motherfucker... mescaline, son of bitch... acid tripping, asshole... get yourself a beautiful all-American girl as sweet as apple pie and as wild as Tina Turner...”

As I comfortably sat back in seat 27A, I could see from my window they were still at it, even though they knew I could no longer hear them. All I could hear at that moment, actually,

was my mother's last late-night admonition, "Whatever you choose to do in America, darling, just don't do anything that would bring you shame or remorse, okay? That's all I ask."

It was, I realized, as it had always been and perhaps will always be—the two sisters of perpetual discord dueling and, by doing so, making sure I had a path to follow and a path to elude; a model to emulate or reject; an impossible-possible future and an unexplainable yet somehow always entertaining past. The plane was now smoothly climbing up into the sky.

It was, I recalled, that time of the night when Mother and I would meet with unintentional punctuality, when the late-night flavors, sounds and shadows that surrounded us obediently retreated to the background: the casual, drunk footsteps of someone crossing the street; the occasional squealing of tires around the corner, followed by the insouciant laughter of teenagers at the wheel; the discordant, foreign-accented voices of Mexican-dubbed American sitcoms coming from our neighbor's window; the distant smell of an ocean we couldn't see yet always dreamt about, especially in winter.

As the flight attendant made the customary announcements after takeoff, I felt the last, quick caress of my mother's warm, dry lips on my right cheek, the inexorable sign that it was time for me to get up from her bed and walk to my room in the dark, absolutely clueless about the life I would create for myself away from her, a life that would include (to my endless sense of unmentionable pride and my mother's unbearable regret and shame) falling in love with the perfect girl with the wrong skin color, and quitting engineering and then school altogether to become, of all things, a tennis coach.