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Alberto Fuquet

THE MOVIES OF MY LIFE

A NOVEL

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH

BY EZRA E. FITZ

For Jaime Fuguet and Silvia De Goyenche (my parents)

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The tremor didn't come out of nowhere. Actually, nothing in this life does. Everything occurs just as it does in earthquakes: in a snap. We are those who live just a bit at a time.

ANA MARÍA DEL RIO, Pandora



How did I come to draw up a list of the movies

of my life? Why did it occur to me? Why haven't I done anything other than mentally tabulate list after list since touching down at LAX and the thing I never thought would happen to me happened? How did I come to revisit this endless city in the backseat of an old green Malibu with a white-haired Salvadoran as my driver? What made my head spin in the brightly lit aisles of a store called DVD Planet full of solitary and obsessive freaks? Why have I returned to think—to live, to feel, to enjoy, to suffer—about facts and people and films chalked up to the oblivion (superceded, eliminated, erased) of my unconsciousness? Why am I remembering now, after so much time? Why, after years of not going to the movies, of seeing absolutely nothing, have I returned to the days when I used to devour them? In other words, ¿qué fucking pasa? What happens is terrible.

Well, not so terrible, but it is for me. I broke my commitment to the university, I've set aside my itinerary, I haven't arrived at the place where

they're waiting for me.

I'm in Los Angeles, "Elei," the city of angels, in the San Fernando Valley, on Van Nuys, over the horizontal fault of the Elysian Park System.

What am I doing here?

Why am I still here? Why, instead of being in Tokyo, as was the plan, as we stipulated, am I now shut up in a room at the Holiday Inn with a panoramic view of the 405 freeway, writing like a madman?

It's already been four days like this, on the edge, to the max, sometimes in slow motion, other times in double fast forward. The 6:43 A.M.s, the dawn about to break, the hot Santa Ana winds rippling the surface of the pool below. The ice I went searching for down the hall is now melted. The carpet is covered in Twinkie crumbs and pumpkin seeds.

Have you ever gone into your kitchen, bored, tired, drowsy, like a zombie, with a dry, scratchy throat and overly ripe breath, dying to open a big, 2.5-liter bottle of ice-cold, refreshing Coke and drink it straight from the bottle, but just as you go to open it, without warning it occurs to you that someone (maybe yourself) has shaken it up, but now it's too late (it's always too late), and you unscrew the plastic cap, and BOOM, pafff, swoooooosh...all the sweet, dark liquid, complete with foam and bubbles, explodes in your face like a fire hydrant in a crash, and you can't do a thing about it except to stand there and take it all in until the eruption subsides?

Well, that's more or less the state I'm in.

Honestly, though, it's worse. But it's not all bad.

Let's say that I'm the bottle of Coke and the person who shook me up is a woman who I'll probably never see again. It was she who looked me straight in the eye, she who made me laugh, talk, doubt, connect. It was she who opened up my mind and let loose the thick, viscous, gooey stuff that memories are made of.



An earthquake never comes alone.

CHARLES RICHTER



SUNDAY January 14, 2001 6:43 A.M.

Santiago de Chile

"Hello?"

"Hi, Beltrán. It's Manuela, your sister."

"Ah . . . what time is it?"

"Early. Sorry to wake you up. I've been wait-

ing for hours to call."

"The alarm clock was already going off; I'm just a sound sleeper, is all."

"Were you dreaming?"

"I think so."

"How are you?"

"Okay."

"What are you up to these days?"

"Nothing much. I'm leaving on a trip tonight."

"A change of scenery is always good. Vaca-

tion?"

"No, no. I'm off to Tokyo. Tsakuba University." $\,$

"You've been there before, right? I read that somewhere."

"Years ago, yes."

"At least you'll be somewhere familiar. That's good."

"Yeah, but my Japanese is pretty bad these days."

"Will you be there long?"

"A semester."

"I envy your ability to just pack up and go places."

"One of the few advantages of being alone in life."

"The flight must take forever, I'd guess."

"Yeah, but they gave me a whole afternoon to relax in Los Angeles."

"California?"

"Yes."

"You could go out to Encino. Or Inglewood. I still remember Ash Street."

"I don't think so, Manuela. You remember the pictures, not the place. They're two different things. We were just kids."

"Anyway, you could go . . ."

"I'm just going to lie down in the hotel room the travel agency got me. It's part of the package; I don't have to pay for a thing. I'm not going out anywhere. Why would I?"

"You've never gone back? You, who travels so much?"

"To California?"

"Yes, where we used to live."

"No. Well, I've been up north. Twice to San Jose and once to Palo Alto. I've had layovers in L.A., but I never went out in the city."

"Weird, huh?"

"I don't know. . . . Maybe."

"Sometimes I enjoy going back."

"We were different people, Manuela. Kids. All that happened so long ago. It's not so hard to have good childhood memories. Those are the ones that stick with us."

"I guess."

"Perhaps. What do I know."

"I couldn't resist the temptation to visit."

"It would seem strange to me to go back to a place where I no longer knew the language."

"Remember how we always used to talk in English?"

"And they hated us for it. It was really a bad idea. One of many."

"We ought to go back to speaking English."

"First we'd have to start speaking again."

(Silence.)

"Anyway, I won't have the time. Just enough to catch a quick nap, shower, get something to eat, and get back on the plane."

"Too bad."

"Yeah, well, that's the way it is."

(Silence.)

"Happy New Year, Beltrán. Now that the new century's begun."

"Right. Happy belated New Year."

"Yes, happy New Year."

(Silence.)

"Where are you calling from?"

"From Puerto Octay."

"In the south?"

"Yes."

"Are you living there?"

"No, I'm on vacation with the kids."

"Ah . . . are you still with—?"

"We're not together anymore."

"Oh. But didn't you have another son?"

"No."

"But you're still living uptown?"

"Yes, but I'm not in Los Trapenses anymore. I'm a bit farther down, near San Damián."

"Ah, that's still far away, no?"

"It depends. It's near the kids' school."

"So how did you get this number? They changed all the lines in this neighborhood."

"I called the Seismological Institute. Spoke with whomever was on duty. Said it was important."

"Is it?"

(Silence.)

"Did you hear about El Salvador, Beltrán? The earthquake yester-day?"

"I haven't stopped looking at the data coming in. It was a 7.8; no small thing."

"Yeah, it sounds like it was big."

"Since when are you interested in quakes, Manuela?"

"They called me and now I'm calling you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Grandpa Teodoro died in the quake."

"What?"

"Grandpa died yesterday."

"Where?"

"In El Salvador, like I said."

(Silence.)

"How did you find out about it?"

"From Mom."

"You speak with her?"

"Sometimes. More these days."

"I don't understand.... Did something fall on him? The quake hit around noon; was he out for a walk?"

"He was sleeping. Must have jolted him awake."

"What was he doing in an adobe building? You're not saying that a wall . . ."

"No. It was a heart attack."

"What?"

"It seems that despite everything he's lived through, all the other earthquakes, Grandpa died from shock."

"That sort of makes sense. I think he was afraid of them, paralyzed by their power. Once, years ago, he took me to see *Earthquake!* at the Lido and he was terrified. I could see the panic in his eyes."

"I didn't know that."

"Yeah, the Sensurround scared him."

"Grandpa was sick with the flu, he was weak, and when the quake started he tried to get up out of bed but his legs gave out. They found him on the floor. The only thing broken in the entire house was a pitcher of lemonade."

"Mom was in El Salvador?"

"In Santa Tecla. She lives there. In a really pretty red house with a garden \dots "

"Can you tell me what our mother is doing in El Salvador?"

"She's lived there for years."

"Have you been there?"

"No. But there's more; she got married to—"

"I honestly don't care."

"—to Santiago Prado."

"The Mexican? Grandpa's old student?"

"Do you know him?"

"I did."

"He's the chair of the Department of Seismology at the local university. Something like that. I thought you'd been in touch with Grandpa, that he'd told you about his adventures."

"Not quite."

"All El Salvador loved Grandpa. They say that it's thanks to him that there aren't more victims to mourn. He started those big educational programs that teach people how to protect themselves during a big earthquake. That's what Mom told me."

"Ironic, isn't it, that he died during one?"

"I thought you'd been in touch with him."

"I last saw him at a conference in Atlanta a few years ago. And he wasn't the same man he used to be. Actually, he was ridiculous. It was

awful. He'd turned into some sort of showman. A reporter found out that I was his grandson and asked my opinion about those predictions of his. And I said just what I thought: that they didn't have a sound factual basis. Grandpa came up to me and said, 'I always knew that you were brilliant, but in time I also came to realize that you had no heart and, therefore, would never have faith.'"

"He said that to you?"

"Yes."

"Did it hurt?"

"It wasn't pleasant, but the old man wasn't well. If I had faith I would've been a priest, not a scientist."

"So you never saw him again?"

"No, did you?"

"The last time I saw him was when they honored him at the Universidad de Chile."

(Silence.)

"You disappeared."

"So did you, Beltrán."

"I've always been here."

"Me too."

"But you lived so far away."

"So did you."

"But I came back."

"So did I. We came back. You should write down my number, Beltrán. You never know."

"Right. What is it?"

"I've got a few. I'll give you my cell."

"You have a cell phone?"

"Yes, it's 09-949-3602."

"You already have mine."

"You can call me whenever you want, from anywhere in the world. From Tokyo if you want. Imagine if something happened to you."

"What could possibly happen to me?"

(Silence.)

"Maybe you could swing through El Salvador. A little detour."

"It's impossible. That's a whole other flight, Manuela. I couldn't manage it. Are you going to go?"

"I'm here, with the kids. No, I couldn't."

"When is it?"

"It's going to be Wednesday afternoon. They've buried a lot of people; the gravediggers can't keep up."

"I'll be giving my first lecture that day. I'll be thinking about him."

"You really can't change your plans even a bit?"

"No."

(Silence.)

"And Dad?"

"I don't know anything, Manuela. In California, I'd guess."

"So, zero contact?"

"Zero. I never heard from him again. You?"

"Nada."

"When did everything get so fucked up?"

"I don't know. "Things weren't always so bad, Beltrán. For a while we were just what we wanted to be."

"Things were good for a while, yes."

"Then it all went downhill."

"And we're still feeling the aftershocks."





An earthquake, a toothache, a mad dog, a telephone message—and all our house of peace falls like a pack of cards.

R. H. BLYTH



SUNDAY

7:14 P.M.

In a TransVip van on
Alameda Bernardo O'Higgins
Near the Universidad de Chile, Santiago

In 1976, for my twelfth birthday, my grandfather Teodoro gave me *The Book of Lists* by David

Wallechinsky, Amy Wallace, and Irving Wallace, published by Little, Brown & Company. It was a big book, heavy, with nearly five hundred pages, and it was written in English, a language that I had a considerably better command of than Spanish. He bought it at Studio Books, which was the only place in Santiago that sold things in English. Sometimes I would go for a walk to the store; just setting foot in there made me think of California and the whole world I had left behind. I read and reread every one of its pages until I had almost memorized it. Together with Cataclysm in Valdivia by Teodoro Niemeyer (published by Zig-Zag in 1964 and dedicated to whom else but me and my uncle Beltrán, who died in just that fierce earthquake), The Book of Lists became my favorite

book. I don't think I've since read or reread a book with such devotion as I did that simple amalgam. Its influence, I suspect, has not been slight. Since then I've tended to enumerate and catalog events, people, happenings, earthquakes, things. I wouldn't go so far as to claim that that book full of miscellaneous trivia changed my life but, if pressed, I'd have no problem in declaring that it definitely gave it some structure.



SUNDAY In a TransVip van on

7:25 P.M.

Alameda Bernardo O'Higgins Near Estación Central, Santiago

I don't usually talk with strangers. Especially on planes. There are people who wait anxiously to see who'll be sitting next to them. Not me. I don't ask much of life. Few people get what they want; I, of course, don't believe in being one of them, and I lead a happier life for just that reason. One

dreams will end up sitting next to the window and that their bodies might brush against each other with the bump of the landing. But I lead a more low-key life and, despite the instabilities and little things that may be, I feel fortunate and at ease.

of my colleagues hopes that the woman of his

obtain: a job doing exactly what I want to do. And if work is life, then my life's not bad at all. Therefore, for me, traveling is not synonymous with adventure and surprise. I don't try to find people who can move the earth; on the contrary, it's people who come to me when the earth decides to move itself.

I've achieved what many yearn for and few



SUNDAY 7:36 P.M.

In a TransVip van on Alameda Bernardo O'Higgins Near Pila del Ganso, Santiago

My grandfather Teodoro fought to be remembered as a leader in the field of predicting telluric movements. That choice (the most taboo of all geophysical sciences, the one that separated us inexorably from the real world, the one that wanted concrete answers) ended up closing doors to him and, for many, myself included, turned him into little more than a charlatan.

"One day, earthquakes will be forecast like the weather," he declared with excessive enthusiasm in a 1989 *Men's Journal* article that made him a celebrated popular figure but, on the other hand, sank him in the eyes of the scientific community.

"In countries like Chile, Japan, and on the West Coast of the United States, each TV station will have a good-looking seismologist who will inform the public of the pressure each tectonic

plate is under and, in case of danger, will announce the seismic future just as it is done today with every hurricane, typhoon, and thunder-storm."

In the last quarter of his life, the Mexico City earthquake of September 19, 1985, rocked him in such a way that he quit his position at the National University, sold his house in Chile, and left my grandmother, his wife of nearly fifty years. In a near-frenzy, my grandfather felt that he had a mission: to bring seismology and earthquakes closer to the greater public.

"Earthquakes are the Earth's way of freeing itself from its demons. One must fear them, respect them, know what they are. Remember that it's the masses who are crushed to death, not the scientists. It's crucial that the public understand that earthquakes kill and destroy. Only fear can protect us. My goal is for thousands of children throughout the world to grow up to become seismologists. In a logical world, there ought to be more students of geophysics than astronomy. We know much about the stars but precious little about the ground beneath our feet."

Without a doubt, my grandfather contributed, over and above his questionable methods, to the education of a wide audience. In the U.S., he became popular in the only way that someone can become popular there: by selling his soul. In the end, somewhat regretting the instant fame and the noise of the limelight, he left with all his forces for the tiny, battered, and telluric country of El Salvador, where he started a campaign of seismic evangelizing. But, if we consider the number of students who each year enroll in geophysics classes all over the world, the hard truth is that my grandfather wasn't able to reverse the trend: almost no one studies seismology.

"For all of its failures, NASA continues drilling into the unconscious minds of the youth. They all want to be astronauts or firemen. Nowadays nobody wants to become a priest or a seismologist. That it happens in Canada or England, I can understand; but that it happens here, among Peruvian, Mexican, Californian, and Chilean children, seems terrible to me, seems like a true curse that fills me with a sense of uneasiness and sadness."

As far as I'm concerned, I think that it'd be fair to mention here a triumph of his. He managed to transform me into what he wanted and what I became. Since I was a child, it was "drilled" into my dreams, and for a good part of my life, even during those shaky years when I tried uselessly to escape my destiny, I always knew that the logical, natural, genetic thing for me was to go on down that same road and continue with what neither my mother nor my uncle Beltrán were able to accomplish.

Curriculum Vitae

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Geophysics

Fundamentals of Seismology

Areas of Specialization:

Superficial earthquakes

Earthquakes in areas of subduction

Physical processes in the origins of large earthquakes



SUNDAY 8:41 p.m.

Comodoro Arturo Merino Benítez Airport, Customs Check

Santiago de Chile

I'm in line at the customs checkpoint, waiting

for them to type in my passport number so the government can find out all about my entrances and departures. I feel like someone is watching me. A prematurely aged woman, humble, with indigenous features and straight, white hair done up in a bun, cautiously observes me from farther back. I can tell she wants to speak with me and also, at the same time, that she doesn't know how to begin.

"Yes?"

tie, a bespectacled, dark-haired boy of about twelve waits, terrified. Around his neck hangs a laminated pass that reads "LanChile" and, in yellow letters, MINOR TRAVELING ALONE.

At her side, dressed in his Sunday jacket and

"Excuse me, but I'd like to ask a favor of you."

"If I can. What's it about?"

"You're flying to the United States?"

"Well, I have a layover there, yes."

"In Los Angeles?"

"Right."

"This boy is my sister's grandson. He's twelve."

"And traveling alone, I see."

"It's his first time flying, and his first time out of the country. We're both quite nervous. We came from Punitaqui yesterday on a bus."

"Punitaqui?"

"In the Cuarta Región."

"I know the place well."

"His father is in California. And his mother, the poor thing . . . do you remember the quake in '97?"

"It hit pretty hard, no?" I say, trying not to reveal that I had spent more than a week monitoring aftershocks in the region around Punitaqui.

"His father works there now and makes a decent living. Much better there than here. Now that he can afford it, he wants the boy at his side."

"I see."

"He's all by himself. I can't go; I don't have either the money or the papers. Could I ask that you just check on him once in a while? So he doesn't get lost. So he doesn't get off at the wrong place."

"Look, I don't know. I'm not the kind of person who likes to take on—"

"You won't have to do a thing. The flight attendants know, but just the same \dots "

The boy doesn't look at me. He's on the verge of tears, though I can't tell whether it's from pain, fear, or shame.

"What's his name?"

"Francisco. Francisco Salgado Ponce, señor."

The boy doesn't speak, is incapable of expressing himself, of saying his name.

"Okay. Look, go on ahead of me and then I'll try to see that nothing—"

"God bless you."

The woman hugs the boy, who barely responds.

"Be good with your father, and be sure to obey. Think of your friends who stayed back there in northern Chile. They're all going to be poor. You're a very lucky boy; I wish I had had this opportunity."

The boy passes into the customs office. He doesn't look back at us, doesn't turn his head, he waits attentively, and when the procedure is finished, he carefully stores his documents in the travel wallet around his neck and disappears.

Then the woman breaks down and I, reluctantly, put my hand on her shoulder and tell her that everything is for the better.

"The world will open itself up to him," I tell her without thinking. "This is a great opportunity for him."

"God willing."

I see that it's my turn to go through customs.

"Hasta luego, and don't worry," I tell the woman, but she doesn't hear me. She continues to cry.

"Next," says the officer.



SUNDAY 8:57 P.M.

Comodoro Arturo Merino Benítez Airport, Boarding Gate

Santiago de Chile

Welcome to LanChile, member of the One World Alliance.

One world. Once we really were one single world.

One continent: Pangea. And one ocean: Panthalassa.

I notice the tarmac is cracked on account of the hundreds of telluric movements that it's had to endure year after year, decade after decade. The terminal might be new, but not the runway. This new terminal has been built on a marsh. In the event of a strong quake, the surface will liquefy and the immense structure will come down in an instant. This is one of the drawbacks to being a seismologist: I always look deeper, I search for the

cracks, I scan for flaws and resistances.

I look to see if the boy is there, but don't find him.

Contrary to what the public thinks, seismologists work in memory. In this regard, we're related to historians and, in certain ways, to psychiatrists. Just like them, we cannot predict what will happen but, rummaging around in what's already happened, we can at least help people to better understand and to be prepared. Unlike my grandfather, I don't think it's important to forecast the next telluric movement down to the hour and minute. The important thing is to be prepared. That's the hard part. My academic and personal experience has shown me that unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately—man is never prepared for anything.

Societies, even the most recent ones, understand the importance of history. It's a common belief that if one isn't mindful of the errors of the past, then one is condemned to repeat them. Historians themselves recognize that this isn't quite so. Errors are committed to memory so that they can return for future use. History's purpose isn't to prevent these political cataclysms but rather to reconstruct what happened and to understand why things happened the way they did.

Seismology does the same. We know that there will be earthquakes, but not precisely when they will occur. The important thing is to not draw mistaken conclusions. The tragedy that occurred in Valdivia in 1960 was due in part to a faulty memory or—and perhaps this is more apt—to not having read the signs thoroughly. Faulty history. Once the earthquake's call sounded at Concepción on May 21, 1960, terror gave way to calm. It was a strong quake, and in some cases fatal, measuring 7.7 on the Richter scale, but in Valdivia the damage wasn't as severe. The people were frightened, but they quickly calmed down. The paper El Correo in Valdivia ran the headline concepción: The EARTHQUAKE'S EPICENTER, and the article was a list of clichéd calls for solidarity. One column listed the previous times that Concepción had been devastated. To read the May 22 El Correo is staggering if one knows what happened next. The reporters wrote about the news as if it were something distant, when it was actually something terrifyingly close at hand. As he confessed in his book, my grandfather assumed that the worst had passed, that they would have some thirty years "to relax before we can expect another." The lack of historical facts made

it impossible to imagine that the aftershocks, which came in diminishing waves, were in reality quakes themselves, preceding what would happen the following day. The earthquake—cataclysm—of May 22 reached 9.5 on the Richter scale and lasted for four interminable minutes. Later it was estimated that this was actually several individual quakes linked together, with thirty-seven epicenters. Nobody could understand what happened, not because such a thing had never happened before but rather because there was no historical record of it to alert people and have them prepared.

"After the theory of plate tectonics was accepted, it became crystal clear which regions of the globe were most vulnerable. Okay, that's it, end of subject. It's all cut-and-dry. What more do they want? We study the earth's movements, we're not nurses or the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Honestly, it doesn't matter to us—at least, not to me—if buildings fall. They can fall, and I hope they sue the hell out of the architects. What we want to know is how much energy was released, in which direction the blocks shifted, not how many old ladies were brained when ceilings collapsed on top of beds. When we present the authorities with the fact that we live on a fault line, we're doing our duty. They'll have to assume the consequences. Either build well, sparing no expense, or it's better not to live there. How many people live in the Andean region? The people there—especially those without resources—understand that nobody's welcome there. Why so many people live in high-rise buildings in Santiago is just beyond me. Why did the Spaniards build adobe houses time and time again? Better not even to speculate. The same thing happened with Arica: they rebuilt it right on the exact same site of its destruction. Incredible. If Arica had been bombed or if it had burned, fine. But no. That's how it is, a time bomb, waiting for the waves. Look, kids, it's one thing to have memories and ties to the land, and it's another thing to be stupid. Nostalgia has nothing to do with memory. If the people really remembered, they would know that they ought to leave as soon as possible. And if they don't do it, fine, but live with the consequences and don't come crying after the fact, like little kids."

The one thing that my grandfather forgets in his meticulous analy-

sis is the human factor. Of course, after every big quake, they uncover strings of municipal corruption, false building permits, and unscrupulous contractors. But the more we know about what happened, the better we can estimate what will happen, clearly. Only through remembering—not forgetting—can we avoid major tragedies. I don't think it's a simple coincidence that forgetful communities, communities with bad memories, spring up in the most unsteady places. Earthquakes rock people who, unconsciously, forget the terror over which they live. If they didn't, they couldn't go on living there; it's a simple survival mechanism.



SUNDAY 9:15 A.M.

Comodoro Arturo Merino Benítez Airport, Boarding Gate

Santiago de Chile

I go in the duty-free shop, but the intense smells of the perfumes people are testing drive me

back out. I go past a store selling marzipan, chocolate, and assorted candies. The kid isn't at our as-

signed gate. Was he getting on another flight? Is it possible that the ticket lady wasn't paying attention and he'd end up getting on a flight to

Caracas instead of Los Angeles? From Punitaqui to California.

From Paris to Punitaqui.

earthquake came to me like a godsend.

I came here from Paris, where I'd spent almost seven years. At first, it was going to be three years there, get my doctorate, and then back home. But

head of the Office of Asia Minor, the constant trips to Istanbul and Ankara, and the Armenian

then came the offer to stay on and teach, be the

I don't remember much about Paris. It didn't

interest me. I wasn't there as a tourist; I was there to study, first and foremost, but also to forget. Not that there was much to forget. It didn't matter much around here. I'd hoped that the past would be full of profound, isolated facts that you could use in a moment of desperation, like having an ace up your sleeve when you have to explain why you are the way you are. People think that these milestones are like earthquakes, the moments in which it all comes down, but the reality is that things are always rumbling. During an earthquake, people feel all the fear that they don't feel when, in their everyday lives, the ground is taken for granted. This is natural. The human body was designed like an anti-seismic building; at most, we intuit that we're moving only because something bad's happening, but something else prevents us from grasping its true dimensions. So, for all practical purposes, for most of us, nothing much happens. Nothing. Some end up with damaged foundations, though the majority manage to weather it well enough. It's only years later that we realize just how much of a tragedy it was that befell us, but by then it's too late.

The things I remember most about my Parisian years are my bedroom and my mattress; the Saint-Germain McDonald's; old Lu Man's Vietnamese restaurant; the Beaubourg FNAC underground bookstore; Rafiq Isber, the Syrian physicist with whom I shared that freezing little flat; the posters of old Hollywood films that played in the art houses on my narrow little street. I never saw any of them. Strange. As a kid I saw so many movies.

The best thing about that city was, without a doubt, the Geophysics Institute. I liked being surrounded by people who were completely unable to relate to themselves or to each other. There is no greater paradise on earth than the microcosm that is science—and now, especially, computer science—for those who don't dare to die but also are unable to live like the rest. In Santiago, the faculty in Beaucheff was like a temple ready to receive nerds, spazzes, and geeks. We weren't alone there; we were a community.

With time and the technological advances society owes to science, a subtle yet significant change had occurred.

"Little by little," the structural mathematician Ricardo Mujica once

told me, "the rest of the world is starting to act like us. The difference is that they don't have anything inside them, and no interest in knowing more. Think about it: imagine acting like us but without feeling the call that drives us."

By 1997 I'd had enough of Paris and of being with someone as fragile and fractured as Dominique. Rafiq (El Sirio) had already gone back to Damascus, having vowed to never again set foot in the West. Dominique, left without a room, figured that the logical thing to do-considering that we were half-friends and half-lovers-was to share an apartment, the cooking, and, more and more often, the bed. It didn't turn out as expected. I suppose she could no longer stand my limitations, deficiencies, and bad habits. When I was with her, I was a worse person. When she was with me, she was bordering on the unbearable. Together we became one of those couples that single people hold up as an example of why to stay single. What bound us together wasn't love or passion but something else that was perhaps even more of an aphrodisiac: pain, blame, consolation, the inability to be alone. What's more, she was obsessed with counseling Chilean expats. I don't think she ever forgave me when she found out I'd never been tortured.

When Dominique was vacationing with her Chilean mother in Brittany, I took advantage of the situation to leave without saying good-bye. I left her a note, taking responsibility for my cowardice. She sent me a postcard of the Bastille saying that I was too predictable and that she was happy to have the apartment on rue Cujas to herself. I never heard from her again.

I went back to the University of Chile's Seismological Institute on Blanco Encalada Street, opposite Beaucheff, and I never left, except when it was absolutely necessary. Sometimes I even slept there, behind the seismographs, which is the warmest part of the Institute. I had a flannel-lined sleeping bag that I threw on top of an electric inflatable mattress Dominique and I had bought at Schipol Airport in Amsterdam for visitors to crash on in our tiny room in the Latin Quarter.

Why am I remembering this? Why go back to it all? I thought that everything'd been erased, deleted, *terminado*.

With France behind me, I set myself to hoping, hour after hour, for the earth to shake. It was mind-boggling to me to once again be in a country where the earth moved; and, even more, it was a blessing to be so far from that city and that country where the ground was stable, immutable, harboring no active faults. In Santiago, in that neighborhood that sometimes wanted to be Parisian, even though it hadn't yet reinvented itself as a college area, it wasn't all just studies, theories, or calculations. There, facts were truths. Things shook there, and shook for real. The land was alive there and, as such, it had the ability to kill.

Such was my desire to be imbued by the Institute and the university, to be near the Chilean crust and to rebuild my life around that which made me feel complete and accepted, that I rented a nice, cozy apartment in the Remodelación República development, with an amazing view of the track at the Club Hípico. I still live there, and if the bank approves my credit, I'll buy it from the landlady, a *Talquina* who made her fortune in the salami business. The Beaucheff neighborhood, or University Heights as it's now called, ended up being the place where I found myself the happiest.

The apartment isn't far from the big old house on Toesca Street, where I lived with four crazy, autistic guys during my early school days. During the March 3, 1985, quake, the house collapsed while I was at the bodega on the corner buying bread. One of the guys, the only one who was home at the time, fell on the nearby house, but nothing happened to him. The house had to be demolished, and I ended up in some rat-infested hostel on Gorbea Street.

On October 14, 1997, at 10:03 P.M., just after the nightly weather report, I was at the Institute eating Señora Mercedes's home-cooked sausage and white rice when I saw the seismograph's needle starting to jump. Right away I knew that this was going to be my trial by fire, my first quake as a member of the Institute.

The earthquake struck the Cuarta Región, and its epicenter was some twenty-three kilometers southeast of Illapel. It was particularly strong in Coquimbo and La Serena, Combarbalá, Ovalle, La Chimba, Paihuano, and the little town of Punitaqui and the village of Pueblo

Nuevo, where a boulder crashed through the roof of a house, killing the entire family inside instantly.

The phone rang. It was Radio Cooperativa. It rang again, and it was the Channel 8 Breaking News team. It rang again and again. I called my boss and he said, "You're the spokesman. You're young, you're conscientious, be an information conduit. And don't forget to mention that you got your doctorate in Paris."

I spoke on behalf of the Institute. When they came—in droves—I said, "It hit 6.8 on the Richter scale. We still have no information about any victims. But we expect there to be some. Reports are already starting to come in from ONEMI and the city council. But I can tell you this: put these numbers in context. This is a poor area with a lot of adobe houses. I think that, for a case such as this, the thing to do is use the Mercalli scale, which measures perceptions. And taking into account the information we've received, we're talking about a 9. Punitaqui no longer exists; it's lying in rubble on the still-moving ground."

In the morning, every paper I read maintained that the little town no longer existed. After my unfortunate declaration, Punitaqui was written off as a disaster, but the fact is that it had suffered little damage compared to the disaster in Valdivia. In Punitaqui, the earth hadn't opened up, there were no tidal waves, not one broken record. There were eight fatalities in the desolate town, an amazing figure considering that more than half of the buildings in the area had collapsed.

I spent five days in Punitaqui and the surrounding areas and felt like an actor who, after years of instruction, had finally ascended to his true stage to perform in front of a paying audience. The people there provided me with food and shelter. They confided in me. I was in all the headlines, and talked for hours on every radio station in the country.

Without intending to—or perhaps having intended all along—I became the authority in the town, in the region. It felt good to be useful, admired, on the public's mind.

"Will it happen again?" President Eduardo Frei asked me in Pueblo Nuevo.

Instead of responding reflexively, I thought for a moment and

looked at his face, absorbing the strong sun that shines over the Andean deserts and foothills. For one brief instant, I held the country's destiny in my hand.

"The question, Señor Presidente, is not if it will happen again, but when. This is the question that no one in this country can or wants to ask. Every Chilean is going to die, yes, for this is the fate of every human being, but we bear an additional cross: we all will endure an earthquake that may either kill us or destroy everything we've fought to have."

From dusk until dawn, I became the principal figure of authority in Punitaqui. After a particularly strong aftershock, people voluntarily came to me with confessions: "I stole from my father," "I raped my daughter," "I like to dress up as a woman," "My brother's son is actually mine."

After I returned to Santiago, the then-director of the Institute threatened to suspend me. I was prohibited from making any more public statements, and he told me that he was going to try to just forget the whole thing.

"This is science, not a spectacle, son," he said sternly.

"You're right, it's not a spectacle. I don't want to be a mouthpiece, I just want to be able to understand things a bit better. I'd like to teach a course next semester. Go out into the field to investigate."

That was five years ago, and now I'm the Institute's director.

I decide to buy some mints. As I'm taking out my money, I see the kid from Punitaqui coming out of the bathroom. He's all broken up, and despite all his efforts to contain his sadness, he just can't. He's devastated. I pay for the mints and stick one, hard like a pearl, in my mouth. I take a few steps over toward the kid, but then stop. How could I possibly help him? Everyone's got problems, and there's nothing worse than a stranger who comes up to you offering advice. Plus, when you're in a state as vulnerable as that, you don't want to be around anybody, you don't want anyone to see you like that. There's nothing worse than going around venting your emotions.

I decide to leave the kid alone. I walk. At least he's here. I promised to watch him, my mission is to make sure he doesn't get lost going through customs, or get off at the wrong gate in Los Angeles.

I'm walking in circles. A blond, willowy girl of about twenty is consoling him. Reminds me of Federica Montt. She caresses his face, and he smiles at her. The kid's stopped crying. I feel as if something's happening to me; an internal tremor. I touch my cheeks; they're dry, thankfully. I try to calm my breathing, to relax, to quell the force of emotion in time.



SUNDAY

On board LanChile Flight 511
A Boeing 767 on the SCL/LIM leg
of the SCL/LAX flight
Bathrooms located on the right
Currently over the Pacific Ocean, off the
coast of the resort city of Tongoy, Chile

I walk down the aisle and see the kid from Punitaqui. He's sleeping. On his lap is an English-Spanish dictionary.

I go into the bathroom.

stainless steel toilet. It's full of foam, on the verge of overflowing. I push the button and listen as the blue liquid is sucked into the atmosphere, and

The passenger before me hadn't flushed the

I wash my face with the 767's hard, warm water.

wipe down the seat with a recycled-paper towel.

I look at myself in the mirror.

I pull down my lower eyelids and examine my normally light brown eyes, now bloodshot, contaminated, irritated. I fish my prescription eyedrops out of my pocket. I look in the mirror once more.

I'm pale; my lightly freckled complexion is unwashed. My hair is straight, a bit too long, butchered at Don Anselmo's barbershop on Vergara Street, near the Institute. I still have that damn cowlick on the top of my head, and no matter how much gel I comb in, it always grows back a few hours later like some sort of mysterious plant.

I'm skinny. You can see my bones. Like Professor Agovino, from Columbia University, once told me, "For a man to be skinny is the same thing as for a woman to be fat: doors will be closed to you." Some people seem to think I've got rickets, think I'm fragile. I don't feel fragile, but I suppose I look it.



MONDAY

12:03 A.M. local time

Temperature: 13°C

Jorge Chávez Airport, Boarding Gate Lima-Callao, Peru

"Señor Beltrán Soler, please proceed to Gate 4."

"Yes, what is it?"

"We've got an overbooked flight, señor, and would like—"

"My ticket was bought three months ago. In cash, I understand. It was settled in Japan by the Geophysics Department of—"

"Yes, of course, there's no problem there. The error was ours. What's happened is that we have more passengers than seats. We can offer you two things."

"You can't offer me anything that'll interest me. I have to get to Los Angeles because I'm connecting with Japan Airlines at seven o'clock."

"I see. I didn't realize that."

"You should have realized that. It's your job, not mine."

"Let's see. . . . Could I see your ticket, please?"

"You're not going to leave me here. I just told you. Don't even think about it."

"That has never been our intention. We were going to offer—if you're interested—to put you up in the San Isidro Swisshotel for the night, and then put you on a flight tomorrow. All the expenses will be taken care of."

"That's very nice, but tomorrow just won't work. They're waiting for me in Tsakuba for the inaugural session."

"I understand. But in addition to this offer, señor, we'll include an extra ticket for travel between Santiago and Los Angeles, good for one year."

"Yes, that's a very generous offer indeed. I'm sure there are many people who will take you up on it, no doubt about it. But again, I have to be in Narita as soon as possible. And I already have a hell of a layover in Los Angeles. Almost twelve hours. I'm praying this thing doesn't get drawn out any longer than is absolutely necessary."

"Let's see . . . this is . . . yes . . . that's it: your connection is all set. Your bags will go straight through. I see you have a voucher from Japan Airlines for the Crowne Plaza at the airport."

"That's right, but it's not from the airline, señorita, it's courtesy of the university."

"Alright, Señor Soler, what we can offer is . . . May I see your Lan Pass?"

"Why? Is there another problem?"

"Not at all. Excuse me for a moment?"

"Why not? But just to be clear, I'm getting on that plane. You can leave all these people here, that's your problem, but I'm getting on. I know my rights."

"Don't worry. You'll get there. Anyway, do you know that you have over a hundred and seventy thousand miles and twelve upgrade vouchers that are about to expire?"

"That's my problem. Private information."

"I can also throw in a rental car at no additional cost."

"I don't drive. Never learned."

"I won't say another word. But, with all due respect, I'd recom-

mend that you use them while you can. If not, you'll lose them, and they really are worth quite a bit. They're good for almost three full trips to the United States. It's an ideal way to vacation . . ."

"Look, señorita, I don't take vacations, and I have no desire to stand around here like a bum. Will we be flying today, or not?"

"Of course. And if it's alright with you, we'll bump you up to business class. It'll be more comfortable for you, and open up a spot in the rear."

"I don't want to waste my miles on trivialities. I thought that was clear."

"Don't worry, Señor Soler. Nobody's going to touch your miles."

"I'm still not sure if I want to accept this proposition. What's in it for me?"

"Well, it's more comfortable, there's more space, and better service."

"I have no desire to travel surrounded by executives with laptops, let me assure you."

"You'll be able to sleep much more comfortably. Shall we make the change then?"

"But to an aisle seat. Aisle seat, or nothing."

"An aisle seat. Why not?"



MONDAY

On board LanChile Flight 511

A Boeing 767 on the LIM/LAX leg
of the SCL/LAX flight
Seat 6D

Currently over the Pacific Ocean,
off the coast of the resort city
of Máncora, Peru

It's true: there's much more space up front here.

The seats recline almost horizontally.

They hand me a little box with complimentary amenities: toiletries, a blindfold for sleeping, a pair of slippers, and a little satchel for carrying shoes. I take off my shoes, stow them in the satchel, and tie it shut tightly so they don't smell. I notice, to my discomfort, that my sock has worn through at the tip of my big toe. As quickly as possible, I put on the ad-hoc flight slippers.

I see that the woman in the aisle seat next to

me has done the same.

I can't help but notice that she took her shoes off. I can't help but notice also that she's one of

off. I can't help but notice also that she's one of those women whose beauty flowers later than

others'. I can't tell if she's attractive, and that, of course, makes her absolutely enticing. She's hidden behind her glasses. Adjusts them constantly. Leafs through the airline's harmless magazine. I decide that she's a banker or—perhaps worse—an FMI executive.

I try reading a book loaned to me by Javier Meza, who was at Penn State for a while presenting a study of the San Ramón Fault, in the foothills of the Región Metropolitana. The book deals with the failed expedition to the Galeras volcano in Colombia in 1993. I had the opportunity, at a meeting of the American Geophysical Union (AGU) in San Jose, California, to have breakfast with Professor Stanley Williams. This was—if my memory serves—in 1991, and I remember, as we thickly spread our bagels with cream cheese, that Professor Williams remarked that he preferred the mini-baguettes they have in Paris, the city that was, in those days, my center of operations.

"Before I graduated," he told me, "I spent three months living in an apartment with no bathroom. Right in the heart of the Latin Quarter."

"I live there. Rue Cujas."

"I know it well. The street with the little theaters that show old films."

"That's the one."

"Great neighborhood, great city. It was the best summer of my life, Osorno."

Despite not being able to strike up a friendship, from the moment we were introduced Williams gave me the nickname "Osorno," after the Chilean volcano. Williams had studied it, and knew its every detail.

"Is that old hotel in Ensenada still there?" he asked me with a touch of nostalgia. "I stayed there for almost a month, eating German delicacies each morning before starting the ascent."

"I'd imagine so. I haven't been in the south of Chile since I was ten."

Williams, who was a geology professor at Arizona State, was happiest doing field work, and was always on one expedition or another. On January 14, 1993, he led a group of twelve explorers—under the auspices of the United Nations—on a climb to the summit of Galeras.

Williams's plan was to install monitors, study the volcano, and collect meaningful data. The unexpected eruption of Nevado del Ruiz, which ended up burying thousands of campesinos in a mudslide, had proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that studying volcanic activity was something of vital importance. There they were, at the summit, some of them in the crater while others were on the lip with some tourists, when suddenly, against all logic, as if all of a sudden they had found themselves in one of Irwin Allen's unseemly disaster movies, the Galeras volcano blew its top. Six of the scientists died, along with three tourists. Williams, inexplicably, managed to save himself, though he wasn't unscathed: first-degree burns covered most of his body, one leg had to be amputated, and he sustained severe damage to his brain. Perhaps worse, Williams's career and status as a scientist were both ruined, as the scientific community blamed him for haste, megalomania, severe errors in judgment, and—they could put it no other way—being a general Indiana Jones type of character. Some circles accused Williams of not only knowing that the volcano was active, but also of ignoring the seismic data. Williams, they said, wanted to be there.

"Excuse me, but is that book you were reading about the failed Galeras expedition?"

"Actually, it is."

Her voice, I think, betrays a slight sadness, a touch of fatigue.

"I heard about that. What a tragedy."

"Yes," I say. "It was."

During the takeoff, she opened her iBook and brought up some digital photos she'd taken of Cuzco. Many of them are of children. Many are of babies.

"I was in Arizona when it happened. It was all over the news," she continues, removing her headphones.

"I see," I say as I watch, transfixed, her long index finger trace delicately across the mousepad and put the iBook to sleep.

The flight attendant comes up to me and offers me something to drink. In general, I don't drink alcohol.

"I'll take a pisco sour," I say.

"And you?"

"Lo mismo," she replies in a perfect, if accented, Spanish, and then slides her laptop under her seat.

"Do you speak Spanish?" I ask her, without knowing just why.

"These days, if you don't speak it, you'll miss a lot of things. Spanish is the tool of my trade."

The flight attendant hands us our pisco sours and two bowls of almonds and peanuts.

"Are you from Peru?" she asks.

"No. Forgive me, it's been great chatting with you, but I really have to finish this. I hope you don't mind."



MONDAY

On board LanChile Flight 511
A Boeing 767 on the LIM/LAX leg
of the SCL/LAX flight
Seat 6D
Currently over the Pacific Ocean,

Jurrently over the Pacific Ocean near the Galápagos Islands, Ecuador

The flight attendant opens a folding table, lays down a cloth, and begins serving us a rather elaborate dinner.

I put my book aside.

I see everyone eating as if in a restaurant, hear the murmur of random conversation.

Cheese and grapes.

White wine, which—I don't know why—I accept.

A brightly colored salad.

Assorted breads.

My seat-neighbor is now reading a copy of *Harper's*, using a pencil to mark something in the index.

"That's the best part of the magazine," I tell her.

She looks at me, at first surprised but then returning my look with a warm smile.

"It's very scientific. Hard facts. I'm a huge fan of statistics. I'm on my way to a convention to discuss just that: hard facts."

"It's the scientist's poetry. An entire world captured in a single equation."

I can tell from the look in her eyes that she appreciated what I said.

"Harper's and the Atlantic Monthly are my favorite magazines."

"Besides the Wall Street Journal," I say.

"What?"

"Never mind. What's your favorite newspaper?"

"The San Diego Union-Tribune, La Prensa San Diego in Spanish, and, if there's time, the Los Angeles Times."

I take a sip of wine and say, "I'm sorry for being rude before, but—"

"It was nothing. I was intruding."

"I'm sorry. Really. One of the topics that we're going to be discussing in Japan is how much risk is necessary when beginning an investigation," I lie.

"And what a topic it is."

"Yes. A bank that ventures nothing will end up ruined. A bank that risks everything will end up—"

"Ruined. It applies to everything, I suppose."

"But in that case, they charge interest. To guard against risk."

"I imagine so," she says, curious. "But you know, I don't work in a bank. I can't stand them. You know how they treat new immigrants."

"You're not a banker?"

"No. And you? And please, you can be informal with me."

"No. I mean, yes. Good. Informal. But no, I'm not a banker."

"I had thought that you were."

"Really?"

"I mean, not a banker per se, but a businessman."

"I really came off as a banker?"

"I was joking. You know, just making small talk. I'm an immigration attorney. One of the good guys, just so you know."

"Not with the Border Patrol?"

"I butt heads with those guys every day. But my real enemies are the INS."

I tell her that I'm a seismologist. But then, quick as a heartbeat, I toss in a bit of scientific trivia. Something to keep the conversation more objective than personal.

"You know, every day there are thirty or forty earthquakes somewhere on earth," I say seriously, precisely, convincingly.

"Yes, I know," she replies. "I'm Californian through and through. Earthquakes don't surprise me anymore. Only when the house comes down."

I look at her and laugh.

"That's it. That's the only thing you've got to watch out for. The ground never killed anybody."

"Almost. Don't forget about those people who fall into crevices and get swallowed up."

"Really?"

"Hey, I've seen my share of big-budget Irwin Allen disaster movies."

"Me too."

"I've gotten addicted to DVDs," she says, showing me a copy of *Sixteen Candles*. "I've got quite a stockpile," she continues. "I started making a list. I read this book—"

"The Movies of My Life, by—"

"Lorenzo Martínez Romero. Have you seen any of his films? The guy's a phenomenal director. A lot of fun too. Captures all the energy of the border."

"Nope, I've never seen any of his stuff."

"You should. Have you read this? It came out just a bit ago. It's his memoir. His cinematic memoir."

"No."

"It's funny because I never used to buy videos. Never even rented them, to be honest. But now . . . I don't know, it seems somehow comforting to go back and watch all the movies that meant something to me. I don't go out much, and when I do go see a movie it's always a disappointment."

"The past was better?"

"No, the past was worse."

"I agree. But maybe it's those old movies that were better."

"I don't think so. That's the point of Lorenzo Martínez's book: those movies weren't important for everybody, but they meant something to you."

"Could be."

"Hi, I'm Lindsay," she says unexpectedly. "Nice to meet you."

"Lindsay? Like Lindsay Wagner?"

"Like the Bionic Woman. Exactly."

"Beltrán. Beltrán Soler."

"Hola, Beltrán."

"Hi."



I'm from the San Fernando Valley. For many years, I was ashamed of that fact: I thought that if you didn't come from the great New York City or the fields of Iowa, you wouldn't have anything interesting to say.

PAUL THOMAS ANDERSON



It's best to arrive in Los Angeles at night.

If you get there during the day, it's too easy to see the truth: the city doesn't have angels, dreams, or stars. But if you arrive at night, the idea of sleeping vanishes, no matter how tired you are, and you feel—if only for a moment—privileged. You feel that it's not just by chance that you're here, where movies are born.

It's even less advisable to arrive at dawn. You touch down at night, full of faith, and by the time you leave the terminal the sun is in your eyes, along with the feeling that someone's cheated you.

Before, I've always touched down at LAX (prior to getting connecting flights to Tokyo, Vancouver, San Jose, or Phoenix) during the daytime, at that ugly hour of dawn when the mist coming off the sea won't even let you see the smoldering sun. But this time, we landed at night and the city seduced me, not so much with what I saw through the window but rather with what I remembered.

As we started our descent and flew in over Catalina Island, I recalled the anxiety that preludes

landing in an unknown city. Los Angeles was just a layover but, nonetheless, it felt like my destiny.

I looked at my JAL ticket and tried to decipher the stylized Japanese characters. I thought: Tokyo, the neon of Ginza, the udon soups on board the bullet train, the campus gardens at Tsakuba.

"Are you happy to be back?" Lindsay asks me.

"This is only the beginning. I still have a long way to go."

"From the expression on your face, I thought that you were returning home. Do you know many people down there?"

"Only some Caltech faculty members. I was just trying to see if I could figure out where Pasadena was. We came in over the ocean around Huntington Beach and—"

"There's DVD Planet, the store I was telling you about."

"Yeah . . . you can tell by the wharf. It's all lit up and sticks out into the ocean."

"I see you know L.A. well."

"I'm a fan of maps. Once, the Institute fellows took me on a little touristy walk," I said, so as not to explain my Californian history. "It's kind of disappointing. All more or less the same. Pasadena's different, though, of course."

"And West Los Angeles. I love the South Bay beaches. And the Valley, of course. Despite everything they say, all the stereotypes, the Valley is the Valley. If I ever have to leave San Diego and go back to L.A., I would try to live in Santa Monica or, I don't know, Sherman Oaks... Encino's another possibility. Encino's a good place, an ideal place for raising a family. Have you ever seen *Encino Man*?"

"No."

What did she know that I did not? Did she know that, in the end, L.A. was really my destiny and not just a place to change planes? Was she reading my mind? Or was it just simple airplane chat? We'd talked for the better part of the flight. She didn't tell me about her life, but summarized her favorite movies. I'd hardly told her anything, and it was too late to start now.

Down there, in that city, I thought, lived some of my relatives, a good part of my past, the beginnings of my history. Would my pater-

nal grandmother still be there, asleep in some nursing home? What were the two Soler cousins up to? My aunts and uncles? What had happened to Javi? To Carlos? Will he have turned up among the dead? Which one of those millions of houses was the one where my father lived?

"Now we're over Compton, I think."

"You ought to take advantage of the layover to get out and stretch your legs a bit," Lindsay suggested. "Manhattan Beach is right there by the airport. That wharf is a lot of fun."

"The only thing I'm asking of this city is air-conditioning and a bed that's not too soft."

"Well, I can pretty much guarantee you the first part. You can't survive in L.A. without A.C. That, or a car. It's the same in San Diego, but we like to think we're more civilized."

The plane was now very low, just about to touch down in the middle of the expansive city. I fine-tuned my focus even more: two 7-Elevens, a Shell station, the Inglewood Forum, the 405 freeway, and—just then and unexpectedly, as if I'd seen it yesterday—the huge Randy's doughnut, shining in the night, just off Ash Street.

For that brief instant just before the rubber tires touched down on the tarmac runway, I felt as if the cabin had filled with the aroma of fresh glazed doughnuts.

I was home again.





I saw my first two hundred films clandestinely, playing hookey from school and sneaking in through the exit or the bathroom window. Whenever my parents went out for the night, I seized the opportunity to escape. By the time they got home, I was already in bed, feigning sleep. I paid for all of these pleasures in fierce stomach pains, cramps, nervous headaches, and feelings of guilt. But all this served to enrich even more the emotions that movies stirred in me. I had a great need to enter into the films, and every time I was able to get a bit closer to the screen and block out the rest of the theater. I rejected period pieces, war movies and westerns because it was difficult to identify with them, thus leaving me with detective films and romances. Contrary to the few other moviegoers of my age, I didn't identify with the heroes but rather with the helpless and, more systematically, with everyone who found themselves in difficult circumstances.

> François Truffaut from the prologue to Les filmes de ma vie



From: Beltrán Soler

bsn@ddg.u-chile.cl>
To: Lindsay Hamilton

Ihamilton@border

crossings.org>

Date: Wednesday, 17 January 2001 06:52 a.m.

Subject: the 50 movies of my life (first 25:

Calif., '64-'73)

Hola, Lindsay:

M&Ms.

movies.

First of all, I'm the seismologist you met on the plane from Lima to L.A. We sat together, up front. Do you remember? I sure do.

Pues, I've done a few things since we split

up at the airport on Monday. I took your advice and went to DVD Planet. Tuviste razón...

iQué padre! It was great, like a return to my youth, when I ate up movies like they were

No sé exáctamente por qué te escribo, pero... you got me thinking about all the movies of my life, and... maybe I don't have anyone else in the world to send my list to, but that doesn't seem either sad or embarrassing. Something tells me it's a good idea to send you this list, all these

By the way, I'm not in Japan. In the end I didn't go; I missed my flight.

When you asked me if I knew L.A., I didn't tell you the truth. I know it well, though it's been years since I wandered through its streets or penetrated the Valley. I'm writing you from a Van Nuys hotel. Can't get more Valley than that.

¿Sentiste el temblor? Por un momento I thought it was going to be a real quake... In San Diego it was a 3, but here it almost made 5.

I'm leaving in a couple hours...

I could write a lot here (I've done nothing else lately but hack end-lessly away at this old PowerBook), telling you about what's been going on inside my head (remembering, remembering, remembering), but I think it's enough to say that I haven't been able to stop thinking about this whole "movies of my life" thing. And I've never written a thing in my life. This is all your fault. It was like a reflex... I just started going over them in my mind. Just for that, I thank you, and I'm in your debt.

Aquí están. Part of them. The ones from the first half of my child-hood, anyway. It seems as if there's no small amount of English underneath my Spanish, and I'm sure there's a lot of youth underneath my age as well.

I'll attach the rest in another e-mail.

Nada más.

Best and thanks,

-Beltrán S.

Born Free, UK, 1966, 96 mins.

DIRECTED BY: James Hill

STARRING: Virginia McKenna, Bill Travers, Geoffrey Keen

SEEN: 1996, Inglewood, CA

The majority of people who come to Los Angeles do so through an airport that has no name: Los Angeles International Airport, they call it, or LAX, its FAA code. This always bothered me, how provincial people could be that they thought "International" would suffice. It rose up to the side of the city, in the middle of Inglewood, between an unpopular arm of the Pacific and the ferocious 405 freeway. In those days, Inglewood was a run-down, semi-industrial neighborhood, stacked with bodegas and Laundromats; an inexpensive, itinerant area that attracted immigrants fresh off the plane. These days, the population is mostly African American with a significant Mexican presence, but in the early '70s, Inglewood was divided between newly arrived South Americans and lower-class white Americans who were trying to get out of the neighborhood.

We lived on tiny Ash Street, in an apartment on the ground floor of a minuscule two-story building. There were only four apartments in the whole building and, out back, according to what our photos say, there was a wide patio with trees and a swing. On the other side of the chain-link fence was the rail line. There were times—above all, at night—when the train, having made its great loop through the neighborhood, rolled by just as an airplane landed, and the noises fed into each other and produced something similar to the sounds that escape from the earth during a 9.0 earthquake. Two blocks away, on Manchester Avenue, a huge plaster doughnut rose up and kept watch over the neighborhood roofs.

For my mother, Angélica Niemeyer, times were tough when we lived in Inglewood. Maybe that's why she never sent me to the play-ground. I suppose she didn't want to be alone; she didn't have anyone else. It's not easy being alone in Inglewood, and my mother learned

that quickly. When she arrived in California in 1962, she knew no English, had neither friends nor money, and couldn't continue her studies. She had started college with the idea of becoming a seismologist like my grandfather, who was dean of the School of Engineering at the University of Chile, which is where she studied as well. But my father, Juan Soler, who came and went from the country, who came and went from the city, who came and went from her life, changed her plans. In a rash, juvenile act, my mother got pregnant. She dropped out halfway through her fourth year of school, married my father, and followed him to California. Inglewood was depressing; the California sun was barely visible through the industrial smog, the close and heavy marine air mixed with the smell of jet fuel, and—to make matters worse—she scarcely saw my father, who worked throughout the day and on into the night to pull together some money so they could move out of there soon. My mother, who like all Chileans was thin and not very tall, vomited so much that she ended up losing her baby—which could have been me—in the second trimester. Sometimes I wonder if a part of my strength went into that little, malnourished fetus; a part of my strength, or some other part of me, which has now left me incomplete. When my mother became pregnant for the second time, she decided to go back to Chile. She went alone, to bear me in a friendly land. She needed to be surrounded by her people, with doctors who were close and trustworthy, with nannies and nurses that a middle-class family of university professors could afford without problems.

When I was about to be born, my father got a stand-by ticket in Panagra. After two days of traveling, he made it to Concepción, saw my birth, and was there for four days doing nothing. He couldn't stand the Niemeyer family's arrogance, while they, for their part, scorned his lack of worldly perspective. He left for Santiago, where he had it out with his father, trading insults back and forth until, without saying good-bye to anyone, he went back to Los Angeles via Antofagasta, Quito, and Honduras. Once he was back there, he went straight to his neighbor's house, a gringa named Karen Tunez, whose husband worked cleaning airplanes for PSA, and he slept with her. This was

the first in a series of compulsive infidelities that, with the distance of kilometers and years, I think I can understand better. In spite of outward appearances, my father was a weak and fractured man who needed consolation of the basic, easy sort that other women offered. While my mother demanded more of him, the others simply asked that he be himself and finish quickly. In Concepción, my mother cut the long, flowing hair of her youth and gave up on my father, although not necessarily Inglewood. Tired of waiting, she decided that my father was capable of disappearing forever, and returned to California. We returned. Two years later, in 1966, my sister, Manuela, was born.

The four of us, they tell me, saw Born Free in a car at the drive-in at the edge of Culver City, next to a cemetery complete with a waterfall. The drive-in was populated with teenagers looking to get laid and couples with young children who couldn't afford a baby-sitter. I just remember a couple of lions loping through the savanna, and perhaps not even that. I do know the famous musical theme, and I think I even know the words. I don't know why my father and mother ever went to see a film about lions. Maybe because nobody knew much English, I don't know. In those days, my mother had an old Pontiac station wagon with fake-wood side panels, a relic from the 1950s that she bought with money my grandfather sent her. I remember she fashioned a bed out of some blankets in the back part of the wagon. She and my father sat up front watching that movie about a pair of Brits who went to Kenya and there, alone, not understanding a thing, they adopted a lion cub and raised it until they had to set it free. My mother would have been twenty-four in 1966, and my father almost twenty-six. I like the idea of the four of us in the car, surrounded by teenagers making out, the windshield grimy with sea salt, my mother nursing Manuela while my father slept, and I in the back, awake, watching that odd pair play with a lion cub that didn't belong to them at all.

Grand Prix, USA, 1966, 175 mins. **DIRECTED BY:** John Frankenheimer

STARRING: James Garner, Eva Marie Saint,

Yves Montand

SEEN: 1966, Culver City, CA

At the start of the 1960s, there was not one Soler in California, but by 1966 or 1967, it had begun to fill up with them. In 1966, when my father and two uncles loaded me into the mammoth white 1956 Plymouth convertible and took me to the drive-in to see Grand Prix, the city was on the verge of becoming the base of operations for the entire Soler clan. Only my grandparents had yet to arrive, though they had sent their children a year before. The Zanetti wave, made up of their cousins and relatives, was imminent. They all escaped from Chile before it was necessary, commendable, understandable, or politically correct. They weren't drawn out by politics or ideals, and neither death nor torture had sunk their talons into them. They weren't motivated to flee north out of hunger or shame. My aunts and uncles and their cousins, and their aunts and uncles and my grandparents, and then some more distant relatives, escaped in fear of becoming what they had, somehow, already become: failures in the eyes of others and, worse, in their own.

The Zanettis and the Solers had always been immigrants. They weren't 100 percent Chilean, which, on the one hand, gave them the liberty of flight, while on the other, it condemned them to being forever strangers in strange lands. These two families were so intricately linked that once the Zanetti patriarch—an old Italian named Arildo, who was also a compulsive gambler—capitulated and married María Soler, my grandfather Juan's sister, it was like a set of dominoes falling. When one of them—Norma Zanetti, a nurse—discovered another place on earth, the migration began, and one after another they left until, in less than five years, there was not a single Soler or Zanetti left in Chile. For them, Santiago had become the damned city, the un-

speakable city, the capital of a country that didn't treat them as they deserved, the place that made them understand just what they were: little and nothing. But in Chile it's not so easy to be little and nothing when you really are something. They were at a certain level, and then they lost it. Considering the dilemma, they preferred to start from zero among people who didn't know them rather than start from the middle, or a bit below, surrounded by the commiseration of people who moved in higher circles. Factors such as humiliation, resentment, rage, hate, and the suffocating sense of failure drove them to leave the country as quickly as possible. When the Zanetti family went under, their textile factory vanished in the breeze because of Arildo's maddening poker affliction, my paternal grandfather, who was always a parasite, was left with nothing. He ended up driving a taxi, though he never thought of himself as a taxi driver.

The moment of maximum humiliation, the thing that undid it all for him, that made him feel like a blind man in a world of the seeing, was when, without realizing it, Aunt Chilaca Valdés, my grandmother Guillermina's sister, got in his taxi. My grandfather wouldn't tolerate it. Wouldn't speak to her. When they got to their destination, Aunt Chilaca tried to pay her driver.

"How could you possibly think that I would accept your money? Who do you think I am?"

A good question: who was he? Was he neither more nor less than an accountant, an ordinary guy who was good with money? That's what he was in Chile, and he made a good living. It was also what he would become in California, and he could live well again. In between he drove a taxi, worked at a failing press, and washed dishes in Hollywood restaurants. Until his dying day, my grandfather wouldn't speak to Aunt Chilaca; when they would bump into each other, he would neither greet her nor make eye contact.

My sister wasn't born yet and my uncles Javi and Carlos had just completed their first year in California when I saw *Grand Prix* with them and my father. I don't remember anything from that film except for the anecdote that's told. This drive-in outing occurred one summer night, and I think I owe it all to my aunt Yvonne, who organized a

baby shower for my mother so Manuela would get everything she would need for free, and my mother could save. My father saw fit to go out and take me somewhere, me having just reached my second birthday, and I have no idea why we went with his two brothers to see Grand Prix. I do know that we saw the movie under the stars, with them drinking and smoking while I slept, not bothering anyone. The choice of movie didn't suprise me, given that my father was a motorhead, as was my uncle Javi, my godfather, who, after his return from Vietnam and before he started to get fat, worked as a mechanic for Ferrari. What did seem strange to me, however, was that on this trip to the movies my father invited his brothers, with whom he was never very close. My father was the oldest by several years, and when he left Chile, they were still children. They showed up in California some years later, in 1965: Carlos was eighteen, Javi was sixteen. My father took them in, and later rented a small apartment near the Forum, right in the heart of Inglewood. Fresh off the plane, my uncles washed cars and dishes, and studied English at night.

There is a photo, taken in front of the arc of the airport—a Jetsons-like structure—where the two of them are standing in matching checkered shirts, posing with their newly bought car. I'm peering through the window. My father must have taken that photo that same day. The car was extravagant but they got it cheap, and I think it was something of a consolation prize, because those two boys were alone, abandoned, they worked themselves to death, and the only truly adolescent act they could commit was to buy a car like that. My uncles had nowhere to go, and wouldn't have known how to, anyway. That would never change. That, unfortunately, was their destiny, both of them.

The Jungle Book, USA, 1967, 78 mins.
The Disney animated feature
DIRECTED BY: Wolfgang Reitherman
SEEN: 1967, Pasadena, CA

I was born on February 14, 1964, Valentine's Day, and had I been born in Los Angeles instead of Concepción, I'm sure they'd have baptized me as Valentín Soler Niemeyer. I've always believed that because Patrick Bellin, my best friend in California, happened to be born on March 17 of the same year, prompting a nurse of Irish heritage to convince his mother, Janice Wisenthal, to baptize him Patrick instead of Isaac, given that he had been born on Saint Patrick's Day. That way, said the nurse, there would always be a party for him every year. And that's how it was: Patrick's birthdays were always green. They tossed green food coloring in the milkshakes, and even the cake was topped with frosting the color of fresh bamboo. When Patrick turned ten, they took us to Farrell's Ice Cream Parlor, where the waiters came out with a green ice-cream cake in the shape of an igloo.

My father was not a fan of Saint Patrick's Day, because the only time he had problems at work was, of course, March 17. They almost kicked him out of the Teamsters union for throwing a wrench at a guy who tried to pinch him for not wearing anything green. Luckily, there was no nurse in Concepción to advise my mother. She was more concerned with whether I'd be born with ten fingers and toes, since there was a pill called Talidomida, which was later recalled, and many children were born with defects due to this drug. As if that wasn't enough, it was later discovered that women who spent their summer vacations on the Pacific Coast in those days were breathing air contaminated with radioactive particles blown in from the Mururoa Atoll, where the French were testing their atomic bomb. My own cousin, Isidora Bulnes Niemeyer, was born with a stump in place of her left hand (she had two fingers; one almost normal, the other twitchy and withered), and maybe that's why she ended up intense, dark, and confused. She

was born irradiated, as my grandmother Guillermina said, and from that day on, she hated the French.

I wasn't actually named Valentín, but I was marked by having been born on that day. In California, my birthday was a celebration, and I was showered with more love than was possible to process. In Chile, however, my birthday fell smack in the middle of summer, and there was never anybody in town. In the beginning, nobody celebrated the Day of Love, but, with time, the country became Californized and it ended up almost as big as Christmas. After checking my extremities, they dubbed me Beltrán—boring Beltrán—though it was far from a clean name: my uncle, my mother's brother, had been named Beltrán Niemeyer, and he died in Valdivia at the age of eighteen.

I don't really remember anything about the movie except that I saw it in a big, baroque theater in Pasadena, where my maternal grandfather was staying, having been invited to Caltech to teach a seminar. To me, The Jungle Book has always seemed like an intensely Chilean movie because, among other things, I imagined Chile as a wild, untamed, insurmountable country, or perhaps because I saw it with my grandfather Teodoro, with whom I associated Chile, which then seemed so exotic and far away. After the movie, my grandfather gave me a hardcover book illustrated with all the movie's characters, which he'd bought in a phenomenal toy store on Colorado Street near the theater. Maybe my memories of Mowgli, the boy who lived alone in the jungle, and Baloo, the dancing bear, are from the book and not the movie. I don't know. What I did take away from it were those four vultures who, with time, ended up looking to me very much like the Beatles. It's strange that one of my first cinematic memories is tied to Grandpa Niemeyer, a man who never appreciated fiction or art and who wanted everyone, from his son, Beltrán, down to me (including my mother, of course), to pursue careers in science.

Doctor Dolittle, USA, 1967, 152 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Richard Fleischer

STARRING: Rex Harrison, Samantha Eggar,

Anthony Newley

SEEN: 1967, Mann's Chinese Theater, Hollywood, CA

I remember very little about this one; just the "Talk to the Animals" theme (something I doubtlessly heard later) and the giant marine snail that sails into a bay like a ship. Nothing else. But what I really remember (or think I do) is the trip, the occasion. My grandparents had by then immigrated to California, and we walked down Hollywood Boulevard to see *Doctor Dolittle*. They lived in Las Palmas, in an apartment on the second floor of a long, rose-stucco building with open-air walkways and surrounded by palm trees. It was always an adventure for me to visit them there; my grandmother would buy me special treats like salami, string cheese, and V8 juice, and I had my own Fisher-Price toys to play with in that apartment in the peaceful, lower-middle-class neighborhood that Hollywood was then.

There is—or was—a photo taken of the time when we went to see the movie. When things happen to you at a certain age, you need certain catalysts (photos, distant memories, your grandparents' old Super-8 films) to trigger what you've hidden away in the depths. This is where that photo comes in: we were all there (except for my mother and father), in front of the famous Mann's Chinese Theater in Hollywood; it's winter and looks like it was cold; Christmas lights and giant Rex Harrison posters are up; and there is, on the sidewalk, hanging above the celebrity hand- and footprints, a fake llama with two heads (one facing forward and the other facing back) walking around. Uncle Carlos, who was in his military uniform, told me that llamas were Chilean, like us. My godfather, Javier Hernán, whom we called Javi, was also in uniform but, unlike Carlos (who also had enlisted in exchange for an instant green card), had been sent to a base outside Waco, Texas, instead of going directly to the front in Vietnam. Javi

had a girlfriend, Teresa—Teri—Mosquera, whose parents were Mexican and who went around in a miniskirt and tall orange boots that made her seem rather like one of the girls from Josie and the Pussycats. Teri was at one end of the row with Javi, who had never looked more skinny. I think Carlos and Javi left the next day, flying to Oakland and from there to their respective centers of operation.

My grandmother Yayi was also there. She looked good in a dress as shiny as plastic, a red coat, and a head full of hairspray. She didn't have light hair like my grandfather Juan Soler, who'd had white hair for as long as I knew him and who, on landing in California, fleeing from that country he had never desired and which had always made him feel like a stranger, started dressing like a Palm Springs golfer despite the fact that he worked hard cleaning things that no gringo wanted to clean. He was fifty-four when he arrived, and while his friends back in Chile were getting ready to retire from the Banco del Estado, he had to start over from scratch.

This fact, I think, is the most important of all. The one that defined him, and defined the rest of us as well. Before and after. No one can have everything in life, but those who have two countries, two languages, end up having less than everyone else. Coming to California allowed him to begin again, of course, but it forced him to bury his past. He was a bitter, fractured, unsociable man full of fears and bankruptcies. In this, unfortunately, we saw ourselves. But my grandfather always felt that he had done less than he could have.

One must always try to triumph in everything, to secure every angle, to gain good health, money, and love, plant a tree, write a book, have children; but, at the end of the day, at least in a man, to not have a profession, to not have that solid certainty that you're good because of it . . . without that—I think—everything, even the most important things, becomes secondary. Or you're not able to enjoy them. My grandfather always felt that people looked down on him, and he couldn't stand not having staked out a position in life. In the end, he had neither good health nor money, and while he did have much love from my grandmother, he had little from his children and none from his grandchildren. It tore down what little he had managed to achieve.

Since I was the oldest, it was up to me to give nicknames to all my grandparents. Grandpa Teodoro Niemeyer became Tata, and Grandma Guillermina Valdés became Mina. Yayi, whose real name was Raquel García, I dubbed—of course—Yayi. But to Grandpa Juan Soler I gave the only thing that came to mind: Grandpa. I think I did it because I understood that he was an interchangeable, generic guy, a man who never got his own way. Grandpa never loved me, even a bit. Maybe this is unfair. In the beginning, just after I'd been born, I'm sure he was proud and fascinated with me. But with time, or as I grew up, it became clear to me that it wasn't a matter of a lack of caring, but rather something very close to hate.

Dumbo, USA, 1941, 64 mins.
The Disney animated feature
DIRECTED BY: Ben Sharpsteen
SEEN: 1968, Inglewood, CA

I saw *Dumbo* in a theater, sitting in a comfortable seat and not the back of a car. My mother took me to see that story of the elephant with ears like giant dishes at a big theater on Sepulveda Boulevard one rainy morning. I had never seen so many children all in the same place, children fresh off the plane, children from every continent and of all colors, all together in a theater with their mothers, watching *Dumbo*.

I didn't see the whole thing, actually, because there was a particular moment that made me want to leave. The scene where they take Dumbo's mother away from him and he sees her in a cage changed me, terrified me, paralyzed me. She wraps her trunk around him and sings a song like a lullaby, "Baby Mine," their huge, round eyes running over with tears because they love each other so much, because they need-they have-an unbreakable bond between them, and I couldn't take it, I started to cry out of fear, bawling out of panic, because the idea that someone would take away my mother, or that she would abandon me in this theater, or Inglewood, or any other place, was unendurable. And if she were ever to die one day? How can someone live without his mother? Without the one who has been at his side every second of his life? The sequence was so unbearably sad, and I scared myself with just how powerfully I let loose and cried out. But luckily—miraculously—my mother calmed me down, assured me that not only would she never leave, but also that she was never going to die.

I saw *Dumbo* at the most opportune time: when you draw pictures for your mother, give her bouquets of flowers picked from the garden, promise that when you're old enough you'll marry her, something she'll never let you forget. Some ten years later, in Santiago de Chile, when we had neither house nor home nor a family to live there, when

I spent my afternoons and many nights in the one clean room of our big, condemned house, I went to my grandparents' apartment, where we gathered, and my mother was waiting for me in the doorway of the kitchen, which doubled as the service room.

"You smell like pisco and cigarettes," she said to me. "You didn't tell me that you started smoking and drinking."

"I don't," I lied. "I don't want to be like you." My mother smoked incessantly; she always had a cigarette in her mouth. Her car smelled of tobacco and peppermint.

"Well, I'd love to be like you or your sister."

My fingers smelled of the metal handrails of the bus, and also of Federica: Coral cologne, Viceroy cigarettes, Lux soap, Capel pisco, raspberry soda, waxed wood, Caffarena cotton shirts, Siempre Libre tampons, the leather of her backpack, the plastic cover to the notebook she never opened, her fruit-scented erasers, and Doublemint gum.

"Do you remember how you used to say you'd marry me?" my mother asked.

"No," I lied again.

"You don't remember how you used to call me 'mi novia'? How you only wanted to be with me and tell me about everything you ever did or discovered? You told me that in Spanish; it was one of the few things you ever told me in Spanish. Now you never tell me anything in either language."

My mother continued to look at me with those brown eyes that, depending on the light, belied the sadness and resignation that she tried to hide when she smiled. I noticed that she knew what I was thinking and was embarrassed.

"Mom. I was a kid."

The fluorescent light was hurting my eyes.

"Now you don't even tell me what time you'll be home at night."

I looked at her. She no longer looked like the woman who had taken me to see *Dumbo*. She no longer had a child's face; much had been given up to become a woman. Why would I have wanted to marry her? Do all children think like that?

"Sometimes you don't come home and don't tell me anything."

"It's not the same," she replied, looking at the floor.

"You're right. It makes sense for me to behave badly, to act like a teenager, but not you."

"Who ever told you that life makes sense, Beltrán?"

She lit a cigarette and looked fixedly at me, with a touch of anger but—more than anything—with fatigue.

"And?"

"What?"

"What's your girlfriend's name?"

"Federica Montt. You know her."

It took her a while to process the information. You can sometimes tell what other people are thinking, and what my mother was thinking was not good.

"That girl's changed a lot. It's a shame."

"We've changed a lot too, Mom. It's a shame."

"Yes. It's all been a shame. If it were up to me, I assure you, things would be happier. Why wouldn't I want it that way?"

I thought about taking her hand, but changed my mind. She tried to reach out to me, but decided to pick up a dishcloth instead.

"And what's his name?"

"Juan Antonio Mancini."

"Is he married?"

"Yes."

Bullitt, USA, 1968, 113 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Peter Yates

STARRING: Steve McQueen, Jacqueline Bisset,

Robert Duvall

SEEN: 1969, Redondo Beach, CA

At first, in all those photos from the late 1950s, my father looked like Frankie Avalon. Not the Frankie Avalon from the beach movies (although there are some photos taken in El Tabo where the resemblance is striking and my mother—the love of his life since he was fifteen—has a very Annette Funicello hairdo) but rather the crooner Frankie Avalon, that skinny guy who dressed in dark suits and sang ballads. Also, in many of these photos, he's sporting black-framed glasses.

In his California photos, however, the glasses, the suit and tie, all vestiges of ambition, class, manners, intelligence, and good breeding disappear and the true Juan Soler (or, so as not to confuse him with my grandfather, the true Juan Alfredo Soler García) appeared in his "this is the real me/California dreamin'" look. The change—the truth—is surprising. Frankly, it's street gangs, James Dean in Rebel Without a Cause, a punk in tight jeans with a cigarette in his mouth. The photos he sent my mother in 1958 as a just-arrived nineteen-yearold show a guy much more confident, narcissistic, and fascinated by himself. There are a couple in particular that show him hanging out with his new friends, some Chileans among other Latinos, all of them more or less kids, the elite of the Third World, raised poorly and educated worse, who, in their respective countries, were turning into punks (bad grades, expelled from Catholic schools, no effort to apply to universities yet unable to accept jobs below their social level) and had no place left to go. So there they were, in California, under the palms and sun, fresh off the plane, smiling for the camera, living on the wild side, drunk and addicted to the American Dream. They worked odd jobs and lived four to a room in a house on Los Feliz, enoying the easy money, cars, and women who gave themselves to

them; life was good, it was better to wash malt glasses at Ben Frank's Drive-In on Sunset (once it was Natalie Wood; another time it was Ricardo Montalbán who spoke to them in Spanish and left a five-dollar tip) than to drink pisco and Cokes at Charles' Drive-In in Las Condes, Santiago's ritzy neighborhood.

I saw *Bullitt* with my mother and father and, like every Steve McQueen movie—like every movie that has to do with cars and speed—it reminded me, instantly and almost reflexively, of my father, though I have only vague images of the event itself.

Years later, in Japan—Kobe, to be precise—an urgent on-site meeting was called after the quake of 1995. After a long day in the field I returned to my tiny room in a dilapidated hotel, turned on the TV, and saw Steve McQueen in *Bullitt*. I couldn't help but notice that McQueen wore pajamas; this was unexpected. Then he said something in Japanese, which, clearly, I didn't understand, but I kept on watching anyway, and soon realized that McQueen, like my father, almost never spoke in his films. Following *Bullitt*'s plot ended up being quite easy—there was no need to be a genius or a UN translator—the hook was simple enough: a cop decides to take the law into his own hands after a witness he'd been assigned to protect is murdered. I kept the TV on, waiting for the only scene that I really remembered: a frantic car chase through the streets of San Francisco with music by the Argentinean Lalo Schifrin booming in the background and McQueen flying up and down the hills in his green Mustang 390 GT.

Despite the fact that, in general, I don't like to be reminded of my father, *Bullitt* reminded me of those few years when we did have some sort of bond, though I don't know if we ever did have a true one. Maybe my great mistake was being born in Chile, staying in Concepción for several months, being more Niemeyer than Soler, ending up becoming a seismologist instead of following in my father's steps and becoming a milkman or bread-truck delivery man. But I do remember that that night, as I pressed the accelerator, I thought of *Bullitt*, of Le Mans, of Steve McQueen and Paul Newman, of black Porsches and yellow BMWs.

Oliver!, UK, 1968, 153 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Carol Reed

STARRING: Mark Lester, Ron Moody, Oliver Reed,

Jack Wild

SEEN: 1969, Inglewood, CA

I remember a couple of scenes from this film, but they have been reshown so many times that I can't be sure that my memories stem directly from what I saw back in 1969 at a drive-in with my parents. To this day, the opening song, "Consider Yourself," fills me with a strange sense of melancholy and, instead of heralding memories of California in the late 1960s, it makes me think instantly of post-coup Chile, when we returned, or—to put it another way—when they abandoned me in a country under a curfew where, at times, in the middle of the night, you could hear bursts of submachine-gun fire that brought a smile to my grandmother's lips, and a comment, "Another communist falls. I hope they kill them all."

Consider yourself at home. . . . Consider yourself part of the family.

In Chile, at least in the beginning, I never considered myself "at home" or "part of the family." That dark winter of 1974, torn out by the roots from everything that was mine, from everything I considered home, from the sun and air-conditioning of California, I was hounded relentlessly by the ghost of the orphan Oliver. Quickly I saw myself digging in in Santiago without language, without friends, without feeling, waiting for my parents to return from California, where they had gone, without warning, "to settle everything." My sister and I stayed behind, and our mission was clear and precise: adapt ourselves one way or another, and learn Spanish.

The famous song "Consider Yourself" was played ceaselessly during that year, and I was never left in peace since some old reporter had the idea to use the orchestral version as the theme song to an ultra-right-wing radio program. I think it was Radio Agricultura or Radio Minería. One of those. My grandmother Guillermina listened to it

constantly on the immense Gründig radio in the second-floor sewing room. *Consider yourself one of us!* rang out every morning and again in the afternoon, along with Pinochet's voice as well as that of Carmen Puelma, the priest Hasbún, the bands, reports, and new civil decrees implemented with the force of law.

For the last few months of that year, in a German school where we occasionally took classes near where my grandparents lived in the Salvador-Condell neighborhood, I felt like Oliver Twist. The school was no more than a big, old three-story house plus an attic, and despite the fact that technically it was a private school for people of certain means, in reality it was quite poor, or that's how it seemed to me, as it had no playground, gym, theater, auditorium, or library: all the things that formed part of public school education in Encino.

The first day they made us line up in the back patio. All of my schoolmates were wearing thick, knee-length overalls the color of wood. They passed me a dented metal teacup, still damp, and I had to hold out my hand so that an older woman who made the rounds with a steaming pot containing a thick, dark liquid could fill my cup up to the brim. Then, instead of saying "I want more," like in *Oliver!*, I had the bad idea to say "No thanks, I don't drink this stuff," this disgusting Ovaltine-like instant milk with boiling water, this poor people's milk, this shit for underdeveloped Chileans who don't have color TVs or any idea what M&Ms are. I didn't say this, though I did think it; I only said, "No thanks, I don't drink this," and then added, "I don't like it." The teacher, a German Nazi and *Pinochetista*, Ms. Renata or Ms. Margarethe, slapped me with such fury that I was petrified.

"You'll drink it, you goddamned brat. We're not in the U.S. anymore: we're in Chile."

The strange thing is that I didn't spill a drop, I just stood there, like Mark Lester, but I, to top it all off, wasn't blond like Oliver, not like my cousin Milo, who looked like Lester's identical twin. I just opened my mouth and let the drops of blood fall onto the viscous skin that had formed over the cup and then, in front of the teacher, drank down the awful, bland milk that our new military government had allotted to us.

The Reivers, USA, 1969, 107 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Mark Rydell

STARRING: Steve McQueen, Mitch Vogel, Rupert Crosse,

Will Geer

SEEN: 1969, Manhattan Beach, CA

As time went on, my father continued his transformation into Steve McQueen. At least that's how I remember him: with the rectangular sunglasses, sideburns, and striped shirts. I suppose he'd like it if he ever found out that when I think of him, the image of that laconic guy, selfmade and in charge of himself, free, the king of cool . . . who, more than desiring women, wanted women to desire him, comes to mind.

McQueen smiled little and knew his limitations: he was no great actor, but he chose his roles well. Similarly, my father chose his location well: California. Outside of the Golden State, he was intimidated, out of context, as if he didn't know his lines, the language, the strange local customs. Chile managed to give him very little, and eventually he cast it off entirely. Because in the end it was always about that, that was the flaw that divided us, the crevice that divides us still. It was enough to pronounce the word "Chile," it was enough to even think about Chile, and the most insurmountable wall was raised. Chile was a wound, a myth, an anxiousness, a weight; it was too many things for all its people unable to process so many conflicting emotions. The thing that separated us all was Chile. Perhaps the most rational, the most logical thing would have been for him to accept his destiny and stay in California, slipping away from his origin. But he couldn't. It wasn't enough to sleep with Californians; he wanted something more. My father began to miss my mother, his only "official" girlfriend since he was sixteen, and in the middle of the night of her fourteenth birthday, in that two-story house in the nice, middle-class neighborhood of Ñuñoa, he asked her to be his girl; she said yes, and they kissed.

In the end, they got married, and my mother followed him to California. In the wedding photos, taken at the Club Concepción, in that depressed, fearful city plagued by students and guerrillas in the making (my father wasn't interested in studying nor in changing the world), he came out in a suit. Both look very young and handsome if also afraid, especially my father, who in one photo is looking to the side, as if searching for a way to escape. And they did it: they escaped to California, but not to Los Feliz, where Los Angeles was one big party, but rather to Inglewood, where life was earned seriously. There, the spoiled kid from Ñuñoa, who never lifted a finger for anybody, became a blue-collar worker, surrounded by folks of all ethnicities and accents who had never known the privileges he had enjoyed. Without a degree and with a pregnant wife who knew no English, my father left his Hollywood life and set himself to the job of cleaning airplanes.

As was the custom in those days when money was scarce, Manuela and I went with my parents to a drive-in near Inglewood to see The Reivers, which, I learned later, was based on a novel by William Faulkner. I don't have a single memory of this viewing, but I saw it again—for the first time—on black-and-white TV late one summer night. It must have been around 1979; my father had already left escaped—one more time back to California. McQueen plays a ruffian through-and-through who rolls through life until—I have no idea why—he decides to adopt a kid named Lucius or Lucio or something, who has a grandfather but no dad. The boy hops on a carriage pulled by a team of horses, escapes, flees to the big city, and there (or maybe before, I don't know) he bumps into McQueen and they go to a brothel where the kid gets with a prostitute, who was worthless compared to the ones I've known. The whole thing takes place over the span of a couple of days, in the U.S. South during the Depression, and the people seem very poor and the roads are all dirt. McQueen takes it upon himself to make this boy into a man, which is exactly what I wanted to have happen to me, but here I was, paralyzed, feeling every bit a busted fraud, with Steve McQueen so far away and me trying to grow up at any cost, striking out blindly, crashing head-on or broadsiding into things, stumbling, knocking about, slipping gradually into the darkness that would end up enveloping me.

Lady and the Tramp, USA, 1955, 75 mins.

The Disney animated feature

DIRECTED BY: Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson,

Hamilton Luske

SEEN: 1969, Inglewood, CA

During the ten years I spent in Los Angeles, there were many trips to Disneyland. Twice it was because it was my birthday, or rather it was a friend's birthday (it was a custom in those days to celebrate one's birthday at a theme park with a few select friends). I think the first time was when we went with Aunt Chilaca, one of Grandma Guillermina Valdés' sisters, and Aunt Pochi Lévera, a friend of my mother's, who looked like Twiggy and was recovering from a broken heart. Aunt Chilaca landed in Inglewood with a metallic Calpany shoebox full of choice raw beans and a kilo of Ambrosoli honey candies.

There are several photos from that first trip to Disneyland, and in many of them you can see Pochi's underwear underneath her minuscule, psychedelic miniskirt. Some weeks before they arrived, Grandma and Grandpa Soler took me to the theater to see *Lady and the Tramp*, and I do happen to remember a bit of that movie, in particular the romantic scene in the Italian restaurant when the Tramp offers his Chef Boyardee meatball to the Lady. In Disneyland, you can run into all the characters you've seen in movies and on TV, and this time we went into a toy store where, in a display case, they had little mechanical Lady and the Tramp toys that walked around, and the song "Bella Notte" was pouring out of the shop's speakers. Aunt Pochi, who was quite sensitive, burst into tears, and my mother had to console her and take her out onto Main Street USA for some air. Also appearing in some other photos of that trip to Disneyland is the baby girl my mother sometimes baby-sat to earn some extra money.

She was younger than I but older than Manuela, and her name was Dakota Lee, although I always thought that it was La Cotalí, that everything was just a nickname, but no, she really was called Dakota

Lee Spencer and she was a skinny, malnourished, white-trash girl who was dressed in stained lacy dresses and with whom I fell instantly in love. She was the first woman to ever seduce me with the "mystery factor," and she always smelled like pee. Dakota Lee's mother was a waitress at Norm's, a coffee shop, and she was originally from South Dakota. According to my father, this woman—who was named Brenda and therefore became known to everyone in the house as Brenda Lee—was a part-time prostitute whom he had seen a couple of times roller-skating down the street and talking with street-corner guys, and sometimes hanging out at bars' exits at last call, when my father was getting ready to make his rounds of milk deliveries.

After this trip to Disneyland, where Aunt Chilaca bought Dakota Lee an Alice in Wonderland–like dress, something unusual happened. One day, Brenda came over to drop off Dakota Lee, just as she always did, but that afternoon she never came to pick her up. As she was bathing the girl, my mother noticed that she had bruises over her entire body. But Brenda Lee never showed up. We called her house, we tried Norm's, but there was nothing, not a trace of her. Dakota Lee stayed with us for two weeks, at the end of which my mother, desperate, called the police. They came for the child, who was in a fit of crying. Aunt Chilaca wanted to adopt her, as did Pochi, but that would not have been legally possible, and poor Dakota Lee ended up in a Sacramento orphanage.

Some months later, when Aunt Chilaca had returned to Chile but Pochi still wasn't thinking about leaving, a Cherokee Indian appeared. Or maybe he was Sioux. He arrived at dawn, around 4 A.M., after my father had already left on his round of deliveries. The Indian began to bang desperately on the door and very nearly broke it down. He was Dakota Lee's father, and a full-blooded Indian; his skin wasn't red but the color of Chilean copper, and he rode a Harley. His hair was longer than any I had ever seen, even longer than that of the hippies out on Venice Beach. Pochi and my mother managed to calm him down with a bottle of red wine from my aunt's family's stock.

Inglewood was getting dangerous. One night, the teenage son of the Mexican family who lived across the street from us was shot in a gang-related drive-by. My mother said that that was too much, that we couldn't continue to live in fear, and she asked Grandpa Teodoro to loan us some money. My father switched from milk to bread, and we left the house on Ash Street for suburban San Fernando Valley, returning to Inglewood only when someone was arriving or departing from the airport. Pochi, meanwhile, had left for Miami, where years later she would become one of Julio Iglesias's secretaries. Without knowing it, we had just begun the best years of our lives.

It's a Wonderful Life, USA, 1946, 30 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Frank Capra

STARRING: Jimmy Stewart, Donna Reed,

Lionel Barrymore, Beulah Bondi

SEEN: 1969, Encino, CA

In 1968, en route to San Francisco, my mother made my father get off the freeway and take a detour through the San Fernando Valley, just on the other side of Hollywood. Her motives were clear: she thought that area could be a good place to live. She was right. One year later, we arrived in Encino. The true reason for my mother wanting to get off the freeway, though, was that the San Fernando Valley bears a distinct resemblance to Chile, with the sun rising over the mountains and setting over the sea. And it's all that fruit, all that close-lying desert, the wine valleys, and so many streets and towns with Spanish names. In those days, the Valley breathed with a new, less industrial air. It was like some sort of sociological experiment: the suburbs as an autonomous city, with the mall as its temple and the teenager as king.

"Juan, slow down, this place looks friendly."

"This place" was Encino. My mother already knew that we were not going back to Chile. Perhaps, if we were lucky, we'd go for a vacation once in a while, but even that seemed complicated. The promise of returning was diminishing bit by bit, and the important thing now was to settle down, buy a house, and start up a life. We didn't buy the house right away, but we did see one under construction that afternoon that we ended up choosing: an avocado-colored bungalow with three bedrooms and a den or family room, situated on peaceful Babbitt Street, in the less ritzy section north of Ventura Boulevard. Encino, at least in those days, was a neighborhood—a town, really—composed of some 90 percent people with money, either a very comfortable middle class or a bit ostentatious upper class. Almost everyone, even those who earned just enough to get by, like our neighbors, was linked in one way or another to the television and film industry. This wasn't by

chance. Encino was simultaneously located sufficiently close to and yet comfortably apart from L.A.'s two centers of film production: Hollywood, on the other side of the hills; and Burbank (which headquartered Warner, Columbia, Disney, and NBC), in the same valley.

But Encino wasn't just situated near the movies; rather, it was built on unmistakably cinematic foundations. Before Encino became Encino and Ventura filled up with Lucky's and Ralph's, much before the schools, the Sepulveda Dam Recreation Area, and all the houses had sprung up, Encino was RKO Telepictures' giant backyard, where cowboys and Indians fought it out for the cameras, and where medieval Paris and Capone's Chicago were reconstructed.

I learned all this at school—the Magnolia Public School—in Miss Petula Squires's class. She was quite a modern teacher, whom my father found attractive, and the truth was that she was indeed: all her students were in love with her. Unlike the other, older teachers, Miss Squires was young, single, wore knee-high boots, lived near us in a condo complete with a pool on Balboa Street, and drove a red, rag-top Karmann Ghia. Lewis Blumenthal (who was incredibly fat and whom we ended up dubbing Brother Louie, after the character from the old soul song by the Stories) showed up one Monday for show-and-tell with some arrowheads he found in the Little League field next to the track, and he told us they were Indian relics dating from the time of Fray Junípero Serra, the Jesuit priest who established missions all throughout California. Miss Squires examined the arrowheads, sent the hated Brother Louie to his seat, and set herself about the task of explaining to us the True History of Encino.

Thus it was that we learned we were the descendants of RKO, and then she took us to the auditorium so we could watch an old 16-mm copy of It's a *Wonderful Life*. We were all a bit too young to understand it. It seemed eternal, and was exasperating in its blacks and whites. I've since watched it many times over the years (one of the few films that I do watch repeatedly) and, as I've come to understand it, I've come to realize that nothing is as moving as a film about the value of family when one doesn't have one of his own. I began to seriously doubt if I ever would have one, and I'm unable to separate the great,

familiar Capra classic from Encino. Not because I saw it there or because I associate Encino with family, but because Bedford Falls, the movie's fictitious town, is Encino. The holm oaks—encinas to us—on Main Street in Bedford Falls were the eponymous encinas of Encino. It's a Wonderful Life was filmed on that back lot, taking advantage of the trees already there. In the end, Capra had become so taken with Encino that he moved there, to a house in the hills overlooking Ventura.

Years later, in a history class at McArthur English School, they explained to me that Santiago was founded by the Spanish conquistador Pedro de Valdivia, and I felt myself extremely fortunate to have lived the first years of my life in a place colonized by Frank Capra and Jimmy Stewart and not by a group of stinking, resentful Spaniards who escaped from their native land to kill Indians and rob them of their riches at the other edge of the world.

Lost Horizon, USA, 1937, 138 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Frank Capra

STARRING: Ronald Colman, Jane Wyatt, Sam Jaffe,
Edward Everett Horton

SEEN: 1970, Encino, CA

Sometimes you can feel a connection to a movie before even seeing it. It can be because people tell you about it, because the whole world's talking about it, or because you just know that that film has sunk its claws into you for reasons you can't yet understand. I think I saw the original version of Lost Horizon on TV one Saturday afternoon in 1970, on KTTV-11, a pretty cool L.A. channel. I called my neighbor and best friend Patrick Bellin to let him know, and found out that he'd already heard about it from our eccentric older friend and mentor Drew Wasserman, who was some six or seven years older than we were but needed an unconditionally supportive audience. We—the Babbitt Street Boys—were his fans, and also the extras in the 8mm films he was always making, recreating his favorite movies. He used a number of different media: filming "personal synopses," sketching comics and storyboards, and making up posters and publicity flyers that were much better than the ones the big studios churned out. He made a distinctly pornographic version of Kansas City Bomber, with Raquel Welch's legs spread wide and a gang of women on skates pouring into her vagina, something that left us both shocked and amazed.

Every Halloween, Drew turned his garage (which the family car would be banished from due to the amount of stuff he set up in there) into a house of horrors: an imitation of Disneyland's house of horrors, which had opened recently. Drew's was a bit more stark: he bought rotten pumpkins to give the place a putrid stench. Kids sat in a wheelchair, and Drew pushed them through his dark labyrinth replete with open tombs and monsters who jumped up in your face.

Drew's house was fascinating: it smelled of incense and had plastic chairs and flowery designs hung up in the kitchen. Drew lived pretty much alone; his parents were never around, and we could go over anytime to watch TV or listen to his records. Drew was always there after class with something strange to show us: a jar with a fetus in it, monster masks, a piece of a dog's ear, or a rubber eyeball.

When I saw *Lost Horizon* for the first time, I was extremely disappointed; Drew had described it much better. It bothered me that it was in black-and-white. Encino always seemed "in Technicolor" to me, and when I went back to Chile, everything became black-and-white again. But eventually, the movie truly won me over. Years later, in Santiago, this classic of classics appeared without warning on Channel 9. Of course I watched it, and not only did it captivate me but also—finally—I understood it. But the important thing is that the first time, back in 1970, KTTV showed it as a tribute to Edward Everett Horton. And it's because of him that I watched it, because it just so happens that Mr. Everett Horton was a neighbor of mine.

I managed to meet him, already a veteran of the screen, one Halloween night. He greeted trick-or-treaters at his door himself. He was a white-haired man, vampire-like, aristocratic, exquisite, and he handed out our treats with long-fingered and white-gloved hands. I'll never forget him. He gave us little velvet sacks filled with orange-andblack candy corn, Lemon Heads, and bits of homemade candied apples and chocolate fudge slathered in butterscotch. I'd never again accept homemade candy, since they had posters all over the school about what kinds of treats it was safe to get for Halloween. There was the ever-present danger (or urban legend) of a psycho putting a razor blade or record player's needle in a candied apple. Some kid from Reseda had bit into one and slit open his throat, spurting blood all over his costumed friends. It was true. They wrote about it on the Green Sheet (the front page of the local paper, which was, indeed, green). Rumors began to fly: they said that some candies had been laced with chemicals that make women horny and ready to fuck the first guy who comes along. That's what Drew told us; he was the guy who taught us about sex, because he knew a lot about it and was even a practitioner, especially by himself.

The one about the apple with the Gillette in Reseda—which is where we went swimming at the public pool in the summer—put an

end to the innocence associated with Halloween. The only candied apple I've ever accepted was the one from Edward Everett Horton; as such, it's the one I remember best, and I've never enjoyed a better-crafted confection since. Everett Horton, who never became a star himself but worked with all the legends over five decades, lived in the only truly old house—a gothic, two-story thing, or maybe it was three, counting the attic—in my neighborhood, a *Psycho*-esque construction that inspired as much terror as fascination.

I got to know him through Drew, who, conquering fear, had gone up to his door some years before and, like any good and stubborn movie buff, ended up visiting him once a week for years. They had tea together. Drew told him all about the latest horror flicks (he could get into the R-rated ones), given that Horton, a confirmed bachelor getting on in years, didn't leave his dark house. Drew was tall and athletic enough to have been a decent basketball player, but he opted for the world of shadows. He wowed us with the fact that Horton was the voice of the narrator for the old *Rocky and Bullwinkle* series. Horton, who had landed in Encino and later came to love so much working on the movies filmed in the area. When RKO closed up its studio and parceled off its land into plots, Horton bought a prime piece of real estate. In time, however, his house grew isolated, just off to the side of the Ventura Freeway. Los Angeles County (which he detested like a plague) ended up appropriating a good piece of his land for the road's construction, and the street where he lived became a dead-end alley.

Edward Everett Horton died in 1969; he was over eighty years old. But through all the stories Drew told all us Babbitt Street Boys about him, I feel as if I also spent afternoons in that house, surrounded by masks and capes and vampire's teeth. After his passing, the community managed to convince the mayor to rename his street Edward Everett Horton Lane, and so it remains to this day. To Drew, he bequeathed his costume wardrobe, his collection of posters, and enough money to enroll in USC film school, something which made us wonder just what, exactly, he had been doing in the old man's house all those afternoons. But we only found this out later, and it only added to the sense of fascination we felt for our neighbor across the street.

Krakatoa, East of Java, USA, 1969, 113 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Bernard L. Kowalski

STARRING: Maximilian Schell, Diane Baker, Brian Keith,

Sal Mineo

SEEN: 1970, Palo Alto, CA

After Salvador Allende was elected president in 1970, the idea of vacationing in Chile didn't simply dissolve; rather, it became a matter of governmental defiance. The U.S. State Department cautioned citizens not to travel to Chile, therefore preventing my sister, Manuela, from setting foot in the strange and now revolutionary country of her parents. The place I was articulating in my mind had more to do with what I was told (and what I overheard) than with the country itself.

Given the impossibility of us ever visiting ("There's no milk, no bread, no toilet paper"), the folks down there began a steady stream of visits to see us. Relatives, acquaintances, friends of strangers—in the end, in 1973, we had to help accommodate the exiles who had escaped the regime. Grandma and Grandpa Niemeyer visited us twice. Grandpa Teodoro was never an *Allendista*, but neither was he against him; all that mattered to him was his science and his tremors. Grandma Guillermina, on the other hand, said that if the military hadn't bombarded La Moneda, she would have hacked off Allende's head herself, with her own butcher's knife.

In 1970, I went with my mother, my sister, and my grandparents (my father either couldn't or didn't want to join us) to see the full length of the San Andreas Fault. We have photos of the five of us in Parkfield, the most unstable place in California, though my favorites are of us emerging from the fault in the middle of a garlic field on the outskirts of Gilroy. My grandfather got his Ph.D. at Caltech in Pasadena, and one of his professors was Charles Richter himself, who was barely older than he was and was known not just for his brilliance but also for being authoritarian, egocentric, and a devoted nudist (we

once visited him in Altadena and he offered us Oreos and milk, but he was by then a little old man and had the graciousness to not show us his package). So it was that I met so many seismologists as we traveled along the fault from one University of California campus to the next. One of the reasons for the trip was to gain the support of certain scientists so that we could translate and publish *Catástrofe en Valdivia*. In fact, on the same afternoon that we visited him, Richter wrote an enthusiastic introduction for the luxurious North American edition of *The Valdivia Catastrophe: The World's Largest Earthquake*, which hit stores two years later.

Grandpa Teodoro was a man of the world, and one of his many hobbies or eccentricities (playing chess, collecting stamps, hiking, playing solitaire, solving crossword puzzles) was to retrace the local streets of places he'd visited. He believed in car trips, and nothing made him happier than to improvise a journey, not knowing where he might stop for the night. We went off in a rented station wagon, listening to Beethoven and Brahms being played on National Public Radio. Map in hand, my grandfather always took the longest road and thus, between detours and sandwiches that my grandmother had prepared, we passed through such unusual places as Ojai, Solvang (there's a photo of us leaving that touristy little town, looking like we were about to be decapitated by its stern Danish population), Yosemite National Park, San Simeón castle (I've never seen Citizen Kane but at least I've been to Xanadu), and Zabriskie Point, in Death Valley, the lowest point on the North American continent.

The difference between Grandma and Grandpa Soler—who visited manicured sites like theme parks, Lion Country Safari, Sea World, Japanese Village, and Knott's Berry Farm—and Grandpa Niemeyer was that he was interested in history, and preferred places where there was evidence of geologic time's passage. Grandpa Soler made home movies, and eventually his strange obsession with filming every important occasion ended up becoming his greatest legacy. We always look happy in his films, were always celebrating, while he, by virtue of being behind the camera, chose to disappear. Grandpa Niemeyer, on the other hand, took advantage of these trips to teach me every-

thing he could. Each journey was a lesson, and in each place there was a museum, or mission, or at the very least a plaque.

My favorite place that we visited was the California Academy of Sciences, in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, because they had a platform that children could climb up on and experience a simulated earthquake. They first set it at 4.7, and, to tell you the truth, it was no big deal, but when they cranked it up a notch to 5.7, a little Canadian boy started to cry out in French. When I was with my grandfather (and this was near the end, just about the last time I would ever see him), I became—by some magic, or perhaps it was actually fear—his footboy, and thus an expert in geology, geography, and seismology. My grandfather, who spoke to me in English, told me stories in the car, complete with the luxury of scientific details that I would later have to memorize. At dinnertime, he would quiz me to see just how much I had learned: "What's the difference between a fissure and a fault?"

In Palo Alto, at Stanford University, we stayed in an extraordinarily modern house, everything white and crystal-clear glass, belonging to the geophysics professor Ingeborg Lehmann, who had four Siberian huskies and a map of the world that covered an entire wall. We spent two whole days poring over this map, and I had to stand up on a chair to show my grandfather the exact site in Mexico where the volcano Paricutín (he was a fanatic about this volcano; it was the focus of his studies when he was department head in the late 1990s at UNAM, and it was also the name of his rottweiler when he lived on Ñuñoa Street) erupted out of the blue.

Just off campus, a Cineplex was showing *Krakatoa*, *East of Java*, a title that Professor Lehmann found rather intriguing, considering that, in reality, Krakatoa is to the *west* of Java. Despite not being much interested in movies or fiction ("Your grandmother is an artist, and look how she turned out"), my grandfather invited me to go see it, along with Professor Lehmann, who knew Java very well. Six years old, and I went to see Krakatoa knowing exactly what was about to happen:

"What happened on the island of Krakatoa in 1883, Beltrán?"

"Lava flowed out of three orifices, lasting for three months, Tata, and you couldn't see the sun through all the ash in the sky."

If I were ever on *Jeopardy!* and the category was Krakatoa, I would've run the board.

Brian Keith appears in the film; he also played the widowed father on the TV show Family Affair (which also featured my favorite actor, a sort of red-haired alter ego of mine named Johnnie Whitaker). I was surprised; I hadn't expected that. He played the boatswain to the captain of a ship that sails to the island before the volcano blew its top, sending part of its crown to the bottom of the sea. The resulting tsunamis drowned over 3,600 people in the village of Menak. Krakatoa is full of special effects, like rivers of lava and smoking seas. Afterwards, walking back across campus, Professor Lehmann said to my grandfather,

"Compared to what you lived through in Valdivia, Teodoro, all that must have seemed like a charade."

"You're right, my dear Ingeborg. You know as well as anyone that my career—and my life—is divided into the years before and the years after May 21 and 22, 1960."

Woodstock, USA, 1970, 184 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Michael Wadleigh

STARRING: Carlos Santana, Joan Baez, Roger Daltrey,

Jimi Hendrix

SEEN: 1970, Burbank, CA

By 1970, much turbulent water had passed under the fragile bridge that kept Grandpa and Grandma Soler afloat. So many things had happened during the past five years of their lives that, looking back, the surprise isn't the things that have happened to them, but that they have gone on with life. Javi—who had come to California as a spoiled virgin, a chubby little kid who, in Santiago, was chauffered to and from his school, San Pedro Nolasco, a pure and simple boy whose greatest glory was to eat chicken sandwiches at La Gallina—was drafted and packed off to Vietnam like so much cannon fodder. He came home lean, tanned, and transformed into a man. Into the man that he perhaps never wanted to be. We'll never know exactly what he saw, what happened to him there, what he had to do and what he didn't want to do. Javi went to Vietnam and returned, more or less, whole and silent. The good-natured guy who told Don Otto jokes spoke now only when absolutely necessary and, to fill the void, began grazing on junk food. In two years, Javi had ballooned into what Grandma Valdés called a "mall pig." He ran out of pants sizes. Flipping through channels with the remote control made him sweat. The veterans' hospital got him a blue handicapped decal so that he could park closer to the front doors of the restaurants, supermarkets, and food courts where he went looking for compensation for what he seemed to have lost.

Carlos was also drafted, but they didn't send him to Southeast Asia but rather to Fort Hood, outside Waco, Texas. Yayi, who went to Mass every day Javi was in Vietnam, said that the fact that Carlos wasn't at the front was part of God's design. Why would He save one but not the other? Javi returned unharmed, but couldn't compose himself. He was unable to become an adult; he was victimized by doubts, credit, and in-

terests, in addition to the obvious calories. Teri Mosquera loved him, but she couldn't deal with his jealous fits or the idea of having three children at home: Uncle Javi and my two cousins, who I doubt knew a single word of Spanish. Jason and Jennifer Soler, my cousins, scattered somewhere in California, or the U.S., or the world.

Carlos, on the other hand, was the genius of the family: he had a very high IQ, a year of college under his belt, and he'd read more than the required number of books. The other thing that perhaps spared him from combat duty was the fact that Carlos was Red. In Chile, he was associated with the Young Communists, and at the Pedagógico, where he studied philosophy, he supported the Cuban revolution and, especially, a young Argentinean doctor called Guevara, also known as Che. How could a Castro and Allende sympathizer, a left-wing humanist, a friend of people who would become MIR revolutionaries, who would later be anchored or thrown into the sea, end up in the U.S. Army in a place called Waco? On leaving Chile, Carlos had to abandon many things, shedding everything that wasn't necessary for survival. Some people, including my mother, believed that, with everything that happened afterwards, with everything he suffered and those whom he made suffer, Carlos wasn't all bad. At worst, she thought, he lost his destiny—lost himself—in the U.S., but at least he didn't lose his life. In Chile, in 1973, Carlos would have died, she thought.

After finishing up his tour with the army, my uncle suddenly married a blond cowgirl with long, freckly legs, named Suzette, whom he'd met two days before, dancing in a bar. Carlos was drunk, Suzette was high, and the music was soul. She lived with her parents, two brothers, and nine cats in the only house that wasn't an RV in her hot Waco neighborhood. Carlos let his hair grow and became a hippie, but eventually his peace-love-dopeism mutated into a sort of Latino pimp plucked straight from a Blaxploitation film.

He ended up playing the bongos in a band that made the rounds through the Manhattan and Redondo Beach bar scene. In those days, he must have been around twenty-five and slim if not very tall, with a pretty-boy aura, and he strutted around with his pelvis thrust forward. He wore sharp pointed boots with a good heel to make himself seem taller, flowered shirts, and necklaces that got tangled in the thick hair of his chest. Sometimes he came out to Encino and played with us. He introduced the Babbitt Street Boys to *fútbol*, or soccer, long before it was popular in California. He'd show up on Saturdays and stay all afternoon, talking history and politics with my parents and getting in shouting matches with my grandfather, accusing him of being a capitalist pig when he really was a miserable, exploited immigrant. Sometimes he drove us to 7-Eleven for Slurpees in his old Mustang with the blood-red seats and floormats, blaring music that neither my parents, grandparents, or neighbors' parents listened to. Carlos wasn't into Elton John or the Carpenters. I remember the first time I heard "Purple Haze," and he told me:

"This is Jimi Hendrix. Plays better than God."

Another time I heard "Fire and Rain" by James Taylor, and Carlos explained the words to me, told me about how the singer's love went out to run errands in her car and had one of those accidents that you don't come back from. I remember that I was completely struck; I never thought that a song could be so true.

I saw *Woodstock* with Carlos, and my mother had no idea. Carlos came by the house one day when my sister was at her ballet class. He suggested taking me to the Fox Van Nuys theater to see *The Aristocats* or another equally lame movie. On the way there, he asked me:

"You want to see something else? Like the Concert to End All Concerts?"

I think—though it could be my imagination—that just then he lit a joint and smoked it right there in the car. Or maybe it was the entire audience that was smoking. Carlos bought me an extra-large Coke and we went in that old Burbank theater filled with smoke and long hair. There were barefoot women and guys with necklaces but no shirts. We finally managed to find seats and the music began; Carlos sang along with several of the songs while sipping a beer and passing a joint back and forth with a black girl with a blown-out Afro that seemed to touch the ceiling and whom he kept calling "babe." They started kissing, and he had his hand up under her macramé bra; I still don't know if he knew her from before or if he just met her there. I don't know if I

passed out from inhaling the smell of marijuana, but I remember a nun flashing the peace sign and Jimi Hendrix ("Look, Beltrán, it's God!") playing "The Star-Spangled Banner" like I'd never heard.

"Don't tell your parents, they don't believe in the Revolution."

My uncle Carlos Patricio Soler García wasn't the first Carlos Patricio Soler García. There had been another guy with that name, and it wasn't a simple coincidence. Nothing here is due to chance. It's not that he opened the phone book and found some guy with the same name; wasn't that he was watching *Sábado Gigante* and laughed at the fact that a Puerto Rican contestant had the same name as he. Nothing like that. Obviously there are thousands of people named Juan Pérez, but it's less likely—almost impossible, actually—that someone would have the same two last names. Juan Pérez Pérez, Juan Pérez Soler, Juan Soler Pérez.

A year before Uncle Carlos was born, my maternal grandmother brought a very weak little boy into the world, whom they immediately named Carlos Patricio Soler García. An hour later, at five hours old, the little guy passed away. They buried him in the Cementerio General in a white coffin no bigger than a shoebox. My grandfather had them cut a highly polished gray tombstone: CARLOS PATRICIO SOLER GARCÍA 1941–42. A year later, in the same clinic, my grandmother gave birth again. This time, the little guy exuded energy and health. A week later, at the Iglesia de Santo Domingo, the child was baptized and written into the civil register as Carlos Patricio Soler García.

During the summer of 1977, when my grandparents came to Chile to visit us, I accompanied my grandmother to the cemetery. We went without permission. My grandfather, it seemed, later regretted such an error, especially when he realized that Carlos was never able to establish himself, that Carlos tended to disappear, not from the face of the earth, like a ghost, but rather from their own little world. He always thought that Carlos didn't fight for his destiny because his future had already been written. We all know that we will someday die, but it's something else entirely to know that you died before you were ever born.

We went up to his grave. Grandma hadn't prepared me for the

shock. All she'd said was that she wanted to go see her *angelito*. When I saw the name engraved on that shiny stone, I was dumbstruck.

"But how? Carlos is alive . . . "

"It's another Carlos. They're not the same."

He came into this world with a curse, a destiny, maybe that's why he was always conscious of the fact that this horrorshow life had only been leased to him—and mistakenly at that—and that he could take full advantage of that knowledge and not be afraid to alienate himself from life, if he was, in effect, dead, wandering around here and there along the dark riverbanks. Maybe the most respectable, most understandable, most valiant act Carlos ever performed was just to break with everything, to disappear not from the world but from the world of those who knew him, albeit superficially, who never looked out for number one.

After we left California, Carlos started to wander. First there were little things: citations for not having his driver's license on him, running a light, or parking in front of a fire hydrant. He asked for loans, which he never repaid, and disappeared for weeks on end. As Carlos got older, he acted more and more juvenile. He never assaulted anybody or acted violent in any way but, bit by bit, nights became his days, his suits morphed into disguises, and he became addicted to money. Cadillacs, Las Vegas, yachts, necklaces, jewelry, hats, prostitutes. Only the best. Carlos was incarcerated for fraud, embezzlement, credit card theft, and forging checks. He was locked up for two or three years in Chino, northwest of L.A. That was around 1978. One day he said he was going to the beach to think. He never came back. And nobody made much of an economic or moral effort to find him.

The Night the World Exploded, USA, 1957, 64 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Fred F. Sears

STARRING: William Leslie, Tristram Coffin, Kathryn Grant

SEEN: 1971, Encino, CA

I spent my seventh birthday in bed, sick with something called the London Flu, which kept me laid up for two weeks with fever, chills, and vomiting that had me jumping in and out of bed like Linda Blair would do in The Exorcist two years later. We had just one television set in the house, an old Zenith built into a console along with a radio, and it was in the den. As I started to feel better, my mother moved me to the couch and covered me with afghans so that I could watch TV and drink glass after glass of Funny Face instant juice drink (I was a big fan of Goofy Grape), which was cheaper than Tang. One afternoon I came across an old black-and-white movie about a scientist who invents a machine for predicting earthquakes. One day this machine tells him that, within twenty-four hours, the state of California will be shaken to its very foundations. But there's more: the entire world is in danger. The governor and the army think the guy is crazy, and the desperate scientist takes his followers and flees into the Carlsbad caverns, which do, in fact, exist and which I've always wanted to see. Soon the earth begins to shake like it's never shook before, and at this point the story get fuzzy, because it seems the movie affected me in such a way that the chills came back and I succumbed to my fever again.

When I felt better, I wrote a letter to my grandfather asking him if it was possible to predict earthquakes. That time he responded with:

"Someday, Beltrán, someday. It's a tragedy that seismology cannot predict earthquakes. Imagine if medicine were only for the dead."

A week after this letter arrived, a bit more than a month after I'd seen *The Night the World Exploded*, I knew I wanted to be a seismologist, that it was my calling, my natural vocation, though there would later be a stretch of a couple of rebellious years when I tried to escape from my destiny of scientific solitude.

The night of February 8, 1971, was incredibly tranquil, as all nights are just before something momentous happens. I went to bed early because I had school the next day. Manuela and my mother were probably watching TV, as we were all obsessed with *The Carol Burnett Show*. My father, who went to bed before everyone, left at the usual time: 3 A.M. So far it was a typical winter night at the Soler home at 5708 Babbitt Street (the number before the street name . . . remember, in English everything is the reverse of the Spanish: months, addresses, and adjectives), Encino, CA 91316, overlooking the San Fernando Fault, an extention of the Santa Susana Fault.

At six in the morning, when it was still dark out, dogs began to howl up and down the street. Something in my genes, perhaps, woke me with a start. I opened my eyes and listened intently to the howling. I recognized Pastrami, the Goldenbergs' dog, and, closer, in the house across the street, the strange, stammering bark of Muhammad Ali, Drew Wasserman's boxer. Then I listened to the barks of dogs I didn't recognize; barks from the dogs over on Wish Street. I got out of bed, opened the curtains, and—in an act befitting a bad magical realism novel—I walked into my mother's bedroom, woke her up, and said:

"There's going to be an earthquake, Mom, and it's going to be big." It's not that I'd had a vision or anything like that. The explanation was in the dogs. Grandpa Teodoro taught me that on our trip along the fault. My mother sat up in bed, swung her feet down onto the floor, and that's when it started: the thing I'd been anxiously waiting for my whole life and which my mother would never want to know ever again.

I've only experienced two earthquakes in my life, two real quakes, that is, and I can assure you that nothing—nothing—can compare with one of these natural marvels. Now I study and analyze them, but somehow I envy the firefighters who speed to the disaster site to fight fires while I, however, am never where I should be during a seismic event. I've lived through thousands of tremors, but to say that a tremor is the same thing as a quake is like saying that a lit match is akin to a burning paint factory. The house began to rock and undulate, and a deep, hoarse guttural sound escaped from the storm drains. Doors

swung open and banged shut as if they were mechanical, and my bookcase—which my father had built out of shelves bought at the local Builder's Emporium and which held an entire set of the Encyclopedia Brittanica, a gift from my grandfather—fell on my bed with the full force of its dry weight.

Suddenly the lights cut out and we couldn't see a thing. My mother, screaming desperately, tried to make it to my sister's yellow bedroom, but our thick shag rug was rolling like the sea in a storm. My mother began to cry out, "Beltrán! Beltrán!" and I, laughing, because to me the whole thing was fabulous, replied "I'm here! I'm here!" to which she said, "Not you... where's Beltrán? Where's Beltrán?" Manuela was thrown from her bed to the floor and couldn't open the door, which had slammed shut on her fingers. "Beltrán, Beltrán!" my mother insisted after grabbing Manuela and dragging us into the living room, where we hunkered under the lintel of the front door. There we stayed for a few eternal and unrepeatable seconds, listening to the glasses in the kitchen fall from the shelves and explode on the linoleum floor, listening to the unforgettable scraping of the pictures against the walls, listening intensely as the plates of the earth's crust fought against each other.

The earthquake of February 9, 1971—the Sylmar quake—was a 6.6 on the Richter scale, and the epicenter was 8.4 kilometers beneath the surface. There were sixty-five dead, we were left without phones or water, the schools were closed for two weeks, and we scarcely left the house for fear that the Van Norman dam would burst. Two hospitals had collapsed, and a highway overpass had crushed a pickup truck. My father took us to Sylmar to see the destruction, even though the aftershocks were still rumbling. There's a photo of me standing in front of the bed of the pickup, the only part of the truck that wasn't crushed. Up front, the driver was still there, crushed by the tons of concrete. That's the one photo that my grandfather always kept of me, the photo I imagine he had right up to the end, up until the 7.8 last Saturday.

Le Mans, USA, 1971, 106 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Lee H. Katzin

starring: Steve McQueen, Siegfried Rauch,

Elga Andersen

SEEN: 1971, the Pacific Cinerama Dome, Hollywood, CA

My father may have worked for Wonder Bread ("Helps Build Strong Bodies 12 Ways"), delivering bread before dawn, but he never felt like a delivery man, despite his pale-blue shirt and the insignia over his chest that read "John." He might have been able to escape Chile, but he was always a prisoner of his bourgeois tastes, and he looked down on the things that satisfied working-class appetites. At home, he listened to Claudio Arrau interpreting Beethoven (every time Arrau performed at the Music Center or the Hollywood Bowl, my parents bought tickets and applauded him as if he were their son), and Burt Bacharach. I can see him now, sitting in the den with a Bloody Mary in hand, listening to his old reel-to-reel with his giant headphones, singing along softly to "What the World Needs Now." My father was good at making money, and my mother was even better at saving it. Only in California could he have what he wanted: a job that didn't require him to wear a fancy suit and tie, didn't expect him to have spent years studying boring subjects, but rather proffered money so that he could share the pleasures of life with those closest to him.

My father always said that a man wasn't quite what he thought himself to be, and neither was his job: a man, in the end, was the sum of his anxieties, loves, manias, and desires (in general, for cars, women, and sports). In the end, a man is no more—and no less—than his style. If that's true, what am I? An entity? Can a lack of style be a style in and of itself? My father bet it all on the sea, the hills, the desert, his BMW. He believed in his mountain bike, which he rode all across the Valley and down into Topanga Canyon. He believed in mountains, pure air, and skiing; he believed in fast cars and the Ontario Speedway, where he would sometimes take us to see the Formula One races

under the desert heat. My parents' Chilean friends also lived in the Valley, but that didn't mean they were close by. They got together every so often to go skiing at Big Bear Lake, hit Zuma Beach, or just throw parties where they danced and drank and—once the children were asleep—perhaps engaged in a little something else, although not to the extent that it was depicted in the movies and books of the time.

My parents skipped the revolution, drugs, rock and roll, and sexual liberation of the '60s and '70s. My father dedicated himself to secretly sleeping with my mother's girlfriends as well as his friends' girlfriends: after work, between noon and three in the afternoon, after he was done delivering bread and before the husbands came home. Aunt Vicki Casteñón, who was blond and wore immense dark glasses, tried to seduce my father with gift boxes of chocolates and jars of chunky peanut butter; in the end, I ballooned up into the "husky size" range while my father had himself an affair that nearly destroyed two marriages at the same time: his own and Vicki's with Pelado Artaza. Eventually, Vicki got as fat as Uncle Javi, opened a frozen yogurt franchise (when that was in style back in Canoga Park), and her husband forgave her. The most pathetic thing about Vicki was that, unlike the rest of his conquests, she really was in love with him and, for reasons I don't quite understand, sent me Christmas cards and birthday cards with fifty-dollar bills tucked inside. My mother also forgave my father but, ultimately, the marriage fell apart and we were left broken and undone. But that was later, in Chile, where nothing turned out as planned.

"There are no Formula One races there," he told me once while we were pumping gas. "There aren't any drivers or Ferraris or Porsches. There's just a single Jaguar, and that belongs to the British ambassador. The only track they have is a piece of shit called the Vizcachas."

The Vizcachas, he had said—as he said everything—in English. His accent was not thick, not very Latino, but it was definitely noticeable.

Many years later, when we had just returned to Chile, he took us to see the Vizcachas, at the entrance to Cajón del Maipo, near the foothills of the Andes, and, to me, it really did look shitty. My grandfather had instilled in my father a sense of skepticism toward Chile.

"Everything moves in this country, from the ground to the hilltops to the people. They all change, they all hide things. Such instability can really be disturbing."

I saw *Le Mans* with my father and one of his few friends, because, like McQueen, my father wasn't a very amicable guy. But if he didn't have many friends, what he did have was a lot of work, a terrible schedule, and a routine that ended up confounding his life. We went to see it at the Cinerama Pacific Dome, a giant dinosaur egg in the middle of Sunset or Wilshire. Even getting to this theater was an event in itself. We went with Max Rodríguez, who had a goatee and was what you might call a Latin Lover. At the time he was separated from his wife, Techy, or at least that's what he told Aunt Esther Collins, who also was Chilean, though her parents were Irish missionaries who had settled in Valparaíso.

Max lived in Westwood, which made him an urban guy, and he went to Las Vegas every so often. His apartment had a black light that made pictures of naked women printed on velvet light up when you turned it on. Going to Max's bachelor pad made me feel bad, because something told me I shouldn't know about such things or be exposed to that world. It affected me, because it seemed to me that this world tempted my father. Max Rodríguez told my father about broads, sex, the Pussy Cat Theater, and other rather explicit things that I didn't fully understand for two reasons: one, I was still pretty young, and two, they talked about those things in Spanish but they spoke to me in English. A girl would pass by and they would launch into Spanish catcalls, which I didn't understand though the general idea was disturbingly clear. Max drove a blue Beemer 2002, dressed like Tom Jones, and listened to "She's a Lady," "It's Not Unusual," and the rest of his idol's hits on 8-tracks. My father went over to his apartment and, with me as an excuse, called up girls while Max mixed cocktails—usually Bloody Marys—and served them with giant celery stalks that gradually became impregnated with the red tomato juice. Max would say to me, "Don't tell your mom," and give me a set of Matchbox cars to play with while my father finished up on the phone. Max never came over to our house in Encino because my mother was a friend of Techy and was horrified by his infidelities.

Max was one of the main reasons why we went to the Valley. In the beginning, he lived near Techy and the kids in Studio City. Something happened the time we went to see Le Mans: on the way there, Max took my father to have a look at a Porsche. He knew a car dealer in Santa Monica who had a used one, from 1962 or something like that, at a price that made it a hell of a car for a guy who delivered milk. My father was crazy about it, and he even handed over the keys to our Volkswagen Beetle as a trade-in. It was a jet-black two-seater; I sat in the back, in a sort of box for holding maps or beers, which I could barely fit into, and, as I was wearing shorts, the rough carpet irritated my legs. I remember that we dropped Max off at his apartment and sped back home in that car—not unlike McQueen's 917 in *Le Mans* and I remember the look on my mother's face. I don't know what they said, because they spoke in Spanish, but it clearly wasn't friendly. My mother laid into him, put him in his place, assuring him that this was a luxury car, a car built for two when we were four, and that he'd have to return it. I didn't want that, because the Porsche was totally cool, very McQueen, and if I'd had the money, I would have bought one. But something happened: my father took my mother for a drive up the coast in that car, with me in the back and Manuela up front in my mother's lap, and my father seemed like such a teenager in love with his car that something clicked in my mother, who did a few quick calculations, and said:

"Fine, we can keep the Porsche."

The sad thing is that a few days later they found out that the bank had not, in fact, approved our credit, so we had to return the Porsche and, what's worse, we lost the VW as well, for not having read the fine print. It can't be easy to choose between a car that makes you feel free and a family that loves you but can nevertheless make you feel like a prisoner at times. We stuck with the old station wagon until my mother started working as a bank teller and they scraped enough money together to cover the down payment on a brand-new BMW 1602, fresh from the factory in Germany, which my father bought before BMWs were either expensive or luxurious.

Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory, USA, 1971, 100 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Mel Stuart

starring: Gene Wilder, Jack Albertson, Peter Ostrum

SEEN: 1971, Westwood, CA

My father delivered bagels, pumpernickel and sourdough bread, and onion rolls, but the most important items—the ones that seemed almost magical—were the stacks of Hostess products he distributed from his truck: DingDongs, Twinkies, HoHos, and the gooey SnoBalls with their pink marshmallow filling. My father brought them home on their expiration date and that, without a doubt, made me one of the most popular boys on Babbitt Street and transformed me, in some way, into the local Willy Wonka. My refrigerator seemed to be directly connected to that cheap children's-cake factory. My father detested the Hostess products; he preferred the Pillsbury Doughboy rolls that my grandmother made in the oven of her Hollywood apartment when she invited us over for dinner. Grandma Yayi was an excellent cook and had brought with her all the recipes that she had prepared in the house on Ñuñoa Street back in Chile. This would serve her well years later when she worked as a housekeeper, or doméstica, in the rich neighborhoods of Orange County.

On Sunday afternoons, my grandparents would often drive up in their sky-blue Mercury Cougar (its antenna sporting a little orange ball with the "76" logo) to take us out for a drive. We never stayed at their house overnight, as kids annoyed my grandfather, and they always returned us to our parents by five o'clock sharp so they could get home in time for their favorite shows. They just couldn't miss their Lawrence Welk program; and their Ray Coniff, Liberace, and Lennon Sisters records were always playing in the background.

Once, my parents got home late, and they handed us off to the Bellin family because for them, time together was sacred time that nobody could interfere with. Unlike many families who sacrifice everything for their children, my grandparents sacrificed everything—starting with their children—for peace and quiet. We usually went to a little amusement park called Beverly Park, where there were horses and boats and a carousel, although, past a certain age, our scene shifted to the good cinemas in Beverly Hills or Century City or in Westwood, where film premieres were held, and not the double-feature theaters in the Valley that smelled of cigarettes and stale popcorn. To me, this meant that my grandparents were rich.

My grandfather learned English at an amazing rate and, being as organized as he was, he got a job with the bookkeeping and accounting department of the textile factory that the Zanetti family had established downtown on San Pedro Street. My grandmother, who later in life looked quite a bit like Lucía Hiriat de Pinochet, the dictator's wife, never learned English and, in time, paid for this very expensive lack of foresight by ending up totally isolated and alone. She never learned English for the simple reason that my grandfather wouldn't tolerate the idea of her attending night classes. Once, at the end of a class, he saw her chatting with the professor, and my grandfather decided that that was enough of that:

"You don't need to learn English; you have me."

If in Chile they were a united couple, in the U.S. they had become one indivisible being. My grandmother, so as not to annoy or give my grandfather a hard time, accepted everything without complaint. They were always together, hand in hand, kissing whenever they could. In those days, such immodest behavior was rather scandalous, and they were progressive, if only in that regard. But appearances can be deceiving; the bond between them was unraveling and they were together not out of pleasure but because he quite literally could not be without her. He died first, because he would not have been able to go on living as a widower. In time, I came to understand that the reason my grandparents were such fans of musical comedies was that my grandmother knew no English. Musical comedies were, at their heart, an affirmation of idiots, and the songs, some of which were already famous, only added to the general delight. Also, for sure, they enjoyed the dance numbers, although, in those days, every

time we went to the theater there were fewer films that were agreeable to these two elderly folks who dressed together in his-and-hers outfits.

Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory was one that I suggested and, since it was a musical (or semi-musical), my grandparents readily agreed. They took me to see a Sunday matinee. I was a fan of Roald Dahl's books, like James and the Giant Peach, which I got from the Encino Public Library. Everyone in the neighborhood knew by heart the adventures of Charlie, the poor boy who found a golden ticket inside a candy bar (bars which, by the way, really did exist and were called "Wonka Bars" before being discontinued).

In the car on the way to the theater, I mentioned that the movie really ought to be called *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, since that's what the book is called. My grandfather's hair and beard were already completely white and he was as lean and bony as an actor in an amateur production of The Man of La Mancha. He didn't smile or have a sense of humor, and it was never possible to contradict him. He immediately told me that I was mistaken, that the title was Willy Wonka and not Charlie. I said that yes, yes, I knew, it's just that it ought to be called Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, because that's the title of the book, and Charlie is its protagonist. My grandmother ended the discussion, interjecting with just how excited she was to see Sammy Davis Jr. sing "The Candy Man," something which, of course, doesn't occur in the movie because the guy doesn't even have a cameo. My grandmother, who carried See's chocolates in her purse and smelled strongly of Jean Naté perfume, jokingly called me ñato and said two or three words to me in English: "What do you want, ñato?" or "Are you alright, ñato?" In those days, talking with her was always affective and about caresses, candy, and food. She bought me everything I wanted. A grandmother always understands what her grandchild wants, no matter what the language.

Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory is, in essence, about a caring grandfather—Grandpa Joe—who makes it possible for his grandson, Charlie, to meet the famous chocolate-maker himself. Grandma Yayi found the movie (as she did every movie she saw) to be "beauti-

ful" and "wonderful." But my grandfather, who actually could speak my language, didn't get it. He exited the theater tense and silent: "I can't understand why Wonka didn't punish Charlie like he did the other children. Now that the chocolate factory is in Charlie's hands, it'll surely fall apart. He'll be ruined, and so will his family."

Downhill Racer, USA, 1969, 101 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Michael Ritchie

STARRING: Robert Redford, Gene Hackman,

Camilla Sparv

SEEN: 1972, Encino, CA

My father was a natural skier. He grew up in the snow, since his cousins had a cabin that held some thirty people, including the help. "The only good thing about Santiago is that Farellones is only 45 minutes from the Plaza Italia. You can ski within sight of the downtown skyline," he'd brag to the neighbors.

Downhill Racer with Robert Redford is one of my father's favorite movies. We watched it at home in Encino, maybe even on the night of its TV premiere. That same year, my father and I had a rather strange mountain experience. He didn't work Wednesdays, his day off, and many winter mornings he'd get up at 3 A.M. and drive the five hours north to the Mammoth Ski Resort, at the edge of Owen Valley, which is where L.A. gets its water. Sometimes he went with the Zanettis, but more often he went alone, driving five hours up, skiing for six, driving five hours back, and sleeping for two or three before getting up to shower and leave for work.

But the time I'm talking about is the time he took me with him: the time we almost didn't make it back home. After that, my father didn't take me along again, and we were both single: a separated father and son, like in some Nescafé commercial. The road to Mammoth passed through several little storybook towns and, in the last one, called Bishop, we stopped in a coffee shop frequented by all the L.A. skiers. A psychedelically painted VW bus full of ski bums parked next to our BMW. Some of them came in and sat down across from the booth where my father and I sat eating eggs and pancakes. One of the girls had the longest hair I'd ever seen; hair so blond that, from chlorine or sun, looked almost green. Without a second thought, she sat down in the booth with us, and my father stopped in mid-chew: she was more beautiful than even she could know. Hair and smiles to spare. She

shared my pancakes, stroked my face, talked about flowers, and left the coffee untouched because she didn't touch caffeine. She gave us a few sticks of incense as a thank-you and left, kissing me on the lips. No girl had ever kissed me on the lips before. But I liked it, and the fact that it made my father jealous, I'm sure. "Bless the beasts and the children," she said. Or, at least, that's what my father thought she said. Then we began our ascent.

It was snowing, which wasn't in the forecast, though in those days the weather reports were little more than wagers. My father had yet to turn thirty and, looking back on that day, I can see that he was a speed freak who wanted nothing more than to ski. He decided to press on; a few flurries weren't going to stop him. Until, all of a sudden, the car stopped. My father managed to push it onto the shoulder, sheltered by immense pines. Since it was a weekday, and because it was snowing harder, traffic was minimal. He opened the hood and peered at the engine, but he couldn't find a thing wrong. Until he realized that we were out of gas.

That was a shock, because back in Bishop, just before stopping for breakfast, we had filled the tank. Less than twenty miles ago, not nearly enough to empty out that tank, no matter how small it was. So how could it be? He inspected the entire tank to see if it was cracked, but found nothing. I was getting cold and opened a thermos of Lipton onion soup that my mother had fixed and put in my H. R. Pufnstuf lunchbox. Public phones were nowhere to be found, and it would be a good thirty years before cell phones came into being. Eventually—and this is what my mother refused to forgive him for—a car came by, driven by a very cowboy-looking guy. He stopped, my father told him what had happened, and the guy, who turned out to be from the area, asked us if we had run into any hippies recently.

"Why?"

The cowboy explained that while the local hippies might be against Nixon and the Establishment, they weren't against skiing. They would wait for a car with a ski rack to park at the local coffee shop, and they would pull up next to it and siphon off their tanks with a rubber hose.

"They think they're fuckin' Robin Hood," he explained, and gave

my father a lift to a nearby store that had emergency kits and a telephone. There he managed to reach my mother in Encino.

"How's Beltrán? Is he freezing?"

"I left him back at the car, wrapped up in a blanket."

My mother just about lost it. My father had just left me—an eight-year-old kid—in a BMW in the middle of the woods, surrounded by wolves and maybe even some murderous Charles Manson types. For my mother, this trip to Mammoth reaffirmed my father's priorities: he was immature and completely irresponsible. I just think he had faith in me and, considering that we made it home alright, I think I did a pretty good job. I'd never felt bigger, but once we got home and after all the yelling and the excuses, I never felt so small.

Fiddler on the Roof, USA, 1971, 181 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Norman Jewison

STARRING: Topol, Norma Crane, Leonard Frey,

Paul Michael Glaser

SEEN: 1972, Beverly Hills, CA

Not having anyone besides family will end up breaking up that very family. If you put all your strength onto a single plate, it will have to give way. You don't have to be a scientist to figure it out. And that's just what happened: the family cracked, and eventually the crack became a fault. Being left without a social class, without a circle of friends, the Solers had to invent new hatreds, angers, and fears to mitigate the fact that they had found themselves so far removed from the place that they once belonged to. (Or can someone ever really belong to a place? Don't they have to accept the place they're at?) The solution was as simple as it was drastic: stop being Latino. This, ultimately, condemned them doubly: it alienated them from those with whom they had a natural bond while at the same time precluding them from ever truly assimilating into the world of the gringos, who never considered them as equals.

The Solers' paranoia was that they would be lumped in with the rest of the South Americans, who were "an uneducated people, dying of starvation." The Solers were educated well enough, and they were scared to death of ever being hungry. In the U.S., relying on nothing, they built their fragile structures on the dubious foundations of supposedly being white.

"We're not Indians . . . don't ever let 'em tell you that you're an Indian, because you're not," Grandpa Soler once told me when he found out that in the neighborhood games of cowboys and Indians, I had been assigned the role of an Indian because I was a Mexican. After all, since my parents spoke Spanish, what else could I have been? It seemed logical to me, not insulting. I didn't know a thing about Mexico, and Chile was nothing but a faded memory.

"You're not Mexican, you're Catalán," he said furiously. "Maybe it's better that this boy doesn't learn Spanish."

The only time Grandpa Soler had problems with the law also had to do with the idea of *blancura*. A little old lady, maybe eighty years old, forgot to brake at the intersection of Fairfax and Beverly Boulevard, near the Farmer's Market, and rear-ended him as he was waiting for the light to change. My grandfather, very conscientious, had insurance; the little old lady, a Czech immigrant with a number tattooed on her arm, did as well. The police arrived after a few minutes, determined that there were no injuries, and—for insurance purposes only—began to fill out their forms. Without asking, the officer checked the box next to the word "Hispanic."

"Excuse me," my grandfather said, "but I'm Caucasian. 'Hispanic' is one of your inventions. There's no such thing as a 'Hispanic race.' We're made up of many races and mine happens to be Caucasian. If you want to know what country I'm from, it's Uruguay, where I was born to Catalán parents."

"Uru-what?" The cop looked at him and continued: "Believe me, you're Hispanic. ¿Comprendes? Just listen to your accent."

Humiliated, my grandfather replied that the lady had a much thicker accent than he did. He wouldn't accept the "Hispanic" label and was detained for two hours until a lawyer convinced him to concede his Aryan pretenses and become Hispanic.

I, for my part, stripped of my Latin roots, without knowing any South Americans, without any real idea whether I was white, Latino, Hispanic, or Chilean, chose Judaism. It wasn't easy, although I was lucky not to have the enormous weight of Catholicism hanging over me. Besides Yayi—who was Catholic—the Soler family was comprised of atheists, as were the Niemeyers and the Valdézes. We knew that Grandpa Teodoro was of Jewish heritage, but he was somewhat anti-Semitic; he didn't like their beliefs or the State of Israel. I, on the other hand, was an *aficionado*, and I donated pennies to save Soviet Jews, and my dream was to one day live in a kibbutz.

I saw Fiddler on the Roof (which was prohibited by Pinochet's government for reasons that, even today, nobody understands) with

Grandma and Grandpa Soler, who were shocked to learn that I knew all the songs when I started to sing along with them in the theater. Laura Bellin (Patrick's sister) wanted to be an actress someday, and she had won the part of the older sister, Tseitel, in the Mulholland Junior High production of the musical. By the time it finally opened, I had seen it at least five nights in a row. To my annoyance and embarrassment, the only family on Babbitt Street who decorated a Christmas tree and, to cap it all off, strung colored lights all around the house like garlands in order to celebrate Baby Jesus' birth was ours. And when I say "colored," I mean green, red, blue, yellow, orange . . . the whole spectrum.

Everyone else in the neighborhood was Jewish and they celebrated Hanukkah, filling their homes with blue and white lights. As if it weren't enough to be Latino in the middle of a white ghetto, I had to be a goy as well. My mother, who hated the pope and scorned nuns, felt that filling the house with little bits of colored light wasn't a matter of faith but one of aesthetics. All my friends were Jewish, and on Fridays they would invite me over to their houses to celebrate the Sabbath before *The Brady Bunch* came on. For Passover, everyone came to school with matzoh and, so I could fit in, I made my mother stop making me Wonder Bread sandwiches and instead send me to school with those thin, brittle, unleavened crackers. She acquiesced but discovered that the local kosher deli sold an unblessed brand of matzoh, which was much cheaper, and started buying it, though nobody could tell the difference and all my friends thought that my matzoh had been blessed by the rabbi just as theirs had been.

Sandcastles, TV, USA, 1972, 90 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Ted Post

STARRING: Jan-Michael Vincent, Bonnie Bedelia,

Herschel Bernardi seen: 1972, La Jolla, CA

I saw this made-for-TV movie one hot August night in 1972, along with Manuela, who was only six at the time. It was very late (probably nine o'clock, which, for us, was more like midnight) and the movie scared the hell out of us. My parents had gone out to dinner, leaving us at home with Grandma Guillermina, who was staying with us, recovering from communism. We were on vacation, spending a week in a beachfront hotel in La Jolla, not far from San Diego.

La Jolla was an elegant place, but the hotel wasn't much to look at; my father had gotten a good discount because the chain was owned by the same company that owned Wonder Bread. Plus, the tourist season was coming to a close, so everything was cheaper. Or it could be that Grandpa Teodoro had something to do with it (we had never taken a summer vacation before, and almost none of our neighbors went to the beach in August; rather, some of them went camping in one of the national parks), because these trips weren't designed for our relaxation but so Grandma Guillermina could get well. Get well and eat well. I remember that just before she touched down at LAX, my mother went to Gelson's—the best supermarket around—to buy filet mignon, butter, the best chicken, and cartons of half-and-half instead of nonfat milk.

"Mina has to get some meat on her bones . . . she didn't eat a thing in Chile."

Thus it was that, in 1972 and on the verge of an anti-*Allendista* nervous breakdown, Grandma Guillermina came to visit and recover. She'd been kicked out by my grandfather, who thought—not unreasonably—that her life there was getting dangerous. It was as simple as that. Mina was on the verge of hanging or poisoning herself, such was

the defiance she felt toward not only the Unidad Popular (which she detested like a plague) but also toward my grandfather, who was sympathetic to Allende and the Revolution. Many years later I learned that my grandmother had, in fact, attempted suicide, drained of her life by so many unfortunate years and so much internal bitterness.

Mina took advantage of Allende's triumph to bring to the surface decades of anger and resentment toward my grandfather, toward his father and family, toward the world in general. Grandma Guillermina Valdés lived a harsh life—she could never bring herself to explain why she married my grandfather, whom she never loved—and she had been forced to swallow a lot of rage and pain, and too many silences. When the right-wing women took to the streets to demand Allende's resignation, Mina felt that the Revolution had come. Nobody, it seemed, had explained to her that actually the opposite was true. But she just couldn't buy into the tenets of Communism, the UP, or the idea that the children of bourgeois parents could now be Socialists. Nor was she going to allow the proletariat to govern or—worse—take away her relatives' lands and way of life. My grandmother paraded down the Alameda, banging on pots and pans and carrying a heavy bar of Le Sancy soap inside a stocking to defend herself with just in case "some Communist son-of-a-bitch" tried to heckle or attack her.

My grandfather had contacts, as well as a pile of money stashed safely under his mattress as if it were an Encino Wells Fargo, so it didn't bother him to pay extra for food and supplies on the black market. I always fantasized about this legendary enterprise: an immense supermarket where everything was black and which was frequented only by black people. My grandmother, on the other hand, would stand in lines for hours, energized and invigorated by the shortage of supplies. She'd get up at dawn and come home dehydrated, demoralized, and dethroned, with two eggs, a pint of oil, and a pork chop.

"This is your UP. This is what you want for me."

My grandmother was a painter but never a famous one; never had her works exhibited in a museum or major gallery. She took classes at the Institutos Culturales de Providencia, or Las Condes, and accepted the counsel of revolutionary professors. She painted still-lifes, not believing in modern art, and of course didn't participate in bohemian life. Plus, she detested Neruda:

"Look at him, a Communist and obsessed with private ownership: he has three houses and the only reason he doesn't have more is because the son of a bitch ran out of those trashy decorations he uses to fill each one."

Mina didn't know a word of English, and in La Jolla she busied herself reading the Latin American novels that Grandma Yayi bought her ("You can tell this Vargas Llosa guy is pro-Fidel") and sewing.

That night my sister and I watched *Sandcastles* while our grand-mother sewed and looked up every once in a while at the color TV's screen. Maybe it was the fact that we were at the beach, surrounded by miles and miles of sand, that scared us. The sliding door that gave way to the balcony was open, and the sea breeze mingled in the room, ruffling the curtains and bringing with it an intense, salty smell. Plus, earlier that afternoon, we had been building castles of our own, and we still had a few grains of sand in the most unexpected places.

The odd thing is that the movie was not about a sand-castle-building competition; it was a horror film. From what I remember, it was actually a love story, a sort of 1970s version of Patrick Swayze's *Ghost*, but it wasn't the romantic stuff that I picked up on; it was the idea of a phantom surfer. Jan-Michael Vincent dies in a car accident, but then comes back to be with the woman who helped him, who made it all possible through salvation. He builds a sand castle even though he's dead. He's an everyday sort of ghost who drifts amidst the living, in love with a woman.

The fact that someone could love a ghost—that they would feel some emotion other than fear—was what really terrified us. That, and having watched it at the beach. My grandmother understood a bit of it, despite her attention to her sewing and her ignorance of English:

"That ghost can't rest because he has to set something straight that's been left unresolved. Even though I don't believe in such things, sometimes my son Beltrán, who died on the beach the day he went to watch a tsunami, comes back and visits his love."

I translated what I could understand for my sister (she understood

more than I did, but she couldn't respond, couldn't converse in Spanish) and immediately, out of sheer terror, Manuela burst into tears. Neither of us slept much that night, afraid that Uncle Beltrán would emerge from the sea and visit us. He didn't, but—just as in the movie—I sometimes feel that he is with me, for better or for worse, watching over me, helping me when I don't have the strength.

Napoleon and Samantha, USA, 1972, 92 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Bernard McEveety

STARRING: Michael Douglas, Johnny Whitaker, Jodie

Foster, Will Geer

SEEN: 1972, Van Nuys, CA

In the summer of 1972, my sister and I did what we wanted. The neighborhood facilitated it: tranquil strees, cul-de-sacs, and a nearby park. Everybody knew everybody else, there were no bars on the windows, and backyard swimming pools were quasi-public. We formed a spy club based out of Eric Brotman's house, held a death-defying bicycle-jumping competition à la Evel Knievel (we built a wooden ramp and jumped over our respective sisters), and organized a carnival with a little help from some material gleaned from Jerry Lewis: we saw a commercial at the end of one of his shows and decided to raise money for his telethon. We raised exactly ninety-seven dollars, a fortune in those days, and later we got a certificate in the mail signed by the comedian himself.

Also during that summer, the rich, blond Cohen twins (one of whom, Stuart, was our occasional baby-sitter, during which time he would set up shop in our kitchen to drink beers and talk on the phone for hours with his girlfriends) scandalized the entire neighborhood by streaking through the field during an important Pony League (part of the Mid-Valley Little League) game in which the Cubs—Patrick Bellin and Ira Goldman's team—were playing (I was not able to either hit or kick a ball with any sort of skill). *The Partridge Family* reigned over the airwaves, and there were at least three Partridge cover bands in the neighborhood.

My friend Patrick, who owned a pair of corduroys in every color imaginable, got a Panasonic portable cassette recorder as a gift, and he used it to record all the Partridge songs so that our band could play along (because of my red hair, I played the banjo, like Danny). My uncle Carlos was disgusted by this pop diversion of ours; he wanted us to form a band more like Led Zeppelin. That summer, my uncle Javi

saved up some money working as a hotel cook, and one hot August night he invited his parents to the Teatro Griego to see Neil Diamond, something Uncle Carlos considered to be "a political rally for superficial troublemakers." We also went often to the Topanga Plaza Shopping Mall; someone's mother would drive us all there, drop us off, and we'd stay all day. There we went ice skating and gorged ourselves on Carl's Jr. hamburgers. Mark Spitz was everybody's idol, and we drank our milk because he told us to.

There were two other watershed events during the summer of 1972: a flock of squawking parrots escaped from Busch Gardens (a boring "Parrot Jungle" type of amusement park that was really nothing more than a giant arboretum built alongside a brewery that made that entire part of Van Nuys reek of barley), and Tyrone Acosta Acosta came to visit us for a couple of days. Tyrone, whom I'd never see again, was my mother's cousin-who-wasn't-really-her-cousin-because-he-was-the-quasi-adopted-son-of-Aunt-Chilaca; in reality, he was the son of a Mapuche Indian employee who had worked with my aunt for decades. She generously helped support him and, since she had no children of her own, paid for his education too (she was a nurse) and used all of her contacts (she worked for one of the first plastic surgeons in the area) so that Tyrone could succeed in life.

Also during that summer, *Napoleon and Samantha* opened in theaters, starring the great Johnny Whitaker, Jodie Foster (who was then just a freckly little girl of ten), and a young hippie actor called Michael Douglas, who—by his beard and his general style—reminded me a bit of Uncle Carlos. I went to see it with Patrick, Ira Goldman, Craig Bluman, and Nathan Shapiro, as well as Tyrone, who was the one who drove us to the theater in my mother's station wagon. He—who must have been about twenty-six at the time—spoke perfect English, though with a bit of a British accent, as he'd won a scholarship to study in London and Oxford. Tyrone was so fascinated by those giant green parrots who had taken over Encino and the surrounding Valley that he spoke to them in his *Oliver!*-like accent, and the parrots, at dusk, would shout back, "Fuck you, you motherfucker," to the delighted hysterics of the neighborhood children.

In Napoleon and Samantha, Johnny Whitaker plays an eleven year-

old kid who lives with a grandfather (played by the same actor who was on *The Waltons*), more like Grandpa Teodoro than Grandpa Soler. But the grandfather dies right at the start of the film, and Napoleon escapes from the child welfare services, which want to take him to an orphanage located deep in a mountain range much like the Andes (it must have been somewhere in the Rockies), along with his friend, Samantha, and their pet lion. Michael Douglas comes riding along on a motorcycle and, out of sheer goodwill—because he's anti-Establishment like Carlos—he decides to help them. I lived in a world of boys, but the idea of going on the lam with a girl like Nathan's sister, Lori Shapiro, for example, was starting to intrigue me. If Napoleon could take off with Samantha, maybe I could run off with Lori. And, just as in any good Disney movie, the two kids and the lion have themselves a series of adventures: some fun, others more dangerous.

Tyrone didn't like the movie at all; to him it seemed "reactionary" and "more Disney than necessary." Years later I found out that Tyrone had been a student and disciple of Ariel Dorfman; his thesis was on Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's seminal "How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic." Then I understood why he preferred cursing parrots to Scrooge McDuck, and why he never took us to Disneyland.

Tyrone Acosta Acosta was a rather peculiar and elegant guy. We'd never seen anyone quite like him, dressed up like a dandy. He arrived in Encino with two full three-piece suits, one of light-blue denim and the other white with dark pinstripes. He drank champagne and smoked black tobacco cigarettes from France, which smelled really strange. He started shopping at Trader Joe's, and brought home things we'd never eaten before, like macadamia nuts, caviar, Brie, and sake. Tyrone was coming from Japan, where he was a cultural attaché, and he was on his way back to Santiago. He was a personal friend—or boyfriend—of one of Salvador Allende's daughters, and they had given him a position with the Department of Culture and Communication. One night he and Carlos (with whom he got along well) went out drinking, and he told him his goal: "To fight the cultural battle."

Luckily, Grandma Guillermina was not at home; she had just left

on a train to go see New York. Tyrone Acosta Acosta left to work at the publishing house Editorial Quimantu; ultimately, he wanted to put a library in the house of every Chilean. Before the military came to look for him, before we forever lost track of him or his whereabouts, Tyrone spent his last day correcting the proofs for the popular edition of *Cataclismo en Valdivia*. The book was never published, and we only found out about Tyrone's fate on the day they published the Rettig Report.

The Poseidon Adventure, USA, 1972, 117 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Ronald Neame

STARRING: Gene Hackman, Ernest Borgnine,

Shelley Winters, Eric Shea

SEEN: 1972, Encino, CA

This one could well be up there among the most important movies of my life. I've seen it more times than any other film, by far. I know it so well that, when the time came to remake it in Drew Wasserman's garage, the dialogue flowed out of my mouth effortlessly, though it didn't matter much, since ours was a silent version.

The Poseidon Adventure is rated PG—or GP, as they said then—meaning anybody could get in and nobody would say a thing, whether you were thirteen or not. No parents, no guardians, you just had to buy your popcorn, put on your game face—I knew them all—and nothing was going to appear on that giant screen that I hadn't seen before, nothing that I hadn't done before. But it turned out to be a huge surprise: I was not at all prepared for what I was about to see. As the movie played out across the screen, I found myself paralyzed: the coarse language, the voluptuous former Playmate (Stella Stevens) in her translucent blue dress, and all the blood, tragedy, and death (just about everyone dies except, of course, for the stars) that occurs when a giant wave—a tsunami caused by an earthquake—capsizes a cruise ship just at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve.

There are two priests, one young and the other older, and they square off over a decision that has to be made. The younger one is played by Gene Hackman, who seemed instantly trustworthy to me. He's a bit unconventional; his faith is faltering and he's fighting against his destiny. He can't understand how God could visit so much suffering on a group of innocents. The older reverend, on the other hand, accepts everything that happens to him. When everyone finds themselves trapped in a ballroom, he's the one who decides to go down

with the ship, consoling those who have been injured. He makes no effort to escape up the Christmas tree. Gene Hackman is up in arms, and orders the women to strip. You can't climb a tree in evening gowns and heels. Pamela Sue Martin ends up in a pair of red velvet shorts while Stella Stevens takes off her dress and tries to escape through the steamy bowels of the ship, clad only in her husband Mike's (played by Ernest Borgnine) dress shirt. When the group reaches the deck, the ship moves, something gives way, and water rushes into the ballroom. Everyone who stayed behind and didn't follow Hackman drowns, including the older priest. For years I identified with Eric Shea, who played Robin Shelby, the ten-year-old kid who survived the tragedy and managed to reach "The Morning After" (that catchy Maureen McGovern song that was played constantly that summer).

I saw *The Poseidon Adventure* on Drew Wasserman's recommendation. He practically forced us to go. And we listened to him when it came to this type of thing, because, for one, nobody in Encino was more closely keyed into the film industry than Drew Wasserman. His mother was a hairstylist who worked with Dean Martin. His stepfather (whom he hated, if no more than his real father) was a makeup artist for Warner Bros.

"He's a fucking loser."

Drew's real father worked on horror films where the actors needed special makeup effects. Drew admitted that, despite being a son of a bitch (back then I couldn't believe a son would talk about his father like that), the guy had talent. He was one of the artists who worked on *The Planet of the Apes* series and, perhaps for that very reason, Drew never saw any of the films. If he did, he never talked about them, never entertained us with his descriptions of the various sequences, emphasizing, as we got older, the sexual details. Nothing in Drew's house hinted that he had such a close relation to the most famous apes on earth—not one poster, photo, not even a latex mask covered with hair.

The difference between this and other "grown-up" movies (especially those R-rated films that we'd never see, like *The Godfather* or *Willard*) was that Drew didn't tell us about *The Poseidon Adventure*.

"This one you've got to see for yourselves. There just aren't words to describe what you'll feel."

I was always grateful that he kept silent; he knew we had to see it without any preconceptions to enjoy it fully. For Drew, everything was a movie. His life was a movie, and outside of the theater, it didn't make much sense. Maybe that's why he tried so hard to re-create movies before they escaped. Before videos and now DVDs, films lived on in two ways: you could describe them to your friends or, in Drew's case, remake them. His stepfather bought him lighting equipment and the best Super-8 camera money could buy but Drew was never really interested in shooting trailers. He wanted to remake actual films. He spent his time building sets, assembling wardrobes, and inventing ways to create special effects.

For *The Poseidon Adventure*, he recruited the entire neighborhood. Drew tinted the water in his mother's bathtub with aniline and floated a model of the *Queen Mary* that he bought at Toys "R" Us. He filmed one of our friends "drowning" in a pool covered in floating cups, glasses, and plastic champagne flutes. Patrick took Hackman's role, I played Borgnine's, my sister was Pamela Sue Martin, and Leslie Melnick was the stripper—she dressed in one of Drew's stepfather's shirts and, when she got wet, we were all mesmerized by her large, erect, prominent nipples.

Where Drew really shone was in creating the wave that destroyed the ballroom. In his driveway, just in front of the garage door, he built a big, 18-by-12-foot wooden platform with two hydraulic jacks supporting one of the corners. On this deck he put three fully set tables, chairs, decorations, a Christmas tree, and all the neighborhood kids decked out in their Sunday best. Up on the roof, Drew lined up six trash cans in a row and filled them up with a long garden hose. When he pulled on a cord, the trash cans would spill over in unison, dumping a formidable quantity of water onto the dance floor below, like a wave. Two other friends were off camera, ready to work the jacks on the breakaway corner. Drew filmed it all: us dining, dancing, and otherwise celebrating the New Year, and then faces filled with fear, with terror—we felt the floor moving, not like in an earthquake but as if it

were rising up on a wave. Glasses began to slide off the tables, then the plates; the chairs and ourselves started to slide off the platform; and then the trash cans were tripped and we were hit by an immense wave that knocked us to the ground.

"Cut," said Drew. "That's a wrap."

Saludos Amigos, USA, 1943, 43 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Jack Kinney, Bill Roberts

STARRING: Walt Disney and his many animated characters

SEEN: 1972, Encino, CA

One of the shows I would always watch before going to bed on Sunday nights was *The Wonderful World of Disney*. One night, there we were, in our pajamas, the kind with booties, in the den in front of the TV, eating some new cereal for hippies called granola, when a short, half-animated, half-real film came on. It was obviously very old.

It was called *Saludos Amigos*—just like that, untranslated—and though my Spanish wasn't great, I knew what it meant. When I saw the map of South America come up on the screen and the old-Walt-Disney-turned-young boarding a plane, I knew this film was getting serious; this film could be about me. As the movie progressed (it showed images from Lake Titicaca to Rio), I realized that this was more than a curiosity. Never in my life had I seed a Disney movie set *en el sur*. I thought of Tyrone Acosta Acosta and his theory that Donald Duck was a capitalist pig who hated all the little socialist children.

Right away I called for my mother, who came in with Grandma Guillermina, who was still living with us, never leaving the house except for a couple of weeks when she went to visit Aunt Luisa (my mother's other sister), who then lived with my cousins in Caracas. Chile, for the most part, never appeared on the pop-culture radar. Not even a blip. Before Pinochet and the coup, if the word "Chile" was mentioned on TV, it had to do with the climate about 20 percent of the time ("It's gonna be chilly tonight," "Why've you become so chilly toward me all of a sudden?" or the little penguin Chilly Willy), while the other 80 percent was in reference to chili peppers, chili con carne, or Wienerschnitzel chili dogs.

"I can't stand it when they associate Chile with all things spicy. We

don't roast our food with peppers. By God, what people will believe!" Grandma Guillermina opined. She insisted that the whole world knew Chile; she swore that the whole world had bought into the story of our republican civility and, therefore, admired us and looked to us as an example.

"You come from a cultured country," she said to me seriously. "Unlike here, where people can barely read a map, everyone in Chile knows where the United States is. Even poor people know the capital is Washington."

Goofy appeared on the screen, riding around with his suspenders and stirring up trouble on the Argentinean pampa. Then the Disney animators boarded a plane in Mendoza and crossed the Andes. This caught Mina's eye, especially when the images stopped being actual footage and became animated.

The reason for her interest was that Grandma Guillermina felt, with good reason, that she owned the Andes. After all, she designed, as a favor for her brother who was a forestry engineer, the logo on the Andes-brand matchbox. It's a simple, basic design that, with time, became something of a pop phenomenon. It's strange but, in the end, my grandma went down in history because of those little matchboxes. Not many people know who designed them (many folks probably think there was no designer, that it's a photo, since who would go through the trouble of capturing and painting that mountain chain), but I doubt that there is a single Chilean who hasn't looked at that painting.

"It's my revenge, I suppose. I end up being way more famous than Henriette Petit, who's related to me and who never liked my still-lifes."

In the late 1990s, several young painters reproduced the design from the matchboxes and built, in the middle of the Museo de Bellas Artes's main hall, an enormous matchbox that had my grandmother's mountain chain on one side and a photo of Pinochet in his dark glasses on the other.

"They wanted to say, 'This is Chile,' or some such thing," my grandmother explained. "I guess they decided on an ironic, contrary form, but I ended up in all the papers; the kids were sort of weird, and no doubt leftists, but they were charming. The cocktail party was especially marvelous."

The segment of *Saludos Amigos* dedicated to us—to me—began with a map of the central region and the voice of the narrator saying:

"Once upon a time, in a little airport near Santiago, Chile, there lived three airplanes . . ."

I sat without speaking, stunned, swelling with so much pride that I couldn't concentrate on the story. Luckily, it was simple enough: there were three Chilean planes, Papa Plane, Mama Plane, and Pedrito the Baby Plane. Pedrito's parents were really sick and couldn't fly. Pedrito, then, offered to save the family's honor, because planes working the Chilean Run fly across the Andes rain or shine. The important thing, they said, was to stay away from the towering, dangerous Aconcagua, whose peak is actually part of Argentina and not Chile. Not much happens in the piece: the loving little plane flies through the mountains, reaches Mendoza and picks up a sack of mail, and on the way back he goes to take a look at Aconcagua like any mischievous little plane would, almost crashes, and just when everyone has given up on him, he arrives safe and sound.

"My brothers died in a plane like that," said my grandmother. "They were promoting Wings for Chile. They collided with another plane, in the Cordillera de la Costa. That was back in 1941. My brothers were in one plane, and the Yáñez brothers were in another. It was a horrible tragedy. The whole world was at the funeral, even Don Pedro Aguirre, because my brother was the president's personal assistant. Now I think I'd better get to bed."

Then she got up and, without realizing that we were there, turned off the TV, ending the movie in darkness.

A Short Walk to Daylight, TV, USA, 1972, 90 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Barry Shear

STARRING: James Brolin, Don Mitchell, Brooke Bundy

SEEN: 1972, Encino, CA

A Short Walk to Daylight woke in me one of the fantasies that all seismologists ought to get past: that an earthquake strikes unexpectedly in a non-seismic place, and everything is completely razed. With time, with age, I've lost this apocalyptic desire. I no longer daydream about 7.2s in São Paulo, 8.1s in Paris, or a vertical 6.8 in Miami. The other fantasy that we have to fight off is the one that the small circle of geophysicists call the "living-to-tell-it syndrome." Everyone—secretly or not so secretly—is excited by the idea of being on hand to document a major cataclysm.

My grandfather had that opportunity in Valdivia; in strictly geologic terms, I have not been lucky enough to experience something as overwhelming as that. Nor do I know, all things considered, if I ever want to face something as life threatening as that. Though I suppose so. Ultimately, it's one of the things I've lived for, maybe the only reason I risk my neck; it is, perhaps, the light at the end of a long, dark, and empty tunnel that I myself spent so much sweat in building so that the world may crumble, so that the ground may open up, so that the human crust may crack and let a bit of life in.

Before, however, I was eager to count more on life, more on instantaneous energy. At the age of eight, I was taken with the need to one day become a seismologist. It was almost like a physical, hormonal deficiency. I needed a new earthquake, I wanted to feel one again, I dreamed that all of L.A. would crumble and I would be one of the few survivors. I wasn't thirsting for revenge. I just wanted to go back to doing things right, to living an interesting life again. Those thirty-some seconds in February of 1971 (so few, and yet I remember every one of them while forgetting entire months of insignificant events) weren't enough for me. No. I wanted more, something more pure, and I wanted it in the yein.

I saw A Short Walk to Daylight, another made-for-TV movie, the night it premiered, with Patrick Bellin, who could stay up late to watch it and still walk home even though it was eleven o'clock when it ended. The movie's premise is something that only an eight-year-old kid could come up with: New York is hit by a huge earthquake, and later it's revealed that it was actually a terrorist strike, caused by bombs placed at strategic points underneath Manhattan. It focuses on a single subway car, grimy and covered in graffiti, where eight people are trapped, including James Brolin, the hero. This seemed like a great idea to me: it was one thing for your house to collapse on top of you, but it's quite another thing entirely to be trapped under ground that roars and rears just to remind everyone that it's still alive.

Two weeks after we saw the movie, I went up to the front of the class to make my show-and-tell presentation, which was nothing more than an exercise in ego formation, since every kid just showed or talked about whatever made them the most proud ("my trip to Israel," "my tropical fish aquarium," "my jumping cat").

When it was my turn, I knew that everyone had felt the February 9 tremor, and that a good part of them had seen *A Short Walk to Daylight*. My mother helped me draw a map of Chile on a piece of poster board ("Most maps make Chile look like a string bean") and my grandfather mailed me a cardboard tube containing ten feet of the original records captured by the seismograph at Quinta Normal during the Valdivia earthquakes in 1960. And if that wasn't enough, I brought in three copies—in English—of my grandfather's book. I made sure everyone saw the dedication: "To Beltrán Niemeyer Valdés, who was going to be a seismologist, and to Beltrán Soler Niemeyer, who will be."

My classmates looked at the photos, and from the looks on their faces I knew that the presentation had gone well. I knew that world records were always surefire winners, since we were all fans of *The Guinness Book of World Records*, and I knew well all the records that Chile held: the highest jump on horseback (Captain Alberto Larraguibel, riding Huaso, jumped eight feet, one and a quarter inches in Viña del Mar in 1949), the world's longest country, and the strongest earthquake recorded in modern times.

That's how it is: the Valdivia quakes aren't distinguished for having killed the most people or for leaving millions homeless. I explained all this carefully to my classmates at Magnolia Public School. Valdivia isn't famous among the general population (the San Francisco quake in 1906 was more traumatic because of the subsequent fires), but rather it's the one earthquake out of them all that made people like me want to become seismologists. The reason for saying that you have some connection to Valdivia, a reason which settles all arguments whenever there are more than three geophysicists around, is that, contradicting all the data indicating that aftershocks following a significant earthquake tend to descend exponentially in strength, the one that came back to strike Valdivia and the surrounding region was terrifyingly superior to the 7.7 that woke the entire country on May 21 at 6:02 A.M. Sunday, May 22, at 3:11 P.M. (7:11 P.M. GMT), the already shattered city of Valdivia was devastated by an aftershock that was, in effect, not an aftershock at all but rather a brand-new earthquake of intensely superior strength. A ten-minute-long quake started—ten minutes of horror, ten minutes of pleasure—which hovered between XI and XII on the Mercalli scale. On the Richter scale, it never dipped below a 9.5.

Then, as if that wasn't enough, three tsunamis struck. Rivers changed their course, mountains were moved, and new lakes were formed. The sea retreated, leaving fish stranded high and dry, and then, like a boomerang, it came back to reclaim its turf in no uncertain terms: a great wave rose up and rushed in, destroying homes, animals, bridges, boats, and, of course, many human lives. Some ships ended up miles from the sea, in dense forests. Valdivia quickly became the center of the world, sending tsunamis across the ocean to break on the coasts of Japan, Hawaii, the Philippines, and even California. Five thousand people lost their lives in Valdivia on May 21 and 22 of 1960, and among them was Beltrán Niemeyer Valdés, my grandfather's son, my mother's brother, and my uncle. Beltrán was eighteen, studying engineering, thinking of becoming a seismologist, and the sea took him. They never found his body. He was never buried.

The King and I, USA, 1956, 133 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Walter Lang

STARRING: Yul Brynner, Deborah Kerr, Rita Moreno

SEEN: 1974, Encino, CA

My parents enjoyed inviting folks over for dinner: steak for the Solers or Zanettis, parties until dawn for their old Chilean friends, and more elaborate dinners for foreign guests. One year, we had an unexpected guest for dinner; a guest who would revolutionize not just our household but also the entire neighborhood. Which was surprising, since people in Encino were used to brushing shoulders with movie stars. Erin Murphy, who played Tabitha on *Bewitched*, for example, went to Lanai Elementary, which was a public school for people who were wealthier than we were, and we saw her all the time at the skating rink or at Plaza de Oro, where we got our hair cut. But Tabitha was Tabitha, and Edward Everett Horton was Edward Everett Horton. That Yul Brynner would show up in Encino in a gold-colored Mercedes and sporting a white cowboy hat was something else. That Yul Brynner would give my mother a bouquet of flowers and give two bottles of Casillero del Diablo to my father was major news.

If Yul Brynner had come to my house for dinner two years earlier, nobody would have made much of a fuss. But *The King and I*, the famous musical that established him, had been re-released a year before; Grandma and Grandpa Soler had, of course, taken me to see it. I thought it was eternally boring and "for girls," and I was humiliated that my grandmother sang "Shall We Dance?" in her horrendous English. But something would happen that turned Yul Brynner into a hero among my friends.

During the 1972–1973 TV season, Brynner starred in *Anna and the King*, a series that, to the collective disgruntlement of all us Babbit Street Boys, was cancelled before its time. It was little more than *The King and I* adapted for TV, in half-hour segments and without the singing. Eric Shea, the same kid from *The Poseidon Adventure*, played

the series' protagonist and, in the end, it was about how he came to Siam with his mother, a governess, and how they had to adapt themselves to the strange local customs (this series was, without knowing it, describing my destiny). What's more, he had to go to the palace and face the king, played by Brynner, who was bald, walked around barefoot, and was even more irritable than Grandpa Soler.

The reason Yul Brynner came to dinner at my house is basically simple. In those days, he was married (or rather, he was in the process of getting a divorce, though we didn't know that) to my great-aunt Nora Niemeyer, Grandpa Teodoro's cousin, a tall, thin woman who was never without her pearl necklace. My grandfather was staying with us for a few days, after having participated in a conference in Pasadena. Aunt Nora, who almost never came to L.A. because it was such an ordeal, was also there, and took the opportunity to get everyone together. The original idea, my mother would tell me years later, was to go out to eat at La Brea or some place like that, but Brynner didn't want to go out in public, and so he suggested we eat at home in Encino. My mother was instantly terrified, and called Grandma Soler to get her famous recipe for tongue and parsley sauce, which to me didn't seem like something anyone would serve a king (or me). My father went to Gelson's to get all the best ingredients and a liter of vodka, since Brynner was Russian and therefore would surely enjoy some.

My mother forbade me from making the imminent visit "public," leaving me exactly three minutes to inform the entire neighborhood. First I told Patrick, who told his sister—the one who wanted to be an actress—and he also told Drew Wasserman, who came right over, rang the bell, called me a liar, and said that if I wasn't telling the truth, he was going to leave me bloody in the street.

The threat—and the idea of Yul Brynner driving up in his gold Mercedes—was enough to draw some twenty neighbors to our front door. The Roths, who were all overweight and still not over the death of their son, came over with lawn chairs and Dairy Queen malts. Drew came over with his *Westworld* poster, in which Brynner had played an evil robot who started to go crazy. *Westworld*, which was for

adults, was still in theaters at the time and had become an unprecedented box-office success. Drew had seen it a ton of times, and had told us all about it in rich detail.

At dinner, Brynner spoke in Castillian Spanish, and when he spoke to me he did so in an English as thickly laced with accent as my father's.

"What's your favorite movie?" he asked me.

"The Poseidon Adventure," I said without a second thought.

"They offered me the role of the captain. I should've said yes."

Aunt Nora said that her husband was not a great judge of scripts, and that he had made a lot of bad decisions.

"We all make mistakes, but in poor Yul's case, his mistakes are preserved for all eternity."

The Chilean gossip magazines tried to turn Aunt Nora into a privileged witness of the international jet set and a sort of glamour queen. They insisted that she had been a model for I don't know what famous photographer, and that's why Brynner had fallen for her. The truth is that Aunt Nora was a simple nurse at Hospital Salvador. Quite a bit younger than my grandfather, she had just turned thirty and was ready to live the bachelorette's life. In a year-end raffle, she won a free trip to Europe. In Paris, she stayed with the cultural attaché (who was a family friend) and went to many parties. At one of these parties, and completely by chance (because someone was the friend of someone who was the friend of someone else), she met "an exotic bald gentleman." Brynner was older than she, and married, but the romance began just the same and she ended up marrying this Russian actor and Oscar winner without knowing what she was getting into.

Aunt Nora was never a film buff and, after the divorce, she never set foot in a theater and refused to have a television in her home. They settled in Switzerland for the tranquility and tax exemptions. She still lives there, I think, on the shores of Lake Geneva, where she cultivates Chile-bells (the national flower of Chile) in a greenhouse. The Chilean press, at the time fascinated with the relationship, ignored the fact that Nora was pregnant with Natacha, some cousin of mine, two years older than me. The whole country was obsessed with the idea that a Chilean was part of that exclusive little world called Hollywood.

For dessert, my mother served rice pudding and, over coffee, they spoke in Spanish about Chile. Aunt Nora mentioned that they were thinking about buying a house in Zapallar. Then everyone got up and bid their affectionate farewells. Outside, in the street, my friends' mothers were waiting to ask for Brynner's autograph. Drew was dumbstruck, but managed to hold out his *Westworld* poster so he could sign it. Brynner picked me up in his arms, hugged me, and gave me his cowboy hat. For one brief moment, I was the most envied kid in Encino.

Trapped, TV, USA, 1973, 90 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Frank De Felitta

STARRING: James Brolin, Susan Clark, Earl Holliman

SEEN: 1973, Encino, CA

One night in the summer of 1973, my father turned on the TV to discover that a program on Chile was about to start, and he called everyone into the den so we could eat our macaroni and cheese on the folding tables and watch. The show (which might have been a 60 Minutes report) was called "Chile in the Red" and showed images of the immense mine at Chuquicamata ("It's the largest in the world, Beltrán") and images of Fidel Castro in the Estadio Nacional and others of thousands of workers marching through streets past old, run-down buildings.

The reporter's conclusion was clear: Chile, then, was a Communist state. I asked my father if that meant that Chile was the enemy, and he said yes.

"Are there Viet Cong in Chile?"

"Something similar," he said, "but they're students, people born into money, friends of Carlos."

"Is Tyrone Acosta bad?"

"No," interrupted my mother. "Tyrone is a dreamer, and from so much dreaming, those boys are turning that poor country into a nightmare."

Then she started to cry silently.

"Why are you crying?"

"Because now Chile's going to become like Cuba," my father replied, sinking his hand into a jar of Planter's Roasted Peanuts. "I don't know how Nixon and Kissinger could have let this happen."

In those days, dozens of Chilean families (some relatives, others friends of friends) were starting to flee from Allende and coming to L.A.

"They're exiles," my mother said. "We have to help them."

After this news report, the film *Trapped* made its debut. Movies with Dobermans were very popular in the early '70s, but they were for older people and I had yet to see one, though I was dying to. Patrick, who was a month younger than I, had seen a few because his sisters would sometimes take him to the drive-in to see PG-rated films like *The Last of Sheila* and *American Graffiti*. He was an expert in Doberman films, and often rattled off the most unusual dog-related trivia.

I suppose *Trapped* was the brainchild of other people who couldn't see the real Doberman films in the theater. James Brolin, who was starring in just about every movie that I liked in those days, plays a guy who goes to a Sears or a Fedco to buy his girlfriend a gift and ends up getting locked inside, having to wait until the employees come back the next morning. A group of young thugs (and why are all young thugs either black or Latino?) jump him in the bathroom, leaving him unconscious or something, I'm not sure. Maybe he just fainted. But the fact is that there he is, trapped, and noboby knows about it, because in those days there were no such things as security cameras or electronic eyes. Brolin wakes up, looks at his watch, sees that it's almost eleven at night, and exits the bathroom. But before even thinking about helping himself to (or at least using) all the many items that are right there at hand, he realizes that the damn store is guarded by six angry, mangy, slobbering Dobermans out for fresh blood and tender meat. From then on, the film is one big hunt, and clearly Brolin has no time to call the police.

At the end of that summer, something dog-related happened that made me think immediately of *Trapped*. It happened in a place called Chula Vista, not far from San Diego and so close to the border that we could see, from the ranch-style house where we had been invited, the giant Mexican flag that fluttered in the main plaza in Tijuana. Also, "Chula Vista" was the name of a song that was popular on the Sundaynight alternative, stoner program *Dr. Demento*, on 93 KHJ, which was required listening for all the Babbitt Street Boys, by order of Drew Wasserman.

Chula Vista was the home to Alejandro Alvarez, a shrewd Argentinean businessman who imported Mexican beer and sold it to restau-

rants in the greater Los Angeles area, much before Dos Equis and Corona became part of popular Yankee culture. Alvarez wore gauchos' sombreros and had built himself a ranch estate complete with five or six houses, two pools, a horse stable, a duck pond, and dozens of dogs of all shapes and sizes. He was married to a Chilean woman who happened to be the sister of Aunt Vicki Casteñón. And when Alvarez invited guests over, he went all the way: guest rooms, kids, shish kebabs, dances, and game rooms. Alvarez had a pair of Mexican nannies who took care of the kids, and coolers with every type of beer imaginable.

The time when all this happened was in September; it was a Sunday afternoon, probably Labor Day and therefore a long weekend. We had gone for a two- or three-day visit. It was late afternoon, and it was terribly hot. Since Alvarez had two pools, I was in the one with the water slide with a ton of other kids I didn't know who spoke Spanish—some of Alvarez's nieces and nephews visiting from Argentina, I suppose, and some of the youngest children of the other guests (I was born with the curse of being not just the oldest in my family, but also being the oldest child of all my parents' friends). The grown-ups were splashing around in the other pool, which Alvarez had built with an in-the-water bar and floating seats, drinking beers and margaritas, and snacking on *tortillas con quacamole*.

Manuela was with the other kids but, in a moment of curiosity, she wandered off to explore the garden. Alvarez had a giant Great Dane named Evita who had recently had puppies, and she was resting with her litter. Manuela was awed to see so many tiny little puppies and probably tried to pet one or maybe tug at a rubber bone, and the mother, who was nervous and protective, bit her on the cheek with her sharp canines. It was like something right out of Stephen King: Manuela screamed so loudly that the other dogs began to howl as well, and I thought that another earthquake was about to strike. Manuela came staggering back to the pool, her cheek hanging like a torn pocket, exposing the bone underneath. Blood streamed down her face and into the pool, turning the water pink. Then she fell silent and crumpled to the ground. Everyone who saw it assumed the worst.

"She's in shock," Vicki's sister said.

Alvarez and my parents left for the hospital with Manuela wrapped up in a sheet. Aunt Vicki told the gardener to go beat Evita, but she was still snarling so fiercely that nobody would go near her.

They kept Manuela as an inpatient and released her Tuesday afternoon with eight stitches under her right eye. For months her whole eye was bruised, as if my parents had beaten her with a shoe every time she refused to finish her supper. The ride back to Encino was long and quiet. On the radio, they played "Midnight Train to Georgia" three times in a row.

When we got home late that night, the phone was ringing but we couldn't get inside in time to answer it. Two minutes later it rang again. It was my grandmother, calling from Caracas, where she was visiting my Bulnes Niemeyer cousins. She was euphoric. My mother listened distractedly and said:

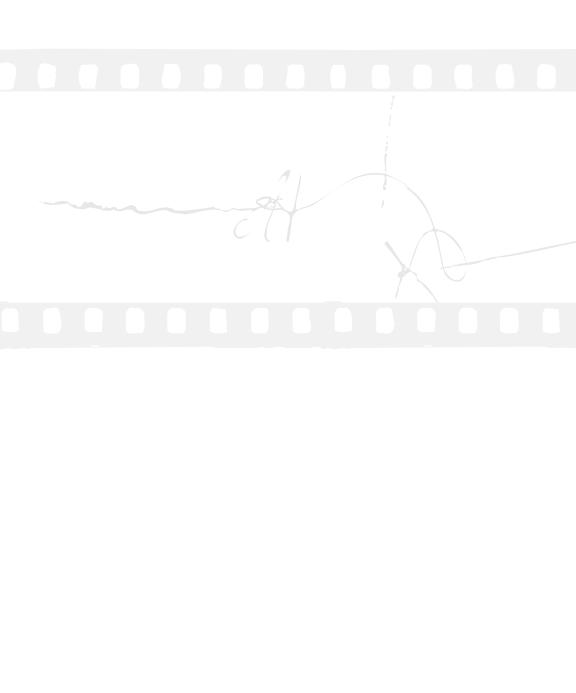
"Ah, bueno. It's what you want, so I guess it's good news."

Then she hung up. She looked at us and said that Allende was dead, that La Moneda was burning, and a military junta was in control.

"Now we can go to Chile," I remarked.

Manuela started to cry again. We looked at her and realized that she was still bleeding. Her blanket was wet with blood.

"This cut isn't going to mend very easily," said my mother. "It's going to take some time."





And if California slides into the ocean Like the mystics and statistics say it will I predict this motel will be standing Until I pay my bill.

WARREN ZEVON, "Desperados Under the Eaves"



TUESDAY January 16, 2001 9:23 A.M.

Los Angeles, CA

"Hello, Manuela?"

"Yes, who is it?"

"Beltrán, your brother."

"Are you in Tokyo?"

"No. Los Angeles."

"What happened to Japan?"

"I'm not going anymore."

"Where are you calling from?"

"My hotel. Near the airport. I can see the runway from here... an Air New Zealand flight is landing just now."

"Are you sick? Did something happen to you?"

"Yes and no. Nothing important. I missed my

flight. Overslept."

"You?"

"Yes. Plus, there was a tremor. I was here, in

bed."

"I don't understand . . ."

"I'll have to stay an extra day, that's all."

"At least you can go for that walk."

"I've got a seat for Wednesday morning. All three flights today are already booked."

"What if you change airlines?"

"The ticket they gave me isn't very flexible. Besides, that's luck. Why not stay here awhile."

"It wasn't a strong one, was it?"

"Strong enough that we felt the floor shake."

"I don't get it, Beltrán. Have you been drinking? Are you sick?"

"I'm fine, Manuela. Peaceful. Very, very tired, but relieved."

"And your bags?"

"Bag, singular. Here with me. Nothing's lost. Nobody's lost. For a change."

(Silence.)

"Do you know anything about El Salvador?"

"Yes, but I was only on the phone for a few seconds before they cut the line."

"When's the funeral?"

"Tomorrow, Beltrán. They embalmed Tata, because of the heat. It seems so . . . I don't know . . . awful."

"Pretty unusual, yeah."

"I was shocked, to be honest. Plus, just then I saw a movie where they open up a guy and inside you can see . . . anyway, I'm getting off the subject."

"What? Tell me. What did you see?"

"It was last night, on TV, on TVN. I didn't see the whole thing. Actually, the kids were watching it. I was outside playing bridge and when I came in and saw what they were watching, I sent them right to bed. But I kept on watching. I'd never seen anything—"

"But what was it?"

"Remember that time when Yul Brynner came to dinner at our house?"

"Of course."

"He was in the movie last night. They open him up and inside he's a robot."

"Westworld."

"I don't know, but that scene really struck me."

"Yul Brynner is a sort of robot cowboy—a sheriff—but he's evil. He starts shooting the tourists instead of saving them."

"Right. That's it exactly. I can't believe it! How did you know?"

"I saw it in Caracas with Milo. *Vacaciones mortales*, they called it in Spanish. *Westworld*. Yesterday I saw it on DVD and almost bought it. I had it in my hands. Maybe I should have bought all those movies."

"You bought a DVD player?"

"No, you see, I went to a store and . . . anyway, it's not important. *Westworld*, huh? Strange."

(Silence.)

"So you fell asleep. Maybe you took some pills?"

"I didn't take any pills. It wasn't that. I just fell asleep. Jet lag, probably. I got to L.A., made all the arrangements, checked into a hotel and, I don't know, just couldn't sleep. So I took a shower and went out for a bit."

"To Encino?"

"No. I hired a car with a Salvadorean driver. He took me to this store pretty far away."

"You went shopping?"

"I didn't buy anything, but I spent almost three hours looking at DVDs. I bet they had every movie there that I've ever seen in my life. Plus thousands that I haven't, and never will."

"You always did like the movies. I remember that."

"Then I went back to the hotel, ordered room service, read part of a book someone recommended to me, and that's it.... I asked the front desk to get me up at six in the evening. I had more than five hours to sleep. Enough."

"Forcing yourself to sleep during the day is a nightmare."

"True."

"And then you didn't hear the phone."

"Exactly. The desk clerk even insists he heard me say 'gracias,' but I don't remember a thing."

"It happens. Sometimes you're so sleepy you don't remember. Or you just forget about it. It's happened to me a thousand times. I've breast-fed a hundred times without remembering when or how. It's a good way to scare yourself."

"I had to work for it, though. I closed the curtains tight and watched some TV."

"You know, the TV keeps you from dreaming. It just hits you with so many stimulants that, no matter how tired you are, you end up sleeping on average at least forty-five minutes later than if you didn't have the TV on in your room. Here in the South I fall asleep in a wink. The TV's in the living room. I just read a few pages of a magazine and then *adiós*, *hasta mañana*."

"I saw part of a movie."

"Don't tell me you saw one of Uncle Yul's?"

"No. It was Swedish, on Bravo. *Wild Strawberries*. It was about this old guy, a professor, who goes to a little college town and ends up decorated. I watched the end and then fell asleep. And I didn't stop dreaming."

"About what?"

"About all of us. It was as if they set me down in front of a screen to watch a long series, episode by episode, and I couldn't wake up until I had seen them all. I even heard the screaming."

"What screaming?"

"Of a woman. The housekeeper. She was in the hallway just bellowing, Manuela. She was screaming like someone who'd lost a lot during another earthquake. That's what struck me. I opened the door and everything was moving, vases and paintings were falling to the floor . . . and this woman in her uniform, on the hallway floor, paralyzed, making her peace with God."

"And?"

"And that was it, in the end. It passed, even the worst of it. I hugged her and together we waited to see what would happen. The

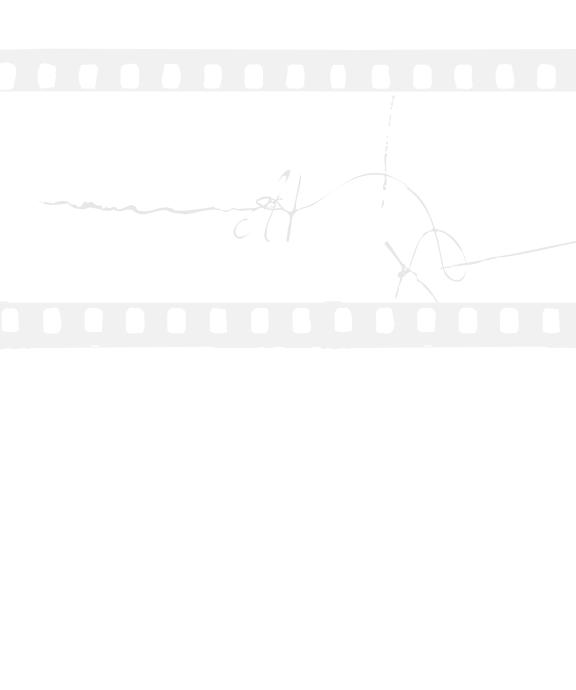
hotel had anti-seismic foundations and it was rocking so much that it seemed like a really powerful one. I helped calm her down. She was from El Salvador. Lost her mother in the quake of '65 and her son in '86, and her sister in the one just the other day. Too many earthquakes for just one person."

"The poor woman! It's good you were there to help console her."

"Anyway, that's all that happened. I overslept and missed my flight. Well, Manuela, I've got to go. I'll try calling tomorrow. I've got all day free. But the first thing is to find a new place to stay. This hotel is booked solid."

"Where are you going to go?"

"This is a big city. There are places I'd like to visit. And people I haven't seen in quite some time."





You have to have experienced an earthquake of 7.5 or greater to understand what can happen. To escape from one with your life, lose a close friend, or maybe the woman you were about to marry. Atkins tended to grade earthquakes like this; it was his own personal scale of magnitude.

PETER HERNON, 8.4



I've been here before. I've traveled this freeway; certain landmarks along the way come back into focus: the HOLLYWOOD lettering there on the hill in the distance, those endless cemeteries, and the Goodyear blimp circling above in the smog-infected sky.

My driver today is the same Salvadoran man as vesterday. Ambrosio Peña, a short, brown man

as yesterday. Ambrosio Peña, a short, brown man with completely white hair, a García Márquezesque guayabera, and hiking boots. He looks about sixty, believes in capitalism, and has a U.S. flag and photos of George W. Bush stuck to his visor.

His company ("Salvation Cars: We Are Your Salvation") has three cars and all three are his. "The other two drivers are family: a brother and a nephew." They offer something surprisingly simple: pick up illegal immigrants at the airport and take them wherever they need to go; if they don't know, then they help them figure it out.

"We're not a taxi and we charge what they can pay; we even offer credit. Everyone in El Salvador is a thief, but here Salvadorans are hard workers and completely devoted to repaying what they owe. It just goes to prove that it's the environment that's bad and not the people. We're just a friendly hand to push them along and help them out until they understand just where they are. This city has no center, no downtown, it's so damn big that you can't help but get lost; just about all my countrymen who come have no idea how to get around. My son Vicencio even has a little school where they teach you how to drive and we help them buy a cheap little jalopy."

Yesterday, on the way to DVD Planet in Huntington Beach, we barely spoke save for when he responded to my questions about his business. He had the deference to not interrupt my thoughts. On the way back to the hotel, when we stopped in front of a Barnes \mathcal{B} Noble, the only thing he said to me was:

"Movies and books. So are you some kind of artist?"

"No."

"Chileno o argentino?"

"Chileno."

"Like Don Francisco."

"And Pinochet."

"Two great men. You must be proud."

"Neruda was Chilean too."

"And a Communist, like Archbishop Romero. Chile . . . I'd like to get to know Chile, let me tell you. Your country is just as fractured as ours."

I'm reminded of my grandfather; these are his words in the mouth of my driver. It's the title of his book, more of a pamphlet, really, printed by the Ministry of Education with the help of UNESCO: A Fractured Country: The Earthquakes of El Salvador and Methods for Preventing Future Disasters by Teodoro Niemeyer. That book, along with radio and television programs, transformed my grandfather into a local hero. I could tell this guy that I'm his grandson, and without a doubt he'd be impressed.

The reason I avoid explaining my profession to random strangers is because inevitably, almost like a reflex, they proceed to tell me exactly where, when, and just how surprised they were when this or that great earthquake struck. By looking at people and guessing their age, I can tell if they'll say "I remember the Chillán quake like it was yester-

day," or "We were having lunch when the Valdivia quake hit," or, if they are younger, about my own age, memories of March 3, 1985, will immediately come to mind:

"It was Sunday, toward the end of the summer, and I was in Reñaca, *compadre*, when the sand started to move; son of a bitch, I almost shit myself from fear."

Earthquakes are watersheds, distinct points, moments of inflection, collective mega-events that no one can avoid, not even those who aren't in the habit of attending anything. In countries where the earth moves, every generation has its own quake, so each president knows that chances are his term will include at least one seismic upheaval with just as much power to sink the country as his government. Everyone remembers at least one earthquake, everyone has a particular angle or distinct detail that gives them the right to tell us a story that we know like the back of our hand, a story whose ending we already know full well.

"I was throwing up in the bathroom," "I was in the shower and ran naked into the hall," "It was my grandson's birthday party and dozens of kids started to cry," "We went to Mass and, in the middle of the sermon, the priest began to read through the list of victims and the Christ behind him came tumbling down," "I had just finished canning some strawberry jam, and all the jars crashed to the floor," "I was taking a shit in my girlfriend's house," "I had gone to the office to finish up some work; I was only on the twenty-second floor," "We were about to land in Pudahuel when the pilot pulled up sharply and we could see the dust cloud from the air," "I was crossing the Maipo River in a pickup truck," "I was jerking off—hard—and just when I was about to come, there was this really strange yet really rich sensation. . . . I've never felt like that since," "We were at the Cine El Golf at a showing of The Terminator," "My husband and I had taken the day and went to Almac and it hit us there: forget the noise; it was something fierce, we just watched as the racks of wine bottles all collapsed."

Where were you? Who were you with? What were you doing?

I was out buying bread while back at the house on Toesca Street a wall fell.

That and the aftershocks: "Where were you when the aftershocks

hit?" and "Where were you on September 11, 1973?" Earthquakes and aftershocks: the things that turn us into brothers, the glue that binds our broken country together.

"I know you were hit by a pretty strong earthquake," I said just to make friendly conversation. "I can imagine you were more than a bit worried about your friends and family."

"I had everyone close here with me; those who stayed behind are just a bunch of good-for-nothing bums. I hope the ceilings came down on their dense little heads."

"You guys have really been through a lot," I said, trying to change the subject.

"Nobody is saved in El Salvador. It's my country, my little piece of earth, but it's cursed. God doesn't want us; or, at least, He doesn't want us to live there. If He doesn't flog us with the land, it's with the climate or the politicians."

He dropped me off at the entrance to the Crowne Plaza, and gave me his card.

"For another little trip, or if you need any other type of service. We can also work out something under the table if you want."

"Thanks a million, but I'm leaving in a bit. Who knows when I'll be back through here."

"That's just it: you never know. Don't lose that card. There's nobody else like us in Los Angeles."

"You again; my lucky day!"

"I missed my flight."

"Qué lástima."

"No, not at all. Now I can hire you out for the day. I just want to drive around, see a bunch of places. Maybe tomorrow too."

"Why not? Just tell me where you want to go."

I want to head to the San Fernando Valley, but not just yet.

"Let me ask a favor of you . . . Ambrosio, right? Don Ambrosio."

"Ambrosio Peña Argueta. If it's out of respect or because of my age, call me Don Ambrosio. If it's a case of superiority, because you think

that I'm poor or uneducated, then just call me Ambrosio. I can't stand those rich folk who call all of their housekeepers 'Señora María.'"

"Ambrosio, then, as we're friends now. De tú a tú."

"I prefer 'don,' actually."

"Don Ambrosio it is."

"Tell me, how can I help you?"

"A detour. I'm not in any hurry . . . if you could head for the Valley, from the east . . . through Glendale, let's say. Could you?"

"You pay for the gas, señor."

"Sí. claro."

"Perfecto. A detour through Los Angeles, as you command."

The downtown skyscrapers are in sight, the same image made famous through innumerable TV programs. La Gigante Tropical, 1090 AM, is blaring over the radio at top volume; the hyperactive hosts haven't stopped talking about yesterday's earthquake (they insist on defining a 5.2 as an "earthquake") and, between the Flores Brothers *cumbias*, they check in with their correspondent in El Salvador, who is reporting on the victims and most affected areas.

"Want to take Olvera Street? It's a gringo thing that tourists do, but some people think it's funny or sweet. If you want, we could stop for a quick bite on Whittier or El Mercadito . . ."

"No, thanks, just keep on the freeway. Then take the route I mentioned. Behind Griffith Park and the Zoological Gardens."

"You know the city well."

"This part, at least. It's been a long time since I came here. I've got a good memory—"

"The memory of an elephant."

"Once we're in the Valley, I guess we could eat something. Do you know a good place?"

"They know me everywhere, señor. What do you feel like at the moment? Some pork rinds, perhaps? Or some little pork tamales? I could take you to that girl Menchita's place, Mi Casita Salvadoreña on Van Owen, what do you say?"

"It's your call. Is it good?"

"Very good, and cheap. Their dishes are really tasty. You'll see, they treat you like a prince there, señor. *Guanacos* are very hospitable."

"... This Saturday, at the Hollywood Palladium, Bailes sin Fronteras. Doors open at eight. Don't miss it. 6215 Sunset ... From Santo Domingo, Pochi and his Coco Band ... From Colombia, Lizandro Meza with Los Cumbiamberos de la Costa ... Raúl Acosta y Oro Sólido ... Plus the return of the boys of the La Raza Band ... Doors open at eight ... Don't miss this kick-ass cumbia, merengue, and salsa party ... Only those twenty-one and older with ID. Tickets available on Ticketmaster, your local Liborio Market, or at La Tapachulteca (the supermarket) ... Come, don't miss it ..."

"Would you be so kind as to change the station?"

"You don't like our Alvaro Torres? He's getting big. He came from nothing and look—"

"He's definitely got a great voice, but I'd like to hear the news, if you'd be so kind."

"AM or FM? Should I change the bandwidth?"

"Whatever you think is best."

The driver hits "scan" and the radio pauses for thirty seconds on each station. It passes by pop hits from the 70s and 80s (few of which I've ever heard) to a station broadcasting news that makes me think it's Iranian

"... My next film, called Borderline, is about a kid named Diego who works in a Borders Books in El Cajon, California. It's a comedy along the lines of Kevin Smith. I hope it does well; the script is very charming. My idea is to show that the border isn't just a place of suffering, but also a place where people live and even have sex ..."

[&]quot;Could you keep it on that station, Don Ambrosio?"

[&]quot;Which one?"

[&]quot;The one we just passed. Two guys talking in English."

"That one?"

"Yeah."

"I'll do what I can."

"Thanks."

I look out my window. We're passing the Staples Center, about to merge onto the Harbor Freeway. The sun reflecting off so many glass windows jumps into my eyes.

"Is this it?"
"Sí, gracias."

"We're here with the young film director Lorenzo Martínez Romero."

"Thanks for that 'young' thing. That's what's good about being an American: you can be young for quite some time."

"Lorenzo's notable films include César Chávez High, a teen comedy with the subtitle of The Breakfast-Burrito Club, and McArthur Park, a musical on that particular Salvadorean enclave in Los Angeles. Now he makes his debut as an author with the book The Movies of My Life."

"Yes, although as an author of nonfiction."

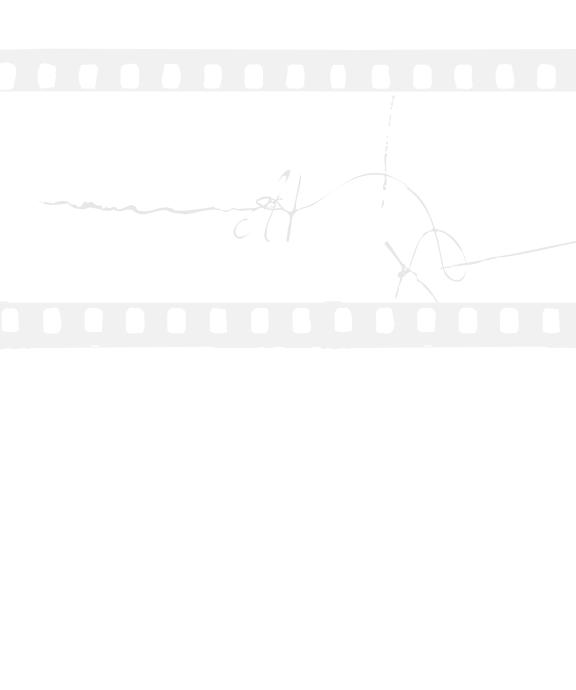
"This is Shaken, Not Stirred, a program about artistic endeavors that have the ability to really rock us, on KCRW, 89.9 FM, Santa Monica. Let's talk about the book. How did it come about?"

"It started with a call from the L.A. Weekly. Just your average, everyday interview. One of the questions was, 'What is the most important movie of your life?' I told them, 'Give me a couple hours and I'll e-mail you a list.' They suggested I jot down seven or eight lines on each selection. The next day the reporter calls back, and I'm still writing. It was like I was in a trance. He asked how many I had, so I looked at my G4 and saw that I was up to a hundred twenty-eight. With some I had barely more than the title, but with others I would have two or three pages of text . . . not scholarly or criticism, but embarrassingly personal."

[&]quot;The movies of my life."

[&]quot;What did you say?"

[&]quot;Nothing. I was just talking to myself."





In Chile, the ground trembled every six days! The very floor was quite literally convulsive. This made everyone subjects to an existential rumbling. They didn't live in a solid world ruled by a rational order, but rather in a tremulous, ambiguous reality. They lived as precariously in the material plane as in the rational.

ALEJANDRO JODOROWSKY, The Dance of Reality



From: Beltrán Soler

bsn@ddg.u-chile.cl>

To: Lindsay Hamilton lhamilton@border-crossings.org

Date: Wednesday, 17 January 2001, 08:47 a.m.

Subject: the 50 movies of my life (second half—

CHILE/74-80)

Hello again:

Here's the second half, the part where I'm older. They're good movies but bad memories.

I'm really not a psychopath, although I'm sure there is some defect that I have, had, or will have someday. Like everybody else.

You don't have to read them, of course, al-

though I admit I'd like it if you would. It's not to make this stuff public or to write another book

like Lorenzo Martínez' (which I bought and enjoyed and which coincides like truth with a lot of

my own... I mean, in the end, we've seen the

same movies, just in different places and with different people). If we ever bump into each

other again someday [I'd like and am afraid and

hope that happens), then at least I won't have to bore you by going on and on about my life's story.

164 ALBERTO FUGUET

Mejor: I'll shut up for now and wait to hear from you.

If that thing is true about people being what they see, well, that's me.

Espero verte pronto

You don't know (you really have no idea) how much I owe you.

BEST

-Beltrán Soler

P.S. I did see Encino Man. In Paris, actually. There they called it L'Homme D'Encino. Not many people were there in the theatre. Some tourists and I. I thought it was pretty bad and—nevertheless—enjoyed it.

Westworld, USA, 1973, 88 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Michael Crichton

STARRING: Yul Brynner, James Brolin, Richard Benjamin

seen: 1974, Caracas, Venezuela

On July 4, 1974, I passed by the giant doughnut that kept watch over the rooftops of the houses on Ash Street and the rest of Inglewood. We were heading to LAX to get on board a big Pan Am 707 en route to Caracas, the first stage of our eternal Latin American vacation. I boarded the plane completely unaware that that was the last time I would set foot on U.S. soil as an "American" (a legal alien with a green card, maybe, but an American nonetheless). In time (sixteen? seventeen years?), I would return to that land, but it was no longer the same. Is it ever? I was no longer an "American" . . . my accent gave me away, I no longer had a green card, and my mind worked in Spanish. "Americans" don't have to translate what they think, what they feel. I wasn't from there, and that was all there was to it. I was cursed with knowing two languages and feeling, secretly, that I wasn't completely at home in either. Now I could look at things comparatively, and suddenly everything was multiplied by two. In every case, I ended up choosing a remote point of view. Now, wherever I may be, I always see things as if I'm a foreigner.

But on that particular Fourth of July I was still an American, a suburban kid whose horizon stopped at Sherman Oaks, who couldn't conceive of a world beyond the L.A. county line. The idea of getting to know Latin America and Chile was completely exotic to me, much more fascinating than visiting Yellowstone or the Grand Canyon. First we would spend a week in Caracas, where my aunt Luisa Niemeyer and her family still lived, and then move on—via Air France—to Santiago. We would be in Chile for three months. The idea was that my father, who only had three weeks of vacation time, would go back to Encino in late August while the rest of us, after some side trips like visiting my grandparents' summer house in Valdivia, would return just before classes started up again. That was the plan, but it never came to be. Something went wrong. Terribly wrong. I never went back. But that was later, a couple months on down the line.

My aunt's house in Caracas was a marble palace with several floors, surrounded by a forest and on a hill overlooking the city lights. To me, Caracas seemed very much like Beverly Hills though in Spanish, full of freeways, malls, and luxurious hotels. The supermarkets offered the same products as they did in California, except that the milk there was produced by a company with the exquisitely ridiculous name of Carabobo. Every glass was served with a round of sidesplitting laughter. My aunt also had two Colombian servants and, at the country club to which they belonged, everyone spoke English and had their own chauffeur. If that was Caracas, I thought that's how Chile would be as well. My cousins and I were never really on the same wavelength; luckily, they were away most of the time at a private school for diplomats' children, complete with required uniforms. I didn't see them much, except for the time we all went to Cata Beach.

Aunt Luisa dressed very colorfully, and when she laughed—and she laughed a lot—she gave the impression that she had spent a fortune on not only her teeth but also making sure that her gums shone. Her husband, Uncle Choclo Bulnes, was so pale that he had to wear pants and a shirt at the beach, along with an immense white straw hat. My cousin Pedro (we didn't yet call him Milo like the Nestlé powdered chocolate drink with vitamins and minerals, only because we hadn't yet seen any of the commercials that would show him running like a track star) was blond and his eyes were the same shade of green as unripe custard apples. People on the street were always taken with how beautiful he was; something that, with time, would come to harm him more than he would ever be able to articulate. Pedro was a year older than I, but I felt as if he had a decade's head start on me.

My cousin Isidora was the same age as Manuela and, objectively, was less good-looking than Pedro, but her gray eyes were immediately striking, as they had much more to hide. Her skin smelled like the sweet resin at the bottom of a jar of condensed milk and was the same color, but that mattered little when it came time to paint her verbal

portrait. Even when she carried her body with the dignity of a Brazilian goddess, everyone fixated on her stump, which wasn't easy to miss, especially when she took to wearing a flashy fuchsia glove made of velvet. Isidora hit it off immediately with Manuela, and both knew how to make the most of their respective physical deformities. Federica Montt, who later joined the two, brought to the group her internal injuries, which, in those days, had yet to come to light. Later, Isidora became something of a celebrity in Santiago, which helped her win the title of Miss Paula 1984, although there was no lack of resentment among those who felt she had been given the crown out of pity. "You try being a cripple, you fucking bitch," she told a show-business reporter who had mentioned the concern.

The Bulnes Niemeyer family weren't exactly exiles from Allende; they were in Caracas because my uncle was a publicist, and in those days Venezuela was a place with a lot of money, thanks to oil. With the money he'd made in Caracas, he managed to set himself up in Santiago as something of a magnate, taking over the businesses that had been vacated through exile. His life was one of highs and lows, but from the mid-70s to the early 80s, when he took control of the dictator's publicity, everything that the family touched turned to gold.

One morning, Aunt Luisa took us for a walk and we went up the mountainside in a cable railway. It was cold at the top, and there was a small German community there. On the way home, she dropped Milo (a.k.a. Pedro) and me off at a giant shopping center, gave us some money, and said:

"Go get some ice cream and go see a movie, and when you're ready, call the agency's car service to come find you. The women are going shopping."

We walked off into the giant mall without speaking, but when Pedro did turn to me, what he said came out in an impeccable British accent:

"What would you care to see, old chap?"

The theater was one of the new ones, like Theeeeee Movies of Tarzana cineplex in Ventura; nearly all the posters were familiar to me, but the titles—translated into Spanish—seemed unusually ridiculous.

American Graffiti was Locura de verano, Snowball Express was Aventuras en la nieve, and The Sting was El golpe.

"What would you like to see?" Milo asked politely.

"Your mom said we should check out Huckleberry Finn."

Indeed, the poster read Las extraordinarias aventuras de Huckleberry Finn.

"I already saw *Tom Sawyer*, which is also a musical, and it's really good. This is like the second part, with what happens to Huck after he runs away."

"Fuckin' kids' stuff. I don't want to see some piece-of-shit musical. I didn't even finish the book. Let's see this one—Natacha's father is in it. Do you know her? When I'm jerking off, I think about fucking her. You probably know her. I stayed with her in Switzerland, and she couldn't take her eyes off me. All the older chicks check me out like they want to give me a hand job, guess they just can't help themselves. Sometimes they do stroke my cock and I get a hard-on. Can you get off from one of those?"

The movie Milo wanted to see was called *Vacaciones mortales*, but I immediately recognized it as *Westworld* by its poster sporting the image of Yul Brynner as the cowboy and, behind him, James Brolin with his pistol.

"But you have to be sixteen to get in," I said.

"So? This is Caracas. Here laws are made to be broken."

When Milo bought the two tickets, the woman frowned at him, but only for a second before she went back to reading her magazine. Milo handed his ticket to the usher and then went to buy a bag of popcorn that, to my surprise and disgust, turned out to be caramel.

James Brolin and a slim, insecure character played by Richard Benjamin are flying in some sort of futuristic plane. They're both businessmen en route to a hallucinatory theme park called Delos. It's sometime in the future, 2020 or 2030, I think, and Delos is better than Disneyland because it's for adults and you can experience real life there (this was long before the advent of virtual reality). For a thousand dollars a day, you can live out your fantasies.

"These guys are like my dad. He's always hiring escort services. I've seen some flyers in his car's glove compartment."

At Delos, you can select the park you want, like the World of the Future, Imperial Rome, or the Middle Ages. Rome offers endless sex, but these two guys choose Westworld or, as the subtitles call it, *Oestelandia*.

"I'd have gone for Rome," said Milo, his feet propped up on the seat in front of him.

Their park is straight out of the Wild West, and all the people walking around are robots. Benjamin goes up to a saloon singer, and she takes him immediately to bed.

"Maybe we'd better go. This is for adults," I said, afraid that the police or our mothers would burst in or—perhaps—afraid that I'd see something I shouldn't.

"Nothing's going to happen. Besides, this is the best part: the sex scenes."

Then Yul Brynner appears, guns blazing, and the guy shoots back but falls. I already knew what was about to happen, thanks to Drew. They take Brynner the Robot to the control rooms at the back of the park and start to disassemble him. They take off his face and, underneath, his brain is a mess of electronics.

"You think Natacha is like that inside?"

The robots of Westworld are there to please the clients, but then they start putting the same effort into shooting them. And if they get shot themselves, they get resuscitated; just adjust a few circuits and they're ready to go. Plus, robots don't fire single rounds, they fire in bursts. But Yul Brynner is Yul Brynner and, bit by bit, he begins to alter his behavior. He starts to become human or, at least, he decides to imitate. He steals a regular pistol and kills James Brolin. Something goes wrong. Something goes terribly wrong. In this perfect, controlled world, something begins to go awry. Some circuit shorts out, and nobody can control the robots. What started out as a few days of pleasure turns into a fatal vacation. In the end, Brynner is destroyed when Richard Benjamin has the idea to try spraying him with acid, dissolving him away.

"That was good," said Milo. "I wish we had acid at my house so I could throw it at my enemies. My uncle Lalo, who's an army officer, says that in Chile they'd cut open the stomachs of their prisoners

before throwing them into the sea, so they wouldn't float. Now, that's something I'd like to see."

I left for Chile the following day, July 12, 1974. After a week in Caracas, I was boarding an Air France flight and bursting with thrills and enthusiasm: finally, I was going to meet the famous Chile. What could possibly go wrong? I wondered.

What's Up, Doc?, USA, 1972, 94 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Peter Bodganovich

STARRING: Barbra Streisand, Ryan O'Neal,

Madeline Kahn, Randy Quaid

SEEN: 1974, onboard an Air France flight

We boarded the plane at dawn, and the air that wafted in before they closed the cabin door was humid and close with the smells of salt, oil, and tropical fruits rotting in the sun. Through my little window, I saw the sun peeking out over the Caribbean, and once we were airborne, they served us kebabs, which seemed rather strange. My mother took the opportunity to order a glass of French wine.

"This is the strangest breakfast I've ever had in my life," she told me, and the two of us—and then all three—burst out laughing. We were all deeply tanned, and our white teeth contrasted sharply with our coppery skin.

Also on the plane was a Chilean girl about the same age as Manuela. Later I learned that her name was Federica Montt and that she had gotten on board in Paris. At first I thought her name sounded awful but, years later, just the mention of it would spark in me the gamut of all possible emotions. Federica was very pale, she had one sea-green eye while the other was clear blue, and she wore a pair of pearl earrings. Even at that age, she was able to step out of her cocoon and transform, fascinatingly, into everything she had kept concealed. "I wasn't mysterious, I was shy; I didn't know what to say," she told me years later in bed—her bed—while I tried to memorize the tiny moles that rested at the small of her back.

Just by watching Federica, I could tell that the place I was heading to was nothing like what I was expecting or hoping to expect. Despite being a girl and despite the fact that I was at an age when boys still aren't interested in such things, Federica intrigued me immediately. From that moment onward, she altered my life. She altered it with her two-tone gaze, her light hair shining in the sun that filtered in through

the plane's window, the way she avoided me even when she invited me to slip into her particular world. Federica was unlike any woman I knew or would ever know. In other words, I would never connect with another woman the way I did with her. During the flight, Federica's mother struck up a conversation with my mother, and they quickly found out that they knew many people in common.

"That's what's good about Chile," Federica's mother said. "I imagine you must have suffered in a place like California. What a pain it is to be in a place where the people don't know each other. What good is that? You'll see how different your life will be now that you're going back to *la patria*."

Maybe it wasn't Federica but rather her mother who changed our lives forever. Señora Constanza ("Call me Aunt, silly") rocked our existence with that portentous commentary.

"No, no, this is just a vacation," explained my mother. "The kids have to go back to school. We have a whole life up there; we're part of the neighborhood. Encino is our world; we could never have another."

But it was already too late; the travel chitchat had already opened up a tiny crack in my mother's subconscious. In Bogotá, we got off for a bit at the El Dorado airport and were awestruck by the emerald-green hills that surrounded the city. The two mothers continued to chat over coffee while Federica, who was wearing a camel-hair coat and long red socks, started talking with Manuela, who showed her her Toot-A-Loop, a portable radio shaped like a blue doughnut.

"They're going to hate you in Chile for that," she said in a British accent. "There they hate everything they don't have themselves."

Back on the plane I tried asking Manuela about Federica.

"Do you like her?" she asked me.

"No, it's not that."

"So what is it then?"

"I don't know, I just want to know more about her."

"That's what happens when you like someone, dummy. You want to get to know them better."

Through Manuela, I learned that Federica learned her English in London, where she had lived for two years, and that her school in San-

tiago really emphasized learning it. At the high-altitude airport in Quito, I showed off in front of a group of travelers, explaining to them what time zones were and what, exactly, the equator was, but Federica paid no attention to what I had to say and, after listening to me for a couple of minutes, she wandered off to explore the airport on her own. From that precious instant on, I knew that Federica was stronger than I, bigger than I, and already knew well just how the world worked. She didn't need a ten-year-old kid to explain it to her.

Between Quito and Lima they showed the film What's Up, Doc? which had come out in Encino some time ago and which Patrick Bellin had seen with his sisters. Since the headphones were so expensive, I just watched the images, but I could follow the story just as well: a crazy woman meddles in the life of a bespectacled scientist who studies rocks and is engaged to a very bossy woman. There are briefcases that change hands, and bad guys who chase the scientist and the crazy woman through the streets of San Francisco. It's all for laughs, and they end up together, on a plane, in love. I laughed a lot, and many of the passengers who had rented the headphones were in stitches. Federica didn't look up at the screen once; she just read, one after another, a collection of books that turned out to be the saga of Papelucho.

After the layover in Lima and en route to Santiago, the plane was more empty. Federica walked to the back of the plane and returned with a glass of mineral water. I had driven the flight attendants mad by asking for so many sodas. Federica sat down next to me and, without so much as a question from me, said:

"In Spain, when we were on a train for a few days with my grand-father, this movie was called *La chica terremoto. The Earthquake Girl*," she said to me in English.

"They should have called it The Seismic Girl," I replied.

"How come you know so much about earthquakes?"

I explained to her about my grandfather.

"There are a lot in Chile; maybe you'll feel one."

"In California too."

Later she asked me if I'd ever been to Disneyland. I said that, yes, I'd been many times. That impressed her.

"Bueno, Seismic Boy, I hope you like Chile. It's a weird place."

The plane began its descent, and out the window I could see nothing except darkness and clouds. Just before touching down, a man started to sing the Chilean National Anthem and, one by one, several of the other passengers joined in, including my mother. I didn't know any of the words and couldn't even understand what they were saying, but it gave me goose bumps anyway. The plane touched down lightly on the Pudahuel Airport's tarmac, and immediately the cabin burst into applause.

"¡Viva Chile, mierda!" shouted the guy who'd started the singing.

I looked over at my mother, who was crying. Manuela asked her if she was afraid to be back, and she replied that, no, the opposite was true, that she was very, very happy.

"At last, we're back," she said. "Finally."

Soylent Green, USA, 1973, 97 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Richard Fleischer

STARRING: Charlton Heston, Leigh Taylor-Young,

Edward G. Robinson

SEEN: 1973, Ventura, CA

We got down from the plane on a slippery ladder, descending into a dense fog cloaking everything. Rather than a Third World country, the whole scene seemed like the opening of an old B-movie. The runway smelled of damp blankets and cheap wine. Pudahuel Airport seemed like little more than a poorly built hangar, extremely basic and fragile. My mother had made us put our coats on before we got off the plane, but the cold was still a shock. It was a cold that I'd never felt before; it was the cold of poverty, and it pervaded everything.

The one thing that we all noticed was the sheer number of soldiers patrolling the airport. They were on the tarmac, behind columns, and alongside the customs-declaration line. Getting off the bus that had picked us up from the 707, I was shocked to see they were carrying machine guns.

"Mom, is there a war going on here?" asked Manuela.

Before our mother could respond, I cut in: "Shut up, stupid, you wanna get killed?"

Manuela's naïveté surprised me. If there were no war, then why would there be so many guns? Unlike in Venezuela, everything here was in black-and-white. At least it seems that way to me now; that's how I remember it. I think, in effect, that's how it was. The few channels on TV, which only began to air material starting at four in the afternoon, broadcast in strikingly contrasted black-and-white. Everything was antique, archaic, from another time.

Was I in 1974 Santiago, or some enemy city during the Second World War?

My grandparents were there, waiting for us behind a privacy glass door that all but obscured their silhouettes. There was quite a crowd there around the door, and it seemed almost as if they were trying to force their way into the terminal and escape on the next plane leaving. Every time a passenger went out, after being meticulously questioned by the customs agents, the doors opened for an instant and the crowd shouted out the multiple names of the friends and family they were waiting for.

Once outside, we were greeted by many people whom we didn't know, and my mother started to cry again. Tata looked at the scar on Manuela's face, took me by the hand, and said, in English:

"You guys are coming with me."

We walked a few yards through the dark fog and went up to an ancient taxi that resembled a hearse. A bearded man began to stack our luggage on the giant rack, and just before we were about to pile in, a tall, white-haired woman came running. It was Marta, my grandfather's sister.

"You don't know me, but I was there the day you were born. I counted your fingers and toes to make sure they were all there."

My mother went in another strange-looking car called a Peugeot. All the cars in Santiago were odd, with unpronounceable and ridiculous names. At our grandparents' house, I found a small, round, orange thing called a Fiat 600, which didn't have a single interior part except for the seats. My grandfather, perhaps conscious of how spartan the vehicle looked, told me later:

"It's for your mother to use. In Santiago, I get around on foot or on the *micro*, like civilized people."

Micros were buses, and there were thousands of them, maybe hundreds of thousands, in all shapes and colors, depending on the route. They were all chock-full of passengers—not one more could fit inside—and so people even hung onto the handrails that lined the entrance, as many up front as in back, and if anyone fell off, the bus would just keep on going and not worry about whether or not someone had just been run over.

The city was cold and dark, and the narrow streets were either full of potholes or paved with small, egg-like stones. Santiago was far from the airport—it took us a while to get there—and when we did arrive we couldn't believe the number of pedestrians out at that hour of the

night. In Encino, where the only pedestrians were kids, the peaceful streets emptied when the sun set and the lawn sprinklers came on. Here, people crossed in the middle of traffic, and on the corners were carts where women dressed completely in white fried and sold something that I later learned were called *churros*.

Despite the darkness, thousands of children dressed in school uniforms just like those in British movies walked in groups, dragging heavy leather satchels. The avenue that we merged onto looked bombarded, and workers in white helmets were crawling like ants out of a giant hole in its center.

"That's the metro," my grandfather told me. "They decided to build something underground in a seismically active country. Let's hope they double-checked all their calculations."

At a traffic light, a dark-skinned, toothless teenager hawking papers shouted, "¡La Segunda! ¡La Segunda!" Tata opened his window and bought a copy, and I remember the headline was something like this:

PINOCHET: WHOEVER DOESN'T APPRECIATE THE HEAVY HAND, GET OUT.

Out the window I saw a giant multistoried theater called Cinerama. On the outside of the building was the largest poster I had ever seen. It was at least six or seven stories high. Right away I knew that it was advertising *Soylent Green*, although the title in Spanish was much longer and I had no idea what it meant: *Cuando el destino nos alcancé*.

"What does it mean?" I asked my grandfather.

"When Your Destiny Finally Reaches You."

The film takes place in New York in the year 2022 (how old would I be when this happened? I wondered) and the city is devastated, left to fend for itself, rife with homelessness. Millions and millions of people are sleeping on the streets. It was like one might picture Calcutta, and you could scarcely walk down the street, much less drive. Everything is contaminated, and it's always hot due to global warming. Charlton Heston plays the protagonist, and he has a romance with a model or some such character played by Leigh Taylor-Young, who eats \$10,000-a-jar marmalade by the spoonful. Heston plays a detective searching for a missing person but, bit by bit, he discovers something that neither he nor the public could have ever imagined.

I saw *Soylent Green* in the newly opened Theeeeee Movies of Tarzana, in Ventura, which held six separate screens under one roof ("Six Screens Under One Roof!"). The good thing about that theater was that it was easy to get in to see the adult movies with a ticket for a children's one. I don't think any other movie has made such an impression on me as this one. So much so that I actually ran out of the theater. It was after the sex scene: Heston and the model were taking a shower together, and I remember that I immediately got an erection. It was then that I realized this was a movie for adults (I was nine at the time) and that it wasn't something I ought to see, although Patrick didn't care.

But what I saw next was even more shocking: the title "Soylent Green" refers to nutritious little energy bars. The people live on Soylent Red, Soylent Yellow, and Soylent Green. It's assumed that Soylent is some combination of lentils and soy beans but, ultimately, Heston discovers that Soylent Green is made out of surplus human beings, those who are picked up at random by garbage trucks and delivered to government depositories where the cadavers are processed and turned into sustenance for the living.

"Tata, they don't take people away here, do they? You can walk around without being afraid you'll disappear?" I asked my grandfather, thinking of the movie. I didn't know New York, but 1974 Santiago seemed a lot like the decrepit Manhattan of 2022.

"No," he said. "Luckily, not much happens around here. Things are pretty peaceful."

Andrea, Argentina, 1973, 108 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Carlos Rinaldi

STARRING: Andrea del Boca, Ángel Magaña, Raúl Aubel,

Paquita Más

SEEN: 1974, Cine Real, Santiago de Chile

My parents, either to protect us or make us feel less like foreigners—or maybe to look good in front of Grandpa Soler, I don't know—never spoke to us in Spanish. We grew up, therefore, in English. When we landed in Maiquetía, everything seemed strange to me, but once I realized that the people around us didn't speak English, Venezuela quickly became a subtitled country, so that no matter what language they spoke, I could understand what they were saying.

Very few people in Santiago could understand English, and fewer still could express themselves in my language without sounding ridiculous. The whole country seemed like it was from another time, another hemisphere. I couldn't tell, for example, if my family was rich or poor. My grandfather was the director of the University of Chile's Seismological Institute; as he said, "There are no right-wing geophysicists; the military has no choice but to leave me here." Two streets had been renamed in honor of my grandmother's relatives. But even so, the immense three-story house was missing certain things: the wood floors were only covered with rugs in the living room, there was no washer or dryer, no dishwasher, and no central heating.

On the second floor, there was a giant apparatus (Comet was the name of the company that made it) for emptying gallons and gallons of an acidic liquid called "blue paraffin" into a drain covered with an old pair of pantyhose that acted as a filter. Then you lit a piece of paper and tossed it into another orifice with a pilot light. Bit by bit, the drafty hallways would warm up. Standing next to the "Comet" was like standing next to a chimney, but if you took a few steps back you could see your breath in the air. In the bathroom, there was another apparatus that I'd never seen before, and that was also lit by the

Andes matches of my grandmother's fame: the water heater. In Encino, ours was automatic and located outside, so I never even knew it was there, but this one was barely able to heat the water above "tepid," and the pressure was not good either. The bathroom was painted light green and felt like a hospital, and right next to the toilet was a small basin that looked ideal for bathing pets but which I never fully understood until years later, when my cousin Isidora, who only had one hand, informed me that she used it to masturbate.

It didn't snow in Santiago, but the snow-capped Andes seemed almost within reach. And that was what seemed worst about the city to me: the cold was paralyzing, yet it kept the kids from going ice skating or building snowmen. That winter was so cold that our milk, which was delivered by horse-drawn cart and left on our doorstep, would freeze overnight and crack the glass bottles.

The house was taken care of by two maids. The more important of the two was Lina; she was from some place called Teno and in those days would have been around twenty-five years old. Lina had a room in the back of the house on the other side of the kitchen, and it always smelled vaguely of smoke and cabbage, and on her nightstand was an assortment of brightly colored sweets, which I always wanted to eat until one day I actually tried one and immediately spit it out, to Lina's great amusement. Bath beads, I understood. Her room was always quite dark: the lone, tiny window looked right out at a wall. I couldn't talk much with Lina, as she didn't know English, but I heard English songs on the radio all day long, songs that she tried to sing along with, imitating the lyrics.

"This is the dance song on *Música Libre*," she told her sister, the other maid, Isabel, who had teeth like a horse. *Música Libre* was a TV show like *American Bandstand*, but this was not America, and they didn't know how to dance.

All day they sang songs like "Warm Up My Feet," which was, I suppose, something of an ironic anthem, given that everyone slept in socks and used hot-water bottles lined with wool. They called them *quateros* and, once, I scalded myself with one of them.

My mother left Santiago one Saturday with my grandparents to

visit some relatives who had a plot of land outside the city, and she told Lina she could take my sister and me to the movies. Lina put on a pair of tight red bell-bottoms with the zipper exposed, and we walked on down to the old, quake-cracked Hospital Salvador, where we waited to catch the bus that would take us downtown. We first got off at the base of a little hill in the middle of the city, just in front, I noticed, of the theater that gave us chills, but then we walked up the hill to meet a guy whom we didn't know but whom Lina greeted with kisses. Then we walked back down and kept on going through the empty streets until we reached the precious and impressive Cine Real: I'd never been in such a place before in my life. Inside it was like a castle, and there were stars painted on the ceiling.

The film that was showing was called *Andrea*, and the protagonist was an Argentinean girl named Andrea del Boca, a.k.a. Pinina, who spent much of her time on a TV show, crying, until the stupid little kids from the Telerín Family cartoon marched in singing "Let's get to bed; it's time for us to rest . . ."

Pinina was quite famous and had done commercials for some pretty disgusting sweets called Calaf. "¡Calaf! ¡Y no hay maf!" went the ridiculous jingle. The theater was full of kids and almost all of the girls had their hair in braids and were wearing flouncy dresses to be more like this exasperating Argentinean Shirley Temple wannabe.

I remember the expansive country landscapes and galloping horses, and I remember that little girl—that Pinina—who talked and talked and gesticulated and made faces and sometimes even bawled and sulked... but she did it all in Spanish. My sister and I looked at each other but didn't say a thing. It had very quickly become clear: the movie was not in English and there was nothing we could do about it. I tried to doze off but couldn't, and instead of trying to concentrate on the screen, I spent the rest of the time picturing how the guy we'd met back on the hill had unzipped Lina's bell-bottoms and slowly inserted his fingers while Lina didn't even stop chewing her Calaf candies.

Fratello Sole, Sorella Luna, UK/Italy, 1972, 122 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Franco Zeffirelli

STARRING: Graham Faulkner, Judi Bowker,

Alec Guinness, Peter Firth

seen: 1974, Cine Oritente, Santiago de Chile

Santiago was infected with soldiers, and the women in the streets applauded when trucks filled with men brandishing machine guns would rumble past. My grandmother would proudly tell how she donated her pearl necklace to help the military rebuild the country. All of Santiago was talking about "national reconstruction" but, looking around me, it seemed more like they were kicking its teeth out. We were downtown one day near the first anniversary of the September 11 coup, and my grandmother bought a poster featuring the four members of the Junta and hung it on our front door. There was one member for each branch, including the Carabineros, who were sometimes called pacos, or "cops," though they didn't much appreciate the nickname. The pacos, they told me, were very good friends to nannies, and so Lina and the other household help were strong supporters of the Junta. In Encino, everyone hated Nixon and called him a liar and a cheat; in Chile, however, everyone seemed to love Pinochet and think of him as their savior. He wore dark glasses at all times, even on days when the sky was cloudy and ominous.

The downtown area was the best part of Santiago. Every day at the stroke of noon, a cannon perched up on top of a cute little hill fired a live round, and I honestly have no idea where it landed. But if you're anywhere nearby when a cannon goes off, the sound alone is enough to make you want to hit the deck. The windows in adjacent office buildings rattle as in an earthquake, and the pigeons roosting in the Plaza de Armas take to the sky in a single, massive eruption that can blot out the sun for a moment. We took many pictures of us standing in front of La Moneda. The palace, which had never been very large nor handsome and was nothing compared to the White House, had

been gutted by fire when it was struck by cruise missiles launched from faraway planes.

"They never missed their target; our pilots' accuracy was amazing," remarked Raúl Saenz Villalba, a relative of my grandmother's who had fought against the Communists with a group called *Patria y Libertad* and who was later honored for his actions by being named mayor of the fascist, geriatric town of Providencia. Every time he heard the song "Libre," his eyes filled with tears of pride.

"You don't know what it was like," he said, excusing himself.

Every family member and distant relative who visited us told us incredible stories from the era of the UP and Allende, full of mystery and adventure, violence and heroism. Once, I mentioned that it was a shame that we had lost all that, that everything must have been much more entertaining back then, as if the entire country had been in the throes of some strange celebration.

"Don't ever say such a stupid thing again," snapped my grandmother in Spanish. I didn't understand her, but I was struck by the tone of her voice. It was the tone of someone cultured and civilized, someone willing to do anything—or at least tolerate anything—so as not to lose what she felt belonged to her.

There was so much to see in Santiago that going to the movies quickly became unnecessary. Life in California was so uneventful that we turned to movies to give us everything we couldn't find in the neighborhood; in Chile, however, everything was so intense—so completely strange and inexplicable—that people went to the movies only when they wanted to kick back and relax. Also, in Santiago, I got the distinct impression that kids didn't choose the movies that they went to see. Kids, in reality, had very little power and were always surrounded by nannies and hidden behind their houses' giant fences. Chilean children, I was convinced, were much more than their Encino counterparts.

My grandmother took us to the movies one rainy afternoon. We saw *Fratello Sole, Sorella Luna (Brother Son, Sister Moon)*, which, luckily, was in English, though it had these annoying subtitles, like in *Westworld*. It was quite a long film about a guy, Francisco, who was a

prince back in the days when men walked around in tights. He ends up becoming Saint Francis of Assisi in the end, and the modern-day California city takes its name from him. Francisco grows tired of being a wealthy prince and, in the middle of a plaza, he strips off all his expensive clothing, baring his buttocks and drawing laughter from all of the children in the audience. Then he dons a tunic fashioned out of a potato sack and travels through Italy or France or some such country befriending animals, helping lepers, and growing out his hair and beard so that, in the end, he looked quite a bit like Uncle Carlos Soler.

There was a little place next to the theater, called Villa Real, where we went after the movie to have *onces*, an exceedingly strange custom that Chileans practice to make themselves feel more civilized than they really are. High society calls this ritual *la hora del té*, but the big difference is that tea comes with cake whereas *onces* are composed of Milo and avocado sandwiches.

My grandmother claimed that the movie was Communist propaganda and that she was surprised they let anyone see it; it was one thing to help the poor, but quite another thing altogether to give them everything you own.

"How are you supposed to generate wealth if you don't have anything to generate it with?" I think is what she said, or maybe I'm just inventing it; in those days I didn't catch a word of what she said but, nevertheless, at times I understood it all.

Manuela mentioned that Saint Francis looked a bit like Tyrone Acosta Acosta with his beard and long hair, and just then I realized that nobody in Chile had a beard or wore their hair long. Then I asked my grandmother if we could go visit Tyrone, and she told me:

"That boy was so smart, and yet he was so stupid as well. I warned him not to get mixed up in any trouble, but he didn't pay any attention to me."

That was it. No family member ever spoke of him again. It was almost as if Tyrone Acosta Acosta had never existed.

The Towering Inferno, USA, 1974, 165 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Irwin Allen, John Guillermin

STARRING: Steve McQueen, Paul Newman,

Faye Dunaway, Fred Astaire

SEEN: 1974, Cine Imperio, Santiago de Chile

Two months had passed since we'd arrived in Santiago, and things I had found terrifying before were no longer so shocking. Rather, that small and backward country had, with the help of my fantasies, been transformed into a long, narrow adventure park. The customs were strange (kids couldn't eat with the grown-ups, servants were called by ringing a little bell, and the elderly lived in the same houses as the younger folks), but they were gracious enough to underline the place's idiosyncrasies. The thing that motivated me most of all was the fact that none of my friends in Encino were going to have stories like the ones I was going to return with. My summer vacation would, without a doubt, be the most exotic of the year.

September, and the spring, and the kites, came, and with them our imminent departure. The cycle was being completed, and just as we were starting to understand things, it was time to go. I had promised myself that I would record every second: the summit of San Cristóbal, the dizzying funicular, and the horrible, stinking zoo where the animals were housed in tiny cages; the El Bote restaurant in the port city of Valparaíso where we ate shrimp and abalone with real mayonnaise, which was nothing like the Hellman's that came in a jar that we ate back in the U.S.; the trip to Concón Beach, where we slid down the dunes as if tobogganing; the country land and farms of my relatives, where they raised chickens, ducks, horses, hogs, and even dairy cows whose milk we would drink warm. The trip to Valdivia exceeded all my expectations, and navigating the Calle Calle River with my grandfather and seeing the houses buried by water seemed like an insurmountable experience—until we reached the lip of the Osorno volcano's crater.

I got to know the Institute of Seismology in Santiago and tagged along with my grandfather when he gave classes in the big lecture hall in Q-10 Beaucheff, the same room where, years later, I myself would teach as a member of the faculty, and while he lectured I would look out the windows at the kids playing hookey from school, screaming from atop the rides at Fantasilandia. My grandfather had me sit at the far end of the highest row in the room, surrounded by students frantically taking notes. From there, I heard him ask the class a question about the theory of viscoelastic deformation. I still didn't know the answer, but he had given it away to me before; on confirming that none of his students were going to take a shot at it, he asked me in English:

"Beltrán, can you tell me what you think would happen to a rock under this sort of pressure?"

My response left the room silent.

Then my grandfather said, "This young man is finishing his doctorate at Stanford; his approach to the Nazca Plate has intrigued many of my colleagues and myself. He's spending his summer vacation here and, if all goes well, ladies and gentlemen, he may even end up working for the Institute. He's a bit advanced, of course, and I hope you all won't corrupt him or take him to any make-out parties."

After the class, a couple of students who looked supremely tall to me took me down into the bowels of the building, where they showed me the giant IBM 360 computer that they kept down there as if it were some sort of fire-breathing monster. Later on, my grandfather took me downtown to the Café Santos, where we had iced coffees with double cream and laughed at the joke.

"Several of the students asked me if you were going to be my research assistant now."

I was never going to forget Chile. Chile was the best place on earth to vacation in; every kid should spend some time there. But the advent of spring didn't just change the air; it also changed something deep within my mother. Bit by bit, I began to notice her desire for us to stay, to make our return a permanent one. The whole family was talking about it.

"Why don't you move back here? Now is your chance."

"Pinochet is giving you the opportunity of a lifetime."

"Come! Don't be foolish."

"Under Allende, I'd understand, you'd have to be crazy to come back to a new Cuba, but now . . . why not?"

At the beginning, I paid it little heed. It didn't scare me much at all. It was, for better or for worse, talk for grown-ups. Dreaming didn't cost a thing, and my mother had every right to dream, just as my father dreamed about owning a Porsche.

We celebrated September 11, 1974—the first anniversary of what they here called the *Liberación Nacional*—at my grandparents' house near Parque Bustamante. Many of their friends, friends of my mother's, and extended members of the Lobos family came to lunch that day. They parked under the old Oriental plane trees that transformed the neighborhood's streets into tunnels. The idea was to go to the nearby celebration after lunch.

It was during this lunch that the plot began to take shape. An aunt (in Chile, everyone was either an aunt or an uncle, regardless of whether they technically were or not) told my mother about a legal decree that Pinochet was going to give that same day, and she could have recourse to it.

"It's a really simple idea: it has to do with helping those who fled and facilitating their return. Many prominent Reds are fleeing the country. We need good people here. This law helps them return and bring in whatever they want without paying a thing."

But the advice that really shook me was that from Uncle Enrique Lobos:

"Take advantage of the fact that your children are still young. Don't be foolish. In a couple years they'll have dates, cars, part-time jobs. You know how it is in the United States. They'll earn a little bit of money and then you'll never be able to control them. They'll start to think of themselves as independent. If you wait too long, they'll be gone, and then you won't even see them at Thanksgiving. You know I'm right. Bring them here before it's too late."

Without being asked, Saenz Villalba, the Liberator, with his formidable jowls, said:

"Not too long ago I was at my sister's house in Cleveland. She's in a real tough spot; she can't go back, and she has no maid. What do you want me to say: I kept butting my head against the wall until I realized that families don't exist over there. Everyone's apart, everyone. Little girls sleep with their boyfriends as if it were nothing. My nephew turned into a stoner, listening to music, with his hair down to here; my poor sister is afraid to even set foot in his room. Is that what you want, Angélica? To raise your family there until the environment destroys them? Think about it."

Then Uncle Enrique Lobos offered a bit of salvation:

"We're all going to lend you a hand here. We'll look for something for your husband. We're on the outer edge of the world here, far from any moral contamination. There are other values here: we're more sane; here the family is the pillar that supports the country. Chile, Angélica, has nothing to do with the United States. Chile will never be like California. You'll be safe here. Nothing will happen to you."

They were wrong, of course, but people tend to hear what they want to hear, just as they tend to see what they want to see.

My mother didn't go to Parque Bustamante, because she didn't like crowds. We went with my grandmother, and jumped up and down to show we weren't with the UP. When we got back home that afternoon, I realized that things were getting serious. My father was for going, and my mother was forming a plan. I went in her room and found her sitting on her bed looking at our Braniff tickets, our passports, our green cards. I saw her reddened eyes.

"Are you sad to be going?" I asked her.

She didn't answer, but there was no need to. On going out into the hall, I had already changed; I had become her ally. The idea, the goal, was to convince my father to stay. I started talking like a ventriloquist's dummy, saying the things that she might not want to. I started by talking up the places we'd visited but, once my father was here, I didn't stop praising Chile and bashing Encino.

At Sunday brunch, where they served artichokes, beans, asparagus, and other spring vegetables, I helped—without completely knowing why but nonetheless feeling that it was the only thing to do—my

mother's cause. At my grandparents' house, the children could sit at the table with the grown-ups, and I took advantage of the fact that Manuela wasn't there (she had the gift of sociability, of being able to make friends instantly), to tell the following story. My mother's sisters, Aunt Marta and Aunt Nena, were there, too. So was Aunt Chilaca Valdés and Gregorio Niemeyer, who lived in Valdivia.

Aunt Marta asked me if I wanted to go back to Encino.

"No," I said.

I explained that there, I was looked down on for being "brown." Then I told them about one of the Cohen brothers, who baby-sat for us from time to time. I talked about how he smoked cigarettes that he rolled himself and that made him strange and spaced out. One time he offered one to me, but I said no. Another time, I went into my sister's room and there she was, without her panties on and her legs spread, showing Stuart Cohen whatever he wanted to see.

All that was the truth. But it wasn't the whole truth. At least I don't think it was. I don't want to think it was. I slipped out of the room and never said another thing—I knew that those things weren't to be talked about—but after telling the tale in the dark dining room of the house on Doctor Ignacio Echaurren Arismendi Street, I knew that the revelation would have the desired effect.

I probably had little-to-nothing to do with the ultimate decision to stay, and I doubt that the Stuart Cohen story was the reason I was transformed into a new person. It wasn't me who sunk us; it wasn't because of one of my whims that we came back. Nevertheless, the blame remained; the anguish of having contributed to the debacle would not go away. I can't remember much, but I still feel guilty.

Aunt Chilaca took me to see *The Towering Inferno* the day after my parents left, leaving Manuela and me with our grandparents. I don't remember having gone to the airport to say good-bye. My impression is that we didn't; I don't—or simply can't—remember just when, exactly, they announced their decision. Maybe they never did. They just left. I don't remember any cards or phone calls either.

I had been waiting for months and months to see *The Towering Inferno*. I'd seen the previews in Encino, and the day of its release in

Chile just couldn't come soon enough. In Chile, if you stopped and looked at a theater's marquee, it seemed as if the country was living in a parallel reality. But here I was, watching *The Towering Inferno* and thinking about what would happen if it was struck by an earthquake before it caught fire. The tower would collapse. As we were leaving the theater, Aunt Chilaca asked me if I'd liked it.

"I would have liked to be up on the top floor in the middle of all that fire," I said.

"Starting school will do you some good."

She was completely wrong. Going to that school, and then to another, before finally ending up at my permanent one, didn't do me a bit of good, but what could I do? There I was, and I was never going back. Everything faded to black; the whole world fell silent.

For three months, the flow of time stopped. Because I couldn't speak, I observed and heard many things, and didn't much like what I discovered. My grandparents believed in the family, but they didn't believe much in themselves, and it wasn't easy to live together with two people who didn't love each other and who—I soon decided—never had.

My grandfather was obsessed with punctuality and bathed only on Sundays. He used Brancato hair gel and shaved with foam that came in a tube that I once confused with toothpaste. Even when he was in California and, years later, in Mexico City or San Salvador, he always wore a suit and tie every day of the year. For him, dressing casual was to wear a light blue or sometimes khaki shirt. Grandma Guillermina didn't trust the servants and kept everything under lock and key; her cellar was full of items left over from the days of the UP. For those months that we spent alone, we didn't eat anything but a canned meat called Chancho Chino, which was worse than Spam. Plus, the house was full of *hombrecitos*, as my grandmother called them, who polished the silver, weeded the garden, or cleaned the thin glass windows that let in the cold.

The horror of feeling uprooted is recouped when the promise of life there, in the new place, is ostensibly greater. When the new country has something to offer you that yours could not: money, work, freedom, love, a heightened consciousness. But Chile offered none of this. At least, not to me.

When my parents got back to Encino, my friends were there waiting for me with a big sign that read welcome home. My paternal grand-parents, who had gone to LAX along with Aunt Teri and Uncle Javi to pick us up, were shocked when Manuela and I didn't get off the plane. Where were we? What had happened? Yayi thought we were dead, and fainted.

My mother came back on New Year's Eve, 1974; my father appeared a year later, almost at the same time his cargo arrived in Valparaíso. It had taken a long time to sell the house and most of the posessions in order to pull together some money. The neighbors bid them farewell with a party and a cake that read GOOD LUCK. They didn't have any of it. It was already late when he touched down in Chile; he was already someone else—we all were different people—and the possibility of starting over, along with my mother's obsession with saving us from the dangers that were lying in wait for us back in the United States, were becoming more and more remote. They didn't know it yet, but I did.

Melody, UK, 1971, 103 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Waris Hussein

STARRING: Mark Lester, Tracy Hyde, Jack Wild **SEEN:** 1975, Cine Gran Palace, Santiago de Chile

The first semester of 1975, while my father was still in California, I had to suffer through the hell that was the Bristol Academy, though all the students—all boys from military families, assassins in the making—called it El Bristol. Three times they kicked the shit out of me in a brutal game called *camotera*, or *peladilla*, I can't remember exactly, but it was a lot like "smear the queer." They called me "asshole gringo" and I quickly realized that if I didn't speak, didn't respond to them, eventually they would leave me alone. All the local customs seemed uncivilized to me; above all, the bestial practice of the "caballito de bronce," which consisted of breaking the backbone of the weakest pony of the season.

Aldo Zolezzi, the son of a butcher, brought pigs' or sheep's heads in sacks, and the animals used them for soccer balls. Since I didn't know how to play soccer and had no desire to learn, they bullied me some more. With the lack of technology (no tape recorders for pretending to be a radio DJ, no 8mm cameras), Chilean kids amused themselves by trying to leave their classmates impotent or sterile, perhaps driven by the strange mission of trying to end the species; something I imagine was instilled by their parents, who were dedicated to this same task. In Encino you had to be quick with words and able to handle the greatest amount of trivia. But in Santiago you had to be able to crush your classmate and, hopefully, leave him bloody.

I had to bring out all my internal resources in order to survive that first and only semester at Bristol. I threw up a lot and invented such terrible headaches that they ended up becoming very real indeed. I was pulled out of Bristol and taken straight to the ophthalmologist, who, to my surprise, discovered a case of severe myopia, which he cor-

rected with a pair of Coke-bottle glasses with black frames, which I had made at Losada Optical. Being sentenced to having to wear glasses was the last straw.

Manuela started right in at Saint Luke's, a coed school, in a mid-to-high-level class linked with the defeated "Civilized Left." Families who sent their children there weren't necessarily religious, but they didn't want to send their kids to a secular school. Also, Saint Luke's didn't require certificates of baptism nor did it discriminate against children of separated parents, a policy which they tried to repeal when a study revealed that 81 percent of the students came from broken homes, and that students whose parents were still together were relentlessly hounded and ridiculed by the others. I couldn't enroll at Saint Luke's because I came to take the entrance exam at the wrong part of the school year. Anyway, I was no good. I didn't know Spanish, I had shut myself off from others, taking on a mute persona. My sister, on the other hand, who knew less Spanish than I did, conquered everything and matriculated without any problems.

Saint Luke's was located on an isolated corner at the foot of a hill alongside a scrawny river, and it was a small paradise isolated from all distractions. It wasn't cheap (eventually, the students renamed it San Lucas, in honor of the thousands who paid the monthly tuition) but, according to everyone, it was the investment of a lifetime since the social network it offered was so extensive that, were you ever to fall, they would always be there to catch you.

But besides this, Saint Luke's seemed to secure a sense of happiness that was both immediate and eternal. The self-confidence that you got from being there and having penetrated the cutthroat system would be with you for the rest of your life. Everybody at those sorts of schools (Saint Luke's, Andover, and fucking Saint Martin in the Fields) was wholesome, open, kind, had nice white teeth, and dated each other. I, therefore, hated everyone from Saint Luke's with that unique type of fervor that one has for things he wants but cannot have. In Santiago, I tasted the flavor of resentment; it was caught in my throat. I wanted what others had: to attend Saint Luke's, live in Vitacura near the school, join a club, and have a house on the beach. And beyond

even that, I wanted to be tall, lean, and handsome, to have a father, and to date a Saint Luke's girl.

To add insult to injury, making me feel even more insignificant, Federica Montt ended up being in one of my sister's classes. I saw her from the car window when we went to pick up Manuela after school, heard her voice when she called on the phone, and spied her walking to birthday parties at friends' houses. Once, nervous and sweaty, I knocked on the door of her house. She answered and, before asking if my sister was there, I asked her if she remembered me.

"I'm sorry, I don't."

I blushed deeply, mumbled that I'd come for Manuela, and she said:

"Ah, wait one second while I call her."

The week they opened the metro, my aunt Marta, who lived across from a neon sign depicting a cork erupting from a bottle of champagne, wanted to take my sister and me for a ride on the new subterranean train. We rode all the way to the end of the line, and instead of going up to the surface we just changed trains because, Marta said, "there are a lot of poor people here; it's not safe."

Heading back to the Moneda station, we walked to the Gran Palace theater, which had very cool water-like walls that changed color constantly, from deep green to a burning orange to lemon-yellow. I could have spent all day watching those walls while chewing contentedly on those sweets that Aunt Marta always carried in her purse.

Melody is about a ten-year-old girl named, of course, Melody, but, more importantly, it's about a boy of the same age who loves her. Melody was played by Tracy Hyde, whom I'd never seen before, but even today I can't think about her without getting goose bumps. Daniel was played by Mark Lester, the same guy from Oliver! who, despite his similarity to my cousin Milo, was a great guy whom I instantly wanted to be like, because even then it was becoming clear to me that things in life are easier for those who see themselves as better than the rest.

Within five minutes of the start of the movie, I had decided that I was Daniel and Federica was Melody. That much was obvious. The

movie demonstrated, like I'd never seen in a movie before, that boys of ten or eleven could fall in love and get married. Melody and Daniel went to a very strict school and had to wear uniforms, not unlike the ones we had to wear. Their parents weren't aware of anything. They both managed to sneak out to a beach with the help of Ornshaw, Daniel's friend, who was played by the same guy who played Lester's friend in *Oliver!* Mark Lester fell hard for her, and someone in the theater that day did as well. What I felt that afternoon was so intense that, years later, I would sometimes wake up at night and recall those scenes as if they had actually happened to me. Once I was watching Federica at ballet practice when she spied me looking through the window. I took off running to the Club Hípico to the sounds of "To Love Somebody," imagining the two of us running away to some rundown seaside resort like Cartagena.

I exited the theater with the songs of the Bee Gees running through my head, along with the certainty that not only did I not have a girlfriend like Melody, I didn't even have a friend of any kind. My one consolation was the knowledge that I was still only ten and had a long way to go, and that perhaps the world still had much to offer me. And what it would offer me was odd and unexpected: the morning after we had first slept together, Federica switched on a transistor radio and the first thing we heard were the sounds of "To Love Somebody." I didn't say anything but, from the look in her eyes, I knew that she too had seen *Melody* when she was ten, and had never forgotten it.

Jaws, USA, 1975, 124 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Steven Spielberg

STARRING: Roy Scheider, Richard Dreyfuss,

Robert Shaw, Lorraine Gary

SEEN: 1975, Cine Oriente, Santiago de Chile

I endured five months of El Bristol until, out of pity and my false threats of suicide, my mother withdrew me and hired a thin woman terrified of life, named Estela, to come to the house and teach me Spanish. She was the daughter of diplomats and had lived in Washington for six years. Every time she came to the house she would say the same thing:

"Our house was in the middle of a forest filled with squirrels. You ought to go to Maryland; it's the most beautiful place in the world."

Years later, staying in D.C., I took the metro to Bethesda and sipped coffee in a park that reminded me of Estela's forest. She helped me with my pronunciation ("*Unicoop*' is pronounced 'uni-cop,' like 'paco,' a 'cop.' 'Uni-cop,' not 'uni-cup'") and together we spent three months poring over *El último grumete de la Baquedano*, which I read with my brand-new Coke-bottle glasses.

My father showed up almost a year later. My mother had reserved a room at the Sheraton so they could be together that afternoon after lunch, and then spend the night together. I instantly knew what that meant, and the fact made me feel sick, disturbed, and afraid. My father had been gone and, living at home with my grandparents, I no longer felt like something was missing. To make matters worse, my grandparents were to move the week before my father arrived in Chile. Tata and Mina had bought an apartment that overlooked Avenida Providencia in the heights of Antonio Varas. The giant house on Doctor Ignacio Echaurren Arismendi Street was left for us, and that bothered me. Without our grandparents there, I felt as if we had been left to our own devices. Lina had been fired for stealing the porcelain Chinese pig from the filthy old china cabinet that held

relics left over from the Allende years, and a can of Nescafé (though neither were very likely, since Lina hated that pig as much as I did, and drank tea instead of coffee).

The day before my father was to arrive, a new maid came to the house: her name was Betsabé, and she had the oblique, sly look of a gypsy about her. She came with her daughter Olimpia, who was five years old and had great green eyes and frizzy hair like the singer from the Hughes Corporation. Nobody knew much about Betsabé's past, but she had one and it wasn't bad. She cooked inspired, exotic Mediterranean dishes and spent her afternoons reading newspapers, magazines, and the same Sidney Sheldon or Harold Robbins novels that, a couple years later, would serve to satisfy my masturbatory urges.

My father came through customs in Pudahuel looking tanned and sporting mud-flap sideburns, aviator glasses, and a safari jacket. Betsabé debuted with a dish of couscous with artichokes, pine nuts, and lamb, which I couldn't eat. Everyone proposed toasts with wine, including Betsabé, who always decided to join us for dessert in the duskily lit main dining room.

"To our life in Chile," said my father, not altogether convincingly.

Three days later (and because I wasn't in school) I went with my father in the Fiat 600 to Valparaíso to see the cargo ship come in with the rest of his belongings. On the way there, he didn't know what to say to me, and I didn't really know what to tell him either. In his crate were all the posessions and artifacts that could remind us of California, like a caramel-colored washing machine and a Westinghouse dryer that had burnt out due to a faulty transformer. My father had also brought skis for everyone, along with boots, gloves, and poles. But we never went skiing; never got the chance to use the gear. The inflatable outboard motorboat complete with Coleman camping gear was something we did use, but only on that one occasion that we went to Pichidangui and everything turned out so badly—too much sun, too much fighting, and too much sand in our tents—that we vowed never to go back. The tent got torn when a drunk teenager stumbled into it at five in the morning, and our grand vessel capsized in the middle of the bay

and nearly drowned us all. Near Longotoma, on the drive back to Santiago, the wind caught hold of the boat (which my father had lashed down poorly) and tore it off the roof of our car. Since my mother was driving at the time, we didn't stop to pick it up. We did turn around to watch, though, as the ten-foot boat flew like a shark over the tops of the cars on the road before landing on a nearby hillside.

The crate's unloading from the ship was delayed, as was the unloading of the blue diesel BMW that my father also had shipped. The customs agent explained that we could have our things in a week's time. My father didn't mind as long as he could at least see his Beemer, which looked to be in quite a sorry state indeed, having been covered in a thick, antioxidizing coat of grease during shipping.

"We'll just wash her, and then she'll be good as new," he said as if it were a dog.

After checking on the BMW, we went to have lunch at the Hotel Miramar, which did indeed look out over the sea. My father ordered abalone, spider crab, and shrimp. I still didn't know what to talk to him about, and he was at just as much of a loss as I was. My sister and I had decided to talk to each other in English for the rest of our lives, but once she was sucked into Saint Luke's, she began to insult me with all the weaponry that her hip new *lolo* slang offered (that supremely pathetic word: a *lolo*, I realized right away, was something that I would never be). I started out trying to speak Castilian with my father, but we soon moved into English. He sipped his glass of wine, looked out over the waves, and asked me:

"Did you see Jaws? Everybody up there saw it."

"No," I said. "Down here they call it Tiburón."

"Tiburón, huh? I guess that's a good name. Better than Dientes, anyway."

"Mandíbulas."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. We gotta go see it. Is it playing anywhere around here?"

"Not until Christmas," I explained. "Navidad."

"Wow, I guess we really are the asshole of the world."

On Christmas Day, my father surprised me with tickets to the

matinee premiere of *Jaws*. The movie was rated for people fourteen and older and, though I was still a month and a half shy of my twelfth birthday, amidst the opening day tumult I was able to shuffle in just the same. My heart didn't stop pounding the entire time. I don't know if it was because of the shark, the pulsating music of John Williams, or the fear of being with my father and not knowing what to say. But you don't have to say much in a theater, just the occasional "That was cool, huh?" and the two of us laughed loudly together when we got to the part where Robert Shaw and Richard Dreyfuss play a bit of one-upmanship over their scars. After the movie ended, everyone filtered out into the lobby, sweaty from the heat and the cumulative tension.

I swear I felt a sea breeze rustling the trees along Pedro de Valdivia Norte Street once we left the theater. We were walking toward the BMW, which had just recently cleared customs, when my father bumped into a gringo he'd met on the plane. The gringo was a lot taller than my father, and he had his two sons with him, one about my age, the other a few years older. They had also just seen *Jaws*.

"Fuckin'-A," said the gringo.

Later, in the car, my father told me that Alf, the younger of the two boys, had lost a testicle in one of those brutal games they play in all the boys' schools.

"Poor kid," he said. "Gringos just aren't used to it."

I couldn't say a thing. Why was this kid a "poor gringo" while I was now the natural-born Chilean who had to understand how everything worked?

About a year later, my father found out that that tall, kind gringo father was called Mike Tanner and that he'd just been arrested for setting off a car bomb in the Washington suburb of Bethesda, Maryland: the very place that Estela, my Spanish teacher, loved so much.

The Barefoot Executive, USA, 1971, 96 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Robert Butler

STARRING: Kurt Russell, Joe Flynn, Wally Cox,

John Ritter

SEEN: 1971, Reseda, CA, and in 1976, Cine El Huelén,

Santiago de Chile

The Barefoot Executive opened in Santiago in a downtown theater called El Huelén, which was built below ground level and whose walls were covered with Disney characters. It was only in theaters for a few days, because in South America, non-animated Disney movies tend to go away without much pain or glory. Up until that point, I had only seen two movies more than once: The Poseidon Adventure (four times) and the musical Tom Sawyer (three). When I saw the previews for The Barefoot Executive, which featured a chimpanzee alongside Kurt Russell, I knew right away that I had to see it. Russell was one of my favorite actors for his series of Disney comedies for teenagers, which, truth be told, were more for kids who dreamed of being teenagers and of being free once and for all. He played the great Dexter Riley in at least three movies that I considered personal classics: The Computer Wore Tennis Shoes, The Strongest Man in the World, and—the best of the three—Now You See Him, Now You Don't.

It was January—the summer—and all of Santiago was on vacation, starting with Manuela, who divided her time between Reñaca, together with Sofía Basterrica; our failed camping trip to Pichidangui; and Cachagua, at Federica Montt's house. I, on the other hand, had no friends and had yet to start at my eventual school, the McArthur Institute, which was located nearby, on Seminario Street, and didn't require me to take any entrance exams or assessments.

"You'll be fine there; at least it's mixed and not just Catholic," figured my mother, who had just started work that summer. It was either for the money or to get out of the house, because with Betsabé and her recipes, my mother's presence really wasn't necessary, and so she took

a job as the executive assistant to the general manager of Goodyear Chile.

She was no expert typist, but she was 100 percent bilingual, and she had a "good presence," something that Chilean businesses always demanded. Surprisingly, our opportunistic uncle Enrique Lobos made good on his word and put my father in charge of a business that exported fruit. My father understood little in general, less about fruit, and even less still about exportation, bribery, and the lack of transparency in the world of business. People paid on time, and then, on payday, my father would be surprised that they had no funds. Even so, there was hope, and the country was growing. Our backyard was crammed with workers who, spades in hand, dug out a pit for a swimming pool. The idea was to have it ready that summer, but it was inaugurated only in May, under a torrential downpour.

There were more children than I'd expected on Doctor Ignacio Echaurren Arismendi Street, although the population of elderly who lived on the same block was a bit repulsive, with the notable exception of Chichi Irarrázaval, a posh little old lady who would go down to the corner store for a liter of oil accompanied by her dalmatian, Cognac. Whenever Manuela saw the dog, she would start shaking and crying uncontrollably.

A couple doors down the street lived a freckly kid about my age. He was from Punta Arenas and had a pet penguin that his father, a fisherman, had gotten him. His father still lived in Punta Arenas, and the kid lived with his grandmother. The penguin's name was Petete, like the South American children's TV character, and he spent that summer in an inflatable kiddie pool. His owner's name was Sebastián Germaine, and since I was still in need of a friend, he could be an ideal candidate. After all, he came from somewhere else, just like I did. But I never knew how to approach him, since my accent was still a dead giveaway. One day I just went up to his door and rang the bell to see if he wanted to do something with me.

"No, I'm just hanging out with my penguin. But thanks for asking," was all he said.

Sebastián never left his big, rambling house, and never seemed to

get bored either. But I did. The geology books that Tata had given me were starting to wear rather thin. So, one January afternoon, I decided to go to the movies, even if it was by myself. I needed to see *The Barefoot Executive*. I still didn't know Santiago very well, and I was as terrified of walking as I was of taking the bus, but I had gone downtown with Tata a bunch of times to pick up his mail at his box in the Central Post Office on the Plaza de Armas. I knew that the bus passed by Salvador Hospital, on the corner, and then continued straight to the downtown area. Without a second thought, I told Betsabé that I was going to Sebastián's house to watch TV and play with the penguin, and took off toward El Huelén with my money stowed carefully in my pocket. On the bus ride there, the #1 song from the previous year ran through my head: Roberto Carlos's "Un millón de amigos." For me, just one would have been enough.

The Barefoot Executive was the first movie I ever saw by myself, and the experience was so intense that from then on I began going to all movies alone; sometimes by choice, but mostly because I just didn't have anyone to go with me. Strictly speaking, that enchanting, subversive, and anti-establishment comedy was not a Dexter Riley film, although it's from the same time frame, produced by the same studio, and directed by the same Robert Butler. This time, Russell plays Steven Stone, who is something like Dexter Riley's long-lost brother. Stone is a young man who drives a VW Beetle and works as a TV news anchorman. And he's frustrated; he feels as if he's simply spinning his wheels in this job. But then one of those things occurs that never occurs in real life but does in movies because if it didn't, then there wouldn't be any. Stone's girlfriend asks him to baby-sit one night, although it's not for a baby; it's for a monkey, a domesticated chimpanzee called Raffles. Stone realizes that this monkey is some sort of genius when he begins to pick out the shows that work the best. He can literally smell ratings and so Stone, using the chimp's nose as a guide, begins to promote his own ideas and quickly rises through the ranks to become a programming executive.

El Huelén was practically empty. Nobody laughed when I laughed; maybe the subtitles weren't saying the same things. Then, at the most

comedic part of the movie, a complete and overpowering wave of nostalgia washed over me. I felt like I was back in the Valley, sitting in the shabby yet decadent Reseda Theater, and the emotions—the conflicting emotions—the fear of being in distant Santiago with only the certainty of never returning to keep me company, made me cry like I'd never cried before and like I would never cry again. It was so intense, painful, and sudden that I thought I'd feel like that forever, and I had the distinct thought that I'd die there, watching *The Barefoot Executive* and not even being able to smile. Maybe I had lost my life, my context, my language, but at least I had that refuge. The theater was dark, it was almost always showing a gringo movie, everything on screen was in English, and I could cry there and nobody would know a thing.

I walked home, first along Parque Forestal and then Bustamante. On the way, drying my tear-stained cheeks, I formed a plan for getting my parents to buy me a dog. As I was passing the Plaza Bernarda Morín, I bumped into Petete, who was stumbling through the bushes, desperately looking for water. Right away I knew that something had happened to Sebastián, the guy who could never be a friend. Sebastián's father was visiting then, and while he was taking a nap, Sebastián had pulled his Peugeot 404 into the garage, shut the door, rolled down the windows, and turned on the radio. By the time Petete and I arrived, there was already an old ambulance from Salvador Hospital outside their house. Later, a hearse bearing an empty coffin pulled up as well. Betsabé told me that we couldn't keep the damn penguin because he stank. I didn't know what to do. The next day, my father took me to Parque O'Higgins, where, surreptitiously, we released Petete into the lagoon.

The World's Greatest Athlete, USA, 1973, 94 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Robert Scheerer

STARRING: Jan-Michael Vincent, Tim Conway, John Amos

SEEN: 1976, Cine Olimpio, Santiago de Chile

I saw The World's Greatest Athlete with my uncle Choclo Bulnes and my cousins Milo and Isidora in Viña del Mar one Sunday morning after having breakfast at the Samoiedo. They had just arrived from Venezuela and, though the kids had just enrolled at Saint Luke's, they still hadn't found a house to their liking. Grandpa Teodoro insisted that they join him for a weekend at the beach where "that idiot Luisa" had rented an old house in Reñaca. I didn't want to go because I had decided that I hated the beach (since you have to take off your shirt when you go there), but also because I couldn't stand Aunt Luisa and her so-called imaginative landscape creations, or Milo, who—now that he lived in Chile—was even more aware of his celebrity (why is it that you can't help but hate famous people?). Uncle Choclo, however, was impossible to dislike. He always used a direct tone when talking with me, as if I were an equal and not his nephew. Maybe that's it: maybe uncles have an easier time communicating with their nephews than with their own children. Milo thought that my father was the best; I thought that Choclo was a cool slacker with a millionaire's bank account.

My grandfather didn't want to come with us to the theater because of a discussion that he had with Uncle Choclo the day before, when, instead of accompanying Milo to the beach at Reñaca (actually, I never even considered it), I tagged along with the grown-ups to look at plots of land. My uncle wanted to invest and develop. "A man can't live by making up little catchphrases alone," he'd say. He ended up buying the house he rented that summer just so he could demolish it and build a residential building complete with an elevator. As his publicity agency grew, taking on not only international clients but also our own government ("We're going to come out ahead; you can bet on it"), Choclo

started putting up all sorts of buildings, from commercial galleries shaped like snail shells to luxury department stores, both in Santiago and on the coast.

The place my uncle liked best was a wasteland at the northern point of the Reñacan highlands, on the way to Con Con. Up there, it almost felt like you were flying.

"Just imagine the view from here. I think I'll buy it. I'll call my partner. I'm thinking: a tall building, like a lighthouse, that you can see even from the port," he said. "Plus, it's a steal."

"There's no doubt about it," replied my grandfather. "The ground here is pure sand. You'll have to sink the foundations so deep that you might as well start exporting seafood to China. You could pipe it over to them. No serious contractor would even consider a building over one story tall."

The World's Greatest Athlete is another Disney movie with humans instead of cartoons, although the humans act like monkeys. Five minutes into the thing, I understood why Milo had wanted to see it so badly: it was practically a documentary on himself. A college track coach, tired of losing all the time, goes to Africa to seek out a topnotch runner. But instead of finding a black Nigerian sprinter, he bumps into something of a modern Tarzan. The coach's assistant was named Milo (something that elicited a laugh from Isidora, who asked me to open the bag of Mix Soda candies, which had fruit-flavored crystals inside and filled your mouth with fizz) but—in one of the greater examples of Hollywood irony I've seen—the blond athlete (Jan-Michael Vincent) was called Nanu. Nanu didn't just run; he ran like a bullet train. He won everything he entered and became a hero but, like Tarzan, he missed Africa, preferring the simple things to the amenities offered by the United States.

"That dumb son of a bitch. He should have signed a contract with Fila," Milo complained on our way out.

My cousin Pedro Bulnes was admired and envied in equal parts by all the people of his generation even before he landed in Chile in early 1976, with his Adidas shoes, his Levi's Originals, and the album *A Night at the Opera* under his arm. Milo was the "Milo Makes You Big"

guy, the omnipresent campaign created around a slogan invented by Uncle Choclo.

He invented the genial phrase at a New Year's Eve party at his agency's office in Santiago. Every member of Imagina, Ideas & Publicidad had to dress up and come up with an advertising slogan too risqué to ever make it on the air. My uncle invented a guy traumatized by the size of his penis who drinks several Pilsners, goes to a cabaret, and realizes that the beers have worked wonders. Pilsner, It Leaves You Hung. But he saw that in Caracas, people were more concerned with their sons growing up to be men and, if the size of your cock is something that can intrigue a few people once they hit fifteen, what's for sure is that, at six or seven, the majority of any normal kid's concerns have to do with making sure that everything is growing (when I was about to turn twelve, I was terrified of getting a hard-on and discovering that the thing was still short). So that's what Milo offered: an important part of a balanced diet that, for all practical purposes, was just like chocolate milk. Out of this insight came the slogan "Milo Makes You Big." Uncle Choclo told me all this decades later, while we were sitting in his apartment at the retirement home, facing Cavancha Beach in Iquique. He was alone and forgotten, and his living room was filled with posters and cans of Milo.

Nothing could illustrate the concept of a growing boy better, he thought, than a series of sporting events. "Each event represents one of life's trials, because life, Beltrán—and you know this well—is full of hurdles, and not all of us are able to clear them with ease." In an act of nepotism that even a member of Mexico's PRI would have been ashamed of, he chose his own son to be the boy-symbol. Pedro was chosen because he was blond ("The spots ought to be inspirational; every brown-haired Latino boy wants to be blond, so they can conquer all the blond girls," he claimed), and because he already looked like a stud.

The Milo campaign was for all of Latin America, and they started the filming in Puerto Rico. His contract was to last until he turned eighteen, and they went filming him every year so that when Milo was finally a man, they would have completed the ultimate commercial showing a boy's growth. As Milo signed the seven-year contract, a little Dutch kid from Curaçao appeared in the first few seconds of the commercial, before giving way to Cousin Milo running around the track.

Milo's face was everywhere. It got to be inevitable. Milo sponsored shows like *El club de los bochincheros* to *El hombre nuclear*, passing through to the kids' crew on *Sábado gigante*. His voice was all over the radio, and his face was on all the milk-can labels. His name wasn't widely known, but the guy couldn't go out for an ice cream at Coppelia or walk down Avenida Perú in Viña (two of his favorite places before—of course—they opened the Plaza Shopping de Vitacura, a.k.a. Los Cobres, which he made into his exclusive territory) without someone recognizing him. Chicks threw themselves at him, and guys reacted in one of two ways: they either tried to become friends with him by giving him arcade tokens or loaning him their skateboards, or those who were more insecure would try to beat him up. A bad idea: Pedro (everyone called him Milo—"Check it out, there goes Milo") was damn good at karate.

Contractually, Milo was obligated to play tennis, swim, and participate in BMX races. He'd never been a champion in anything; he couldn't fly through the air like a pole vaulter, and he shattered no records in the 400 meters. What you have to remember, though, is that he was decent at most sports, whereas I, on the other hand, uncoordinated as I was, couldn't play anything. Besides our grandfather, the only thing we had in common was the fact that we were worthless soccer players. When they had to film the commercials in color for World Cup 1978, the shots of Milo controlling the ball with Caszely or some other South American star were done with a stunt double.

In March, the country was captivated by the Davis Cup when, by some miracle, Chile beat Argentina, even with Guillermo Vilas playing for the trans-Andean rivals. Milo sponsored the event, and there, rubbing shoulders with Julio Martínez, Pedro Carcuro, and Jaime Fillol, was my cousin Milo, decked out in the freshest tennis gear, right down to his Wilson racket, taking pictures and passing out glasses of ice-cold Milo with a bevy of girls dressed in green miniskirts.

"They went down on me in the locker room while Cornejo was playing. Then me and Belus Prajoux fucked two hot promoters. Call him up if you don't believe me."

We were at my grandmother's birthday party, eating merengue pies with egg-fruit.

"You might shit on me in terms of intelligence, but I'm going to have more money, more girls, and more friends."

"So what."

"So, you'll never forgive me. You'll always lose. I'll always win."

Earthquakel, USA, 1974, 123 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Mark Robson

STARRING: Charlton Heston, George Kennedy,

Geneviève Bujold

SEEN: 1976, Cine Lido, Santiago de Chile

Once, at Aunt Chilaca's apartment on the tenth floor of a building on Lyon Street, the whole family got together for a dinner of "tongue surprise," which I refused to try, when the ground started to shake. Unlike the time a little tremor hit us while I was still at El Bristol and our math teacher made us get down under our beat-up little desks, the family went on with the conversation, sipping their wine and chewing their bits of tongue. The building rocked from side to side, the pieces on the mantel slid, and the chandelier swayed enough to create a small breeze, but there was nothing remotely like a state of commotion.

Once the tremor passed, Marquita, Aunt Chilaca's old, whitehaired maid, who was never without her white apron, said, "That was a three," and asked if anyone would like some coffee.

"Do you know how she knows?" my grandfather asked me. "Look at the teacup."

The liquid was rippling, like when a kid throws a rock into the middle of a calm lake. I watched as, little by little, the concentric rings disappeared.

"When liquids are subjected to a vibration strong enough to slosh them out of the container they're held in, then, Beltrán, we're past an 8 and it's time to start thinking about how to protect yourself."

Grandpa Teodoro wouldn't tolerate "double meaning" jokes or allow us to talk about sex or other "degenerate things" at the dinner table. He took advantage of the situation to tell me something about the university and the earth. Despite all the reading, his lectures were very scientific or, at least, historical. A meal could start him off on the famous anecdote of Archimedes in the bathtub or telling us about the fall of Constantinople. He even had me watch Jorge Dahm's

educational program where he, his pencil, and his little friend, Roscapumpa, traced out key events in the history of the world.

Eventually I realized that my grandfather practically never went to the movies, and that fiction—dealing with subjective themes and seeming generally like a waste of time—was something that he preferred to avoid. I'd be willing to bet that the few movies that he had seen, he'd seen with me. *Earthquake!* was one of these. It was inevitable. How could we not see it? How could we miss a movie that seemed to have been made especially for us?

That year, for my twelfth birthday three months earlier, my grandfather had given me a copy of *The Book of Lists*. It was an immense book, heavy, with nearly five hundred pages, and inside it was an envelope with a slip of paper that read Good for two tickets to the premiere of *Earthquake!*.

This was more than just a movie; this was an event.

My obsession with that film began about the time when *The Poseidon Adventure* was in theaters, when Drew Wasserman surprised us one day at the 7-Eleven with the release dates of upcoming movies.

"The disaster movies continue," he said flatly, as if he were a CIA informant reporting to his superiors that the terrorist groups in Latin America were not going to go away just like that.

"Universal will wreck L.A., and planes will keep on having accidents. I heard that eventually they're going to remake *The Birds*, but this time with bees."

I was going to enjoy *Earthquake!* no matter what. I had made up my mind to enjoy it even if it was bad. But within two minutes I was hooked, unbelievably fascinated, because the city that was about to fall (and that's what made me nervous: I knew what was going to happen; I just didn't know when) was Los Angeles. And when they show the dam, and the guy who drowns in the elevator after the first quake, I knew that the movie *Earthquake!* was based on the actual earthquake that hit Sylmar in 1971. The only difference—of course—was that this time they were going to crank up the energy loosed.

They presented the characters in the early part of the movie, and among them was a young seismologist who hypothesized that the morning's quake was merely a portent of things to come, and so he tried to convince his boss to warn the mayor. My grandfather was getting into it; it was going well. They were letting history carry a lot of it.

Then came el monstruo. The Big One.

Maybe my grandfather didn't understand what Sensurround was; maybe he hadn't read the articles or seen "The Making Of," where María Romero appeared on the show *Estudio Abierto* along with sound technicians who explained how they recreated the roaring earth. One of them had mentioned that, in order to get the full Sensurround effect, it was best to sit right in the dead center of the theater, which is where we were.

On the screen, the city of Los Angeles was crumbling; in the Cine Lido, the walls were shaking. At least, it seemed as if they were shaking, and strongly too: 7, 8, or 9. The unbearable sounds were pouring out of the speakers with such force that our seats were shaking. My grandfather grabbed my hand, and it felt as cold as a bottle of milk straight from the refrigerator.

Suddenly he stood up. Some people behind us shouted for him to sit down, but he bolted for the exit and ended up tripping in the dark. I tried to follow him. On the screen, highway overpasses were crumbling and buildings were starting to collapse. In the midst of all that deafening sound, I pushed my way through the thick velvet curtains and out into the foyer, where I saw my grandfather sitting on a bench, sobbing in fear, and with a thread of blood trickling from his forehead. His complexion was so pale it was almost transparent, and I realized for the first time just how old he was. He was trembling all over; his legs were jumping so much that it seemed as if the floor really was shaking.

An usher came over to us and asked him if he was okay, asked if he should call an ambulance. Grandpa didn't respond, so the usher turned to me and said:

"The same thing happened to a woman at an earlier showing. We're going to have to put up a warning sign, and maybe have the Red Cross present at all the showings."

I didn't dare go up to my grandfather, who had buried his face in his hands. Back in the theater, the earthquake raged on. I opened the curtain and peeked in to see the city being razed while fires erupted and water mains burst.

"Tata, why don't we call a taxi? I'm ready to go too."

The Sound of Music, USA, 1965, 174 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Robert Wise

STARRING: Julie Andrews, Christopher Plummer,

Peggy Wood

SEEN: 1976, Cine Santa Lucía, Santiago de Chile

My mother wanted me to have friends in Santiago like I did in Encino. It's not that I didn't want friends; it's just that I couldn't find any. The main problem was with my new neighborhood: there weren't many kids my age, and the few there all went to faraway schools. Santiago had a smaller population than L.A., and it was a less sprawling city as well. Still, for me, Santiago was the biggest city on earth. Everything was so far away. The neighborhood wasn't enough: I'd have to branch out.

But you can't just put the blame on the streets, though the temptation to do so is always there. I had finally grasped Spanish, but I still didn't feel a part of things, much less welcome. I was a changed person, and the person I had become didn't seem to need other people around him. I didn't want to feel a part of things, because I just wasn't going to be there long. Chile was a transitional place, somewhere to pass through, an experience that would fascinate my future colleagues at Caltech. My father didn't find it to his liking, and you didn't have to be psychic to catch the signals or sense his regret. Every day he stayed, he drew further and further into himself until he was unable to communicate not only with me but also with the rest of the world. My father, without a doubt, wanted to go back to California. And when he did it, I thought, he could take me with him, even if that meant leaving the rest of the family behind.

After Sebastián Germaine's suicide, the only kid in the neighborhood who could potentially be a friend was Remigio Echaurren Stevens, who lived across the street. He was exactly the same age as I, short, fat, and he wore glasses. But I categorically refused to make any attempts at getting to know him for fear of becoming like him. My

sister had already become one of the Saint Luke's girls, and I didn't want to run that risk. People always end up being like their friends, which is why it's important to choose them well. Remigio Echaurren was probably a good enough guy, though I would never actually find out. We didn't have much in common besides the street that we lived on and, knowing what his family was like, I didn't want to have anything more than that. Our street was even named after his grandfather, one of the founders of the recently demolished San Borja Hospital.

Remigio Echaurren's father, about to turn eighty, was a former representative of the Partido Nacional and provided legal counsel to people of little means, something that seemed unusual to us, given that his family had no resources other than their big, run-down house and an old station wagon that looked like the one from The Waltons on TV. Actually, everything in that house looked straight out of *The Wal*tons. They didn't have a TV, and they used newspaper instead of toilet paper. Every two weeks, the old man's wealthier relatives in Nancagua sent over sacks of fruit and vegetables. Constanza Stevens, the kid's mother, was considerably younger than her husband, and she went to Mass every day with three or four of her eleven children. Owing to the patriarch's age, the Echaurren Stevens family was not all well. All of the children suffered from one thing or another: one was deaf, two others seemed retarded to some degree, three were diabetic, one was blind, two were obese, and the eldest had a hip problem such that, when he walked, he always looked like he was on the verge of collapse. All things considered, Remigio seemed like the healthiest of them all, until two years later when they moved him to the country and it became clear that he had stopped growing. He was stuck at four foot seven, and starting to get hairy.

The first time I saw *The Sound of Music* was in an elegant Beverly Hills theater with Grandma and Grandpa Soler. The second time was in the Cine Santa Lucía at a Sunday matinee with Grandma Guillermina and Aunt Chilaca. To our surprise, the entire Echaurren Stevens family was also there, filling up a whole row.

"It's the only movie the children have ever seen," Remigio's mother admitted to my grandmother.

To me it seemed even tougher to stomach than I remembered, and

"good for girls' birthday parties." I never expected that the Echaurren Stevens clan would know all the words to the songs, even if only in an English that was barely a phonetic approximation. Out of the blue, they broke into song.

"Forgive us," said Mrs. Stevens during the intermission. "We're rehearsing for television."

Two weeks later, I awoke to the sounds of "My Favorite Things," followed by "Edelweiss." Another Sunday, while Betsabé was making toast, I opened the windows and in flowed the song "Climb Every Mountain." It was the Echaurren Stevenses and, on hearing them, you could swear that it was all Anglo-Saxon angels. There was no doubt about it: they were singing as if they were all healthy and strong and living in better times.

The show they were rehearsing for was on Channel 13, and it came on on Sunday nights. It was called *Fa-Mi-La En Familia* and, as I would later discover, it was a program "recommended" by the brains of the military regime in order to promote the family, "which is the support and cornerstone of this government," as Raúl Saenz Villaba once remarked before he became mayor.

They appeared on the show one night with Benjamin MacKenna, the host of the show, who was also the leader of Los Huasos Quincheros, a group of Creole cowboys who admired the old traditions and works of General Pinochet. Two families competed per show, and then those who won would compete among themselves to reach the final. To our amazement, the Echaurren Stevenses swept through the competition, ousting every singing family that was put in front of them. When they saw that they couldn't keep going with the songs from *The Sound of Music*, they altered their repertoire to include the theme from *The Flowered Pergola*, which brought the public and the judges to their feet.

The program's concept was undeniably fascist, but it was dead-on: "The family that sings together, stays together." We were all healthy and we weren't badly off economically, but maybe the fact that we were all tone deaf and incapable of harmony had condemned us. We watched the program in silence, and once the Echaurren Stevenses won, my father got in his BMW and went out for a drive. He came back, I remember, sometime after three in the morning.

Logan's Run, USA, 1976, 120 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Michael Anderson

STARRING: Michael York, Jenny Agutter, Farrah Fawcett,

Peter Ustinov

SEEN: 1977, Cine Olimpo, Viña del Mar

We had a bit more money in the summer of 1977, and things seemed to be going well enough. My mother was looking as if she had never left Chile in the first place, and had turned her back on anything remotely North American. My father's business negotiations were improving, and he was no longer haunted by the sudden headaches that made him vomit, stick his head in a sink filled with ice, or bang it against the wall, which he once did with such force that he left a bloody stain. Nor did he go out without warning anymore. On weekends, we hopped in the Beemer for short trips to nearby places. Santiago was no Encino, but it wasn't hell either. Everybody was happy enough, and who was I to make a fuss?

My first year at McArthur—seventh grade—ended uneventfully. I wasn't class president, but I wasn't the most hated kid there either. Somehow I had worked it out so that my anonymity carried with it a certain dignity.

My mother decided to rent an apartment in Viña del Mar instead of in a smaller, more familiar resort, because that January Grandma and Grandpa Soler paid us a visit from California. It was better for them to be in Ciudad Jardín, because many of their old friends spent their summers there, some of whom they hadn't seen in over ten years.

That same summer, I had a new thing to worry about: puberty had crept up on me and pounced without warning. My parents hadn't explained any of it to me and, since I didn't have any friends, I didn't understand a thing. I didn't aspire, nor did I feel at all prepared, to be an adolescent like the ones in the movies, who shouted, danced, and fornicated to the sounds of rock 'n' roll. I couldn't see myself cruising around on a motorcycle or riding the waves on a longboard. I wasn't

Milo; I didn't have to be big. Or did I? To me, adolescence meant access to girls like Federica Montt, but it was clear—very clear—that girls like Federica Montt weren't going to be bothered with guys like me. Especially if I stayed short and chubby. I got the impression that the teenage world was only for the very brave or the very strong, and I wasn't either.

My grandparents bypassed Santiago and came directly to the apartment we had rented on 5 Norte in Viña. When they came in, I couldn't believe what gringos they were. I couldn't tell if they were wearing costumes, or if they had planned to come in those outfits. Their clothes exuded summer: hers pink, his bright yellow. Plus, each was sporting a straw sombrero. My grandfather seemed older and thinner than I remembered him, and when he coughed, you could hear the tens of thousands of packs of cigarettes that he had smoked.

My paternal grandfather didn't go around with an 8mm camera; he carried a camcorder instead. We all took a train to Valparaíso and took pictures in front of the statue of Arturo Prat and at the pier where the *Esmeralda* was anchored. My mother commented that Valparaíso was a lot like San Francisco, with its hills and bridges and all; my grandfather said that it seemed much uglier, poor, run-down, and dangerous.

Chief among the things that they brought me from California were a Seiko watch with a golden-yellow face and a chronometer, a three-quarter-length green corduroy jacket with a Levi's tag (the only brand in Chile was Robert Lewis, which was made entirely out of something resembling the skin of a peach), and a poster of Farrah Fawcett that Uncle Javi had sent along. But the best and most unexpected gift was an invitation to go with them to Buenos Aires and Montevideo for my thirteenth birthday. Grandpa Juan wanted to revisit the city where he was born and spent the first few years of his life. He didn't know anybody there anymore, of course, but at least he could connect more easily with his memories if he could walk again where he had walked once before.

Somehow I talked them into taking me to see *Logan's Run*, which, according to the ads in all the papers, was starring the very same Far-

rah Fawcett. They wanted to see something called *That's Entertainment*, which was a collection of scenes from assorted musicals, but I was able to convince them that this movie had subtitles. My grandmother agreed. The true motive, of course, was that the movie was rated for those fourteen and over, but if I went in speaking English with this blatantly gringo couple, nobody would say a thing about it. And indeed, we went to an early-evening showing at the Cine Olimpo without the ticket-taker giving me a second glance.

Despite the futuristic, colorful costumes, the movie wasn't very pleasant. In a domed city, the people of the twenty-third century do nothing but dance and have sex. For food, they eat plankton and algae, sort of like the krill that the military wants Chileans to eat, since the southern ocean is full of those little bugs. Everybody is young and happy. Actually, they're very young: there's not a single elderly person in the whole city. Whenever one of the citizens turns thirty, he or she has to board some sort of futuristic carousel that supposedly takes them to be reborn. But, of course, that's not it: just like in *Soylent Green*, they are taken to be terminated. Michael York's character, Logan, is twenty-nine, and he decides to flee together with a scantily clad Jenny Agutter and not Farrah Fawcett, who has a rather small role but nonetheless made quite an impression on me with her teeth and hair.

On the way out, my grandfather was tense, and had I been more perceptive, I would have thanked them and the walk home would have been utterly silent. But no.

"Incredible, fantastic, better than *The Planet of the Apes*," I offered. I'd never seen it, but, thanks to Drew Wasserman, I knew how it ended, and the conclusion of *Logan's Run*, with the destruction of Washington, D.C., seemed similar. "*Qué huevón*, that was some good shit," I added, trying to say it with the teenage insolence of my supposed "generation."

"Please don't talk like a sailor in front of your grandmother, Beltrán. When I was your age, boys didn't speak so crudely. It's embarrassing that someone with my last name would say such things. Is that what they teach you in school?"

I kept on walking and couldn't help but respond with, "No, not in school, but out on the playground, sure. Everyone uses swearwords. Everybody says things like 'huevón.' It's like a wild card, you just throw it in whenever you want."

"That's hard to believe, Beltrán. I'm sorry. I doubt that everyone talks like that."

"Even Mom says it."

"Then your mother's ignorant."

I didn't know how to respond to that. Maybe out of fear, panic, or wanting to get on the plane with them, I didn't say anything, though I felt my blood roil and I had to swallow all my emotions while the three of us walked on down Libertad Street in the harshest of silences.

As the days went by, I began to suspect that the only reason my father's parents had come to Chile was because it was on the way to Uruguay. Grandpa Soler had resigned himself to systematically complaining about how he found Chile to be inferior to California. He moaned about the black-and-white TVs and griped—rightly, of course—that Pinochet was "a smart hick and, above all, a murderer."

We were already back in Santiago for the 1977 Festival de Viña. Three days later, we would leave for Buenos Aires. The thing I was most excited about was the chance to fly in a 747 operated by Air France, which was the only airline that flew jumbo jets to Chile. I had already seen *Airport 1975* and, since then, I'd dreamt about flying in one.

We were gathered in front of the TV, eating watermelon. In those days, the entire country watched the Festival de la Canción de Viña, and to not watch it surrounded by your whole family was tantamount to not watching it at all. That year, Uruguay was competing with a song I can't remember. Chile, as always, being the host country, presented three songs, although only one could potentially move through to the finals. The best of the three was "Brevemente gente" by Florecita Motuda, an odd-looking man who got up on stage in a mask, a yellow track suit, and a jacket that looked as if it were made out of spaghetti. Not one single person had ever before thought to dress themselves like that in the entire history of Chile. Everyone was

shocked, starting with Grandpa Soler, who didn't just brand him a "clown" but also a "stuffed shirt and an imbecile." He considered his song, which had swept through all the kids and youths in the country, to be "garbage." I kept quiet because it was obvious to me that, with all the controversy, Florecita Motuda would go through to the next round. But it wasn't to be: Luz Eliana was chosen for a song she'd written with only the crowd in mind. Incredibly, Uruguay had made it to the semifinals, prompting my grandfather to leap up out of his seat, applaud, and kiss my grandmother.

"You just like it because it's Uruguayan," I muttered. Both my parents put their plates of watermelon down on the table and looked at me. "I bet if that song were Korean or Bolivian, you'd say it was bad. If it were Chilean, you'd say it was downright offensive. And you'd be right: it is awful, but you just think that everything Chilean is disgusting when really it's Uruguay."

My grandfather swung at me, but my reflexes were too fast for him.

"Careful, you old sack of shit! Careful," I screamed, and then threw my watermelon all over his blue-green slacks. "Why don't you tell me now how I talk ignorant, just like my mom!"

So I didn't go to Uruguay or Buenos Aires. My grandfather tore up my ticket and left without saying good-bye to me; my grandmother could only cry and say, "He's my husband, *ñato*, you've got to know your place."

My father didn't punish me, and my mother understood everything and didn't invite him back. In Montevideo, they changed their tickets so they would have only a two-hour layover in the Santiago airport on their way back to L.A. I never saw my grandfather again; he never wrote to me, and I didn't hear another thing about him until they told me he had died, and I had to resist the urge to go out and celebrate.

Airport '77, USA, 1977, 114 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Jerry Jameson

STARRING: Jack Lemmon, Brenda Vaccaro,

Jimmy Stewart, Joseph Cotten

SEEN: 1977, Cine Metro, Santiago de Chile

I met Zacarías Enisman during a drill for the recently launched *Operación DEYSE*. At first I thought it was like "Daisy," as in Donald Duck's sweetheart, but when I was named a monitor and put in charge of the safety of my fellow classmates—especially in case of an earthquake—I had to deconstruct the acronym and discovered that the school's *Operación DEYSE* stood for "*Operación de Evacuación y Sequidad Escolar*." There was no doubt that Pinochet's henchmen took their cues from TV, like I would in my new role at school.

I never understood how the McArthur administration thought that I could be a respectable leader in the middle of a fire or some other catastrophe, but the nomination was something of an honor, so I accepted it. My job was to watch over "the safe and smooth evacuation from the classroom to an open patio." If a classmate fell behind or otherwise "affected the rapid movement of the group," the blame would fall on me. Years later, I came to understand that that's the way a dictator can exert his power everywhere: he recruits the weak and the isolated and gives them power and responsibility. Luckily I was only thirteen and not nineteen. But *Operación DEYSE*, for all of its militaristic patina, wasn't the Chilean National Intel, and so my responsibility and blame weren't as great.

Zacarías, who was in my class, came via Mexico and Puerto Rico, and he had a Texas Instruments calculator that must have cost a fortune. He had curly hair and puffy cheeks, as if he were always munching on a piece of cake. He didn't know whether he wanted to go into hydraulics or mechanics, but he knew he wanted to be an engineer. You could talk to him about anything, from physics to geology to—as I later learned—movies and disasters. We had competitions to see who

got better grades in math. Besides being naturally brilliant, he really had his nose to the grindstone when it came to studying, though Manuela just thought he was a nerd.

The McArthur school was pretty nerdy itself, and defined itself in part by not showing up on the subconscious radar of most other Santiago residents. It wasn't a famous school, wasn't Catholic or public, didn't turn out either presidents of the republic or criminals, and didn't win championships of any sort. McArthur was "recently coeducational," with an 80:20 ratio. Also, not many of my classmates were very attractive, with the notable exception of Viviana Oporto, who was short but full of curves and whose two eyelids, always lowered and with purple eyeshadow, seemed to have their own personality. Since there were so few girls, there wasn't much competition among them, so instead of trying to be the most stupendous, popular girl in school, the girls at McArthur all tried to be like the most celebrated one in my grade: Mardoqueo Sotoluque. Mardoqueo wore glasses and had an acne problem, and instead of carrying a leather satchel, she used a little Samsonite briefcase that someone had the idea to call a James Bond briefcase.

The majority of McArthur students weren't immigrants, technically (except for Kenzo Nobutami, whose father opened the first Japanese restaurant in the area); rather, they were the children or nieces and nephews of immigrants, which, in those days—at least through the eyes of the Saint Lukes or the Andovers—was tantamount to being from another planet. Almost everyone belonged to a "colony." Finally, many of them (though not all) belonged to sports clubs that bore the name of their place of origin: Club Syria, Club Palestine, Club Israel, Club Yugoslavia, Club Italy.

Perhaps because they all knew what it was like to be an outsider, at McArthur, nobody had a first name. Unlike at Bristol, I was Soler. No Beltrán, just Soler. It was the same with the girls: there were no Lauras, Rosas, Gabys, Irenes, or Claudias; just Ramírez, Haddad, Zunino, Balic, or Zimmerman. The only one who did have a girl's name was Viviana, though she was always Viviana Oporto.

Zacarías started coming over to my house with National Geo-

graphic maps so we could trace imaginary fault lines on them in pencil. He invited me to his bar mitzvah, and I remember noticing how few people came, and I was glad I didn't celebrate anything like that.

Once, on the phone, I called him "Zack" without thinking.

"It's Zacarías, from the Old Testament. Please don't confuse me with some BMX champ or one of your old California friends."

I saw *Airport 1975* in 1976 with Grandpa Teodoro at the Cine Oriente, and I thought it was one of the best films of all time. It was a month after the disaster in the Canary Islands where two jumbo jets—one Pan Am and one KLM—crashed on the runway. What was on the screen, then, had taken on a greater sence of immediacy.

"Something's Hit Us...The Crew's Dead...Somebody Help Us, Please!" read the posters. A smaller plane had collided with the big 747 right in the upper cabin, and the only one who could keep the plane stable until Charlton Heston came in on a cable was a flight attendant.

One day out on the patio, I noticed Zacarías examining a box with a picture of a plane on it. I went over to him and saw that it was a model you had to put together, like the ones they sold at Hobbyland. His father traveled a lot, and had bought the model while on board a Quantas flight. He invited me over to his apartment (which I thought looked spectacular) to help put it together, and while we were doing so, he put on the theme from *Airport 1975*, and even the original *Airport* movie with Jacqueline Bisset, which he had seen back in Mexico: "I saw everything in the D.F., no matter what the rating was. We lived right next to the theater, and gave the managers a little something extra so they would let us in, even to the eighteen-and-over ones, or twenty-one-and-over if you're in Papudo."

Zacarías liked all the same movies as I did: Earthquake!, The Poseidon Adventure, Westworld . . . And he'd seen movies that I hadn't been able to, like The Exorcist, Rollerball, The Kansas City Bomber, and Cabaret ("a movie every Jew should see"). Maybe he was a bookworm and not a superstar athlete, but he was interested in science, planes, and he'd seen more movies than I had. He seemed like the ideal friend and, at the time, he was exactly that. As was our custom, Zacarías and

I walked downtown from the school to see the five o'clock premiere of *Airport '77* ("Remember, it's '77,' not '1977'").

The best part about *Airport* '77 is the part underwater. Jimmy Stewart's private jet goes down in the Bermuda Triangle after crashing into an oil rig. That sequence is amazing. The reason for the accident is simple: the plane was carrying valuable pieces of art, and a group of thieves wanted to kidnap Stewart and relieve him of the works. But things go badly, and the plane crashes into the sea. There's a large sandbar there, though, and the plane neither explodes nor sinks to the sea floor; it's underwater, still filled with air, and the characters have to escape. But how? Jack Lemmon, who plays the captain, has to figure out a way before the sea creeps in and the plane founders.

"With that much air trapped inside, and assuming the pressure doesn't crack the cabin walls, the plane ought to float to the surface," observed Zacarías.

We both agreed that the fact that *Airport '77* actually opened in Chile in 1977 was something of a test of ultramodernity ("Someday, movies'll open here only two or three weeks after they open in North America, like they do in Puerto Rico"). We liked the movie so much, and since it was still early, we hid out in the theater while they rewound the film and watched it again. The second time seemed even better than the first.

The Deep, USA, 1977, 123 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Peter Yates

STARRING: Nick Nolte, Jacqueline Bisset, Robert Shaw,
Louis Gosset Jr.

SEEN: 1977, Cine Las Condes, Santiago de Chile

According to a book on puberty that I managed to sneak a look at in the school library before they took it away from me lest I got "corrupted," I ought to be growing at least a couple inches per year, but nothing was happening. I was still short, squat, and pudgy. Maybe it was the milk in Chile, or that slightly leavened white bread they call hallulla, which isn't enriched like Wonder Bread. I was stuck at four foot eight. I thought about Remigio Echaurren: short, fat, and hairy. My future didn't look too bright.

I wasn't thrilled about the whole "getting hair in new places" part; didn't understand what it was for. Nor did I understand when I was supposed to be ejaculating. I drank cans and cans of sweetened condensed milk to speed up the process. Whenever I saw Milo, he couldn't stop asking me about it:

"So are you nutting yet? Shit, *huevón*, I'm getting addicted. I love it too much. I'm too sweet. I can't help but jerk off all day. But I bet when you go out with a girl, you won't lay a hand on her."

At McArthur, a professor with a face like a mole and who sweated like a pederast gave us a couple of classes. He sent the girls away, including Viviana Oporto, and took out of his James Bond briefcase a few photos of erect penises, which made Renzo Zunino stumble to the bathroom and lose his morning's breakfast. He then seemed to enjoy going into details that were as explicit as they were unnecessary:

"First you've got to use your finger like this, kids, to see if they're ready."

By the third class, when he had started to tell us about his experiences with one "Aunt Carlina" and "how to tell if a broad has a cock," it was clear to me—just as it had been to Zacarías at the beginning—

that he was wacko and that the only thing we could do was report him to the minister of education, which, of course, we never did. By the end of the brief course, we felt as if we understood even less than the little that we did in the beginning.

But the most confusing thing of all was why my parents had skipped over "the birds and the bees" and everything else I wanted to know about sex but was afraid to ask. Zacarías's father, on the other hand, had a long talk with his son, after which he blessed him in Hebrew and got quite emotional, because now there was another man in the house. I was starting to feel as if, somewhere along the road to maturity, I had broken a secret yet severe law; my growing up would not be welcomed. I just didn't understand. Was it my fault? If my father was hooked on extramarital sex, what trouble could it be for him to toss me a few facts here and there? I couldn't bring myself to broach the subject with Grandpa Teodoro, a man of science, out of fear that he'd cast me out of his world and shut the doors of the engineering school to me.

On December 25, 1977, after celebrating Christmas and smiling appreciatively at all my boring gifts (and why are a kid's gifts always better than a teenager's?), some of my parents' friends came over to spend the afternoon in our pool, which had been up and running for a while now, although since it was constructed without a filter we had to empty and clean it every three weeks. Plus, Grandpa Teodoro insisted that my father keep it filled for protection during an earthquake.

"A strong quake will crack an empty pool."

The idea of hanging out in a pool with a bunch of adults who didn't interest me and some little kids who did nothing but shriek and splash around didn't seem like the most promising of scenarios. But maybe that's what adolescence means: on one hand, it hurt to feel everyone so far away but, on the other hand, I was the one who was most responsible for the alienation. I needed to get out of there, but had neither a companion nor a destination. The only recourse was to go to the movies with Zacarías. I knew he wasn't doing anything, since his family didn't celebrate Christmas, and so I suggested that, since it

was so hot, we go see *The Deep*, which was opening that same day. He said sure, of course.

The Cine Las Condes was about three-quarters full. We sat down to wait for the movie to start, trying not to look at all the fourteen-year-old guys making out with thirteen-year-old girls. Before the house lights went down, we saw Viviana Oporto stand up several rows in front of us. We watched in silence as she made her way to the aisle, picturing her short, shapely, bare legs brushing past the legs of the guys who were lucky enough to be sitting in that row. Once she made it to the aisle she began to walk slowly, almost in slow motion (or, at least, that's how she seemed to us), emerging from the shadowy depths of the theater toward the shimmering lobby scorched by the harsh December sun. Just before she moved out of sight, she noticed us watching her, and smiled at us.

She was sporting a tight baby T-shirt with the Jordache logo between her breasts, and a short pink skirt made out of stretchy terrycloth. We hadn't seen her for about three weeks, but three weeks of summer can transform a woman much more than they can a guy, and these three weeks seemed more like three years. She wasn't just pretty anymore; she was a babe.

Zacarías had been smitten ever since the first day he'd laid eyes on her and, good as he was at math, he offered to help her study. However, after class one day back in his living room, Viviana told him that studying wasn't so important to her. "There are other things I like doing better," she confessed without explaining exactly what those things were, although we figured that they had to do with our gender, but not with us in particular.

"Years from now," Zacarías told me, "she'll realize that men aren't all muscles, good looks, and dance steps. Years from now, when she's broke and divorced, she'll see me on the metro and realize that she made a big mistake."

The lights went down and, just as the opening credits began to scroll across the screen, I replaced the image of her dry T-shirt with that of the wet one that was clinging to the large, erect nipples of Jacqueline Bisset.

"You think the water's cold, or is she just horny?" Zacarías asked me. I didn't know how to respond.

"I bet it's some sort of physical reaction: the cold makes girls' nipples hard and guys' nutsacks shrink."

Jacqueline Bisset swam through the Caribbean depths in that T-shirt and, just as Viviana sat down in her seat, something trapped Bisset's character below the surface. You couldn't tell what it was. Jacqueline, with her scuba tank, her mask, and her wet T-shirt, fought and screamed in the depths of the sea, but instead of being frightened or worrying about the plot, we—or I—could only stare at her nipples.

I barely remember anything else about the movie. There's a lot of ocean and sunken treasures and people who don't want Jacqueline and Nick Nolte to keep diving or to keep the riches that they found while down there. Something like that. The only part of *The Deep* that mattered were the images of Jacqueline Bisset swimming in that T-shirt, and the Donna Summer song in the background, moans and all.

Afterwards we worked our way over so that we could bump into Viviana on our way out, though Zacarías didn't want to, because of the way their study sessions had ended. He claimed that *The Deep* had been adapted from a novel by Peter Benchley, the same guy who wrote *Jaws*, but the two didn't have anything in common. Not even Robert Shaw's presence was worth that much.

"It's a way to derail the viewer and get them to fall into your trap," he said.

Viviana ended up coming over to us and greeted us both with kisses on both cheeks. She said that's how it was done in Spain, and that a cousin of hers harkened from near one of the nudist beaches at Costa del Sol. I instantly got a hard-on, and was sure that Viviana knew it and was looking at it. She was with her mother, who, unlike her daughter, was willowy and ethereal. She seemed very young, wearing white jeans two sizes too small and a thin man's shirt knotted in the front, exposing her smooth, bronzed stomach to the air. Like Jacqueline Bisset, Viviana's mother wasn't wearing a bra, and I couldn't get my mind off the fact that everybody knew it.

"You kids can come by the house and hang out in the pool," she proposed. "I have some pisco sour left over."

I mentioned that we didn't have our bathing suits with us.

"Ay, honey, do you think I've never seen a man in his underwear before?" she laughed, and I thought I was going to faint from blushing so nervously.

These kinds of things just don't happen in real life, I thought. And, in effect, nothing did happen: Zacarías said that we were on our way to something, and that maybe Viviana could call us to go bowling or something more in accordance with our age. He wasn't yet fourteen, but he conducted himself as if he were forty-five. Actually, his mind worked like a father's. On the bus back to my house, he said:

"Now I know why Viviana is the way she is. Now, even more than I want to make out with her, I want to help her."

That night it was very hot, and my TV (I had a black-and-white Antú) was on the blink. I couldn't sleep, and went down to the kitchen to have the leftover punch that my father had mixed for his visitors. As I drank, I thought about Viviana's mother, about Viviana, and about Jacqueline Bisset. I looked out the window and thought about going for a swim (the water was definitely nice and warm), but Betsabé and her daughter were asleep in the room across the way.

I went back to my room, sweating and a bit drunk, took off my Caffarena summer pajamas, and started to touch myself. Right away, my own nipples hardened. I had touched myself before, and played around with my erections until I got bored, but that night was different. I kept sweating, and my heart was pounding so loudly that I covered my chest with a pillow so nobody would hear it. It was as if my body had taken on a life of its own. With each passing instant I felt myself harder and more sensitive, and my mind was on fire—Jacqueline Bisset, Jacqueline Bisset, T-shirts, water, nipples, Viviana's taut, bronzed skin, Jacqueline Bisset, and all of a sudden it was as if they had all hit me, I felt like I'd disappeared, that the current had taken me away, and then, without warning, without being prepared, I felt the need to urinate, but it wasn't urine that came spurting out with surprising force, and since I wasn't ready, since I didn't know what was in store for me, I didn't have any tissue paper or a sock or anything, it shot all over me, warm and thick and very, very wet, and there it was, on me but also on the floor and soaking into the sheets. I panicked; I

was afraid everyone would know, and I wanted to clean up my evidence, but I just couldn't . . . it was as if I were floating there in space, in water, in the Caribbean, down there in The Deep.

I lay there for maybe half an hour, spent, exhausted, trying to recover from what had just happened. Finally I managed to get up and walked to the bathroom in silence, feeling the liquid trickling down my leg. I shut the door and started drinking water. I drank glass after glass, like I did the time I completed the school's physical fitness test. I looked at myself in the mirror. Maybe being a teenager wasn't so bad after all, I thought, and then I surprised myself by breaking out into a big, silly grin.

Carrie, USA, 1976, 98 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Brian De Palma

STARRING: Sissy Spacek, John Travolta, Piper Laurie,

Amy Irving

SEEN: 1978, Papudo, Chile

Zacarías's father worked for CEPAL, and was almost never in the country. His older sister, Ruth, lived in Puerto Rico, where she attended a convent school in Old San Juan, which was exclusively for the wealthy. I only saw her once, and was struck by how thin and beautiful she was. Not at all what I'd expected a sister of Zacarías to be like. I asked her why she lived so far away, and she said:

"Because I couldn't stand my mother's same old shit."

The mother's name was Rebeca, and she was one of those women who, without makeup, seemed like they didn't exist. I never saw her without her immense dark glasses, and she spent all day in bed despite the fact that she had a Cadillac Seville in her driveway, probably one of the only Cadillacs in all of Santiago. As a diplomat, Zacarías's father was entitled to such a car for twelve months, at which time Rebeca would demand that he exchange it for a brand-new one, with 000 on the odometer and in a different color than the one before. Zacarías had been convinced that his mother suffered from depression, but when he overheard her insulting his father, calling him a "coward" and a "failure," drawing each word out like a blade so that it hurt as much as possible, he understood that his father and he were the sick ones, for putting up with her.

Mr. and Mrs. Enisman spent the last couple of weeks of December and the first two weeks of January at the Gran Hotel de Papudo, and so were able to avoid celebrating Hanukkah or the New Year. Zacarías could only go to Papudo in January, since, as he explained to me, "She thinks she needs some time away from me and that I need some time away from her."

Zacarías, therefore, always spent the holidays alone.

"They're the best two weeks of the year," he said. "The nanny always leaves me some special food."

His mother would rent the best room in the hotel and, since it was summer, she would spend less time in bed. She would get up after breakfast, go out for a walk, and after a lunch in which she would dispatch two full bottles of ice-cold white wine, she would cross the dusty plaza and go into the foul Papudo theater. The theater opened its doors every January 1, and showed two movies per night, with the schedule changing daily. The woman started her mornings with the movie listings in the paper, and in two weeks had devoured at least twenty-eight films.

Three days after I discovered that I could sow my own seed and engender offspring, Zacarías invited me to spend a few days in Papudo.

"My father has to leave for Panama, and I'm allowed to go on the thirty-first. Want to come?"

It was the first chance I'd had to go anywhere, actually. My parents weren't speaking to each other, and I really didn't want to be with them to usher in 1978, which, I felt, could be disastrous. We caught a bus at the north depot near the prison and, full of fear and desire, I couldn't take my eyes off the prostitutes who drifted like ships among the crumbling adobe houses.

Once in Papudo, we found out that Zacarías's mother had a headache and wouldn't come out of her room. She ordered a bottle of champagne from room service and sent down an envelope with money for us. We went to the hotel dining room for turkey and shrimp, though with ginger ale instead of champagne.

"I don't ever want to drink alcohol," Zacarías told me. "Kids who drink and do drugs turn out all messed up."

I responded that that could be true, but drinking could also make for a good time.

"Having fun isn't one of my priorities, Beltrán. Making it big is. What about you?"

After our New Year's Eve dinner we went out for a walk around the beach. At midnight, in front of the Pan Duro, we high-fived.

"Feliz año. Hope all your dreams come true."

Then we tried to get into a disco club, but of course we were too young.

"It's just as well; it'll save us the money and the humiliation of dancing."

I was in Papudo for a week with Zacarías, and we never went down to the beach. We slept till noon, then went for a walk, had lunch, played cards, and read old comic books. At 8:30 we would meet his mother for dinner in the hotel dining room. She took advantage of dinnertime to catch up on reading her jet-set magazines. After dessert, we went across the plaza and she bought the movie tickets. Zacarías and I sat one row behind her, to make sure that no one would touch her hair.

I saw a lot of movies that week, including a lot of ones for people twenty-one and older, like *Dirty May and Crazy Larry* and *Zardoz*, though I really wanted to see *The Little Girl Who Lived Down the Lane*, which they were going to show at the end of the month. One that really thrilled, shocked, and scared me was *Carrie*. Especially the shower scene, which starts off like a porn flick but quickly becomes bloody and horrific when Carrie, who's homely and doesn't understand anything about anything, starts to menstruate in the shower. Luckily, the first time a man ejaculates, it's semen and not blood, I thought, relieved. If blood had shot out of my penis instead of semen while I was fantasizing about Jacqueline Bisset, I'm sure I would have gone crazy too.

My heart was pounding as we left the theater, and as we walked through the dark plaza, I couldn't stop picturing Carrie jumping out at me from behind a tree. Zacarías's mother walked in silence, and I wondered if she was bothered by the fact that she looked so much like Carrie's mother. The next morning, I spent longer than usual in the shower, remembering—of course—the shower scene. Zacarías banged on the door and called,

"I hope you're not in there practicing the vice of Onan."

Actually, I had been thinking about it, but hadn't done so precisely because he was right there, outside the door.

"You've gotta be able to control yourself. If you can't do that, you'll be left with nothing."

I yelled back at him to stop hassling me, and started to masturbate as quickly as I could. When I didn't see so much as a drop of semen, I shut off the water and dried off.

That afternoon I went to the beach without Zacarías and, while not a single girl looked my way, at least I could go back to Santiago with a little sun in my face and a little sand in my trunks.

Rollercoaster, USA, 1977, 119 mins.

DIRECTED BY: James Goldstone

STARRING: George Segal, Richard Widmark,

Timothy Bottoms

SEEN: 1978, Cine Lido, Santiago de Chile

I spent the afternoon of my fourteenth birthday floating around the pool on an inflatable chair. Zacarías called to wish me a happy one and to see what I thought about having a party.

"With who?" I asked. "I'm not exactly the most popular guy in school."

"Right . . . I knew there was a reason you hung out with me."

He suggested we go to the movies. I said perfect, I'd call him later. My mother came home from the office and, before going up to her room to cry, she gave me a rugby shirt from Palta that was a bit too big for me.

Betsabé was on vacation in Cuzco, staying in a convent with some friends of her sister Carmelita. Manuela, for a change, wasn't home; she was in Pucón with some of her friends from Saint Luke's. As a birthday present, she sent me a photo of Federica Montt in an all-red bathing suit sunning herself on the volcanic sand beach surrounding Lake Villarica. On one side of her I could make out a leg covered in blond hairs and realized that on that night, February 14, Valentine's Day, she had someone to go with.

In record time, my sister had transformed not just into a Chilean but also into a faithful representative of the Saint Luke's morality. I could no longer relate to her. Those who assimilate themselves into a new world tend to forget what the world that they came from was ever like. Manuela also took full advantage of her small but notorious scar. "Nobody'll ever forget me," she told us once, and she was right. Without the scar, she would have been just another girl at the party, just another one of the nicely proportioned and attractive girls that Saint Luke's seemed to mass-produce. But the Great Dane's bite had

given her face a hallmark, something particular and unforgettable, relegating adjectives like "pretty," "lovely," or "beautiful" to her body. In the summer, when skin began to tan, her scar came just a bit more into relief, and it was just at that time of year that everyone looked at her for the first time and was mesmerized by her imperfect beauty.

That same day, Grandpa Teodoro came over to say happy birthday and give me a globe with a light inside that we couldn't switch on because it needed a new transformer and we weren't about to take apart the refrigerator to get one. My father came out and, as he didn't have much to talk about with my grandfather, they both just looked at their shoes for a while and made small talk about the forest fires in the Novena Región until my grandfather went home. I was worried about the fact that my father had spent an entire day in jail the week before because of some bad checks, but fortunately neither of them brought up the subject, though I'm sure that it was all either of them could think about.

The problem with the fraud and the checks wasn't my father's fault—at least not entirely—but rather that of a few of his associates, especially one social climber by the name of Alex Zampelli, who tried to hide his modest origins by traveling everywhere first class and by collecting things he couldn't afford. But in the long run it didn't matter: everything was unraveling bit by bit, and now it was just a matter of time. The denouement was clear: Zampelli and the others would survive, and maybe even the exportation business itself. The ones who weren't going to make it were us. My father, I suspected, was about to become homeless. He was marking the Lan and Braniff ads with his Parker pencil.

"Remember to keep that pool filled," my grandfather said on his way out the door.

I watched from the balcony as he waved to all the neighbors on his way by, and at that moment I realized that this was his neighborhood and we had pushed him out of it.

"Is it true that today's your birthday?" asked my father.

"Yes," I said.

He took a few bills out of his wallet and handed them to me.

- "Is this enough?"
- "For what?"
- "For whatever you want."
- "I don't want anything."
- "There's always something to get. Don't bust my balls."
- "Then I want to go see *Rollercoaster*. It's playing downtown at the Lido, in Sensurround."

My father looked at his watch and nodded.

- "And I want to invite someone."
- "Who?"
- "Zacarías Enisman?"
- "Does it have to be him?"
- "I don't have any other friends."

My father looked at me with disdain and even a touch of fatigue.

- "Can I?"
- "Can you what?"
- "Invite him?"
- "Fine, but only if he doesn't talk too much."

Then he went over to my grandfather's old desk to make a call, and almost knocked my globe onto the floor.

Zacarías came over freshly showered; he was wearing a light-blue shirt buttoned all the way up, and nice slacks. Before getting in, he took a good long look at the BMW and even walked around it once, as if he were a city inspector from the department of transportation.

"What happened, Uncle Soler? Did you hit something or did something hit you? From the look of the dents, I'd say you were stationary at the time."

My father didn't respond.

At the theater, while my father was in the bathroom, Zacarías told me he was worried:

"I think your dad's taking sedatives. I saw a bottle of Valium in the glove compartment. He shouldn't be driving if he's on medication, just like with alcohol. Is he seeing a doctor? Are those pills prescribed?"

Rollercoaster was about a divorced, ill-tempered detective with a ruined life (George Segal) who is trying to get along with his teenage

daughter while also trying to find and arrest a psychopath (Timothy Bottoms) who's placing bombs on the country's most popular roller coasters. Like in *Jaws*, neither the park owners nor the local authorities want to cause alarm or close down the rides right in the middle of the summer tourist season. Every time a camera pans over some roller coaster, the Sensurround starts up with its usual tricks. It created a momentary sense of riding up in the car, and then shooting down and back up and then down again and into a loop-de-loop, the sensation so powerful that it made both Zacarías and me seasick.

"Remember Pacific Ocean Park?" asked my father. "In Santa Monica, near the ocean? I took you on a roller coaster there once, and you wouldn't stop screaming."

He kept looking back behind us throughout the entire movie. Finally he said:

"You boys wait here for me, or at the exit. I've got to take care of something, but I'll be back."

Zacarías and I turned around, and in the darkness we could just make out the silhouette of a long-haired woman standing at the top of the aisle. When my father went up to her, she kissed him on the mouth and ran her fingers through his hair.

"Who's that?" asked Zacarías.

"Look," I said, pointing to the screen. "That's Magic Mountain; it's only about half an hour from where I used to live."

"Beltrán, why is your dad with another woman at the theater? Do you know her?"

I told him he hadn't seen a thing; that he was confused. Zacarías got up from his seat and headed for the exit. I kept watching the movie, or at least I tried to with all my strength, but I couldn't. Finally I got up before the movie ended—before they caught Timothy Bottoms—and left too. Zacarías was in the lobby peering through one of the theater's big windows.

"This doesn't look good at all. They went over to the Cine Rex, bought something at a kiosk—cigarettes, I think—and then got in the car."

The downtown area was nearly empty, by virtue of the time and

the fact that it was summer. The BMW was parked half a block from the theater, on Huérfanos, but I couldn't make anything out.

"I got up and walked right past them. I'm not going to tell you what I saw."

"I don't want to know," I replied.

"You ought to, Beltrán. You have a sister to think about. If your dad runs off with this woman, you're the one who will have to take charge. You ought to tell your mom . . . No, better talk to him first. If you want, I'll go with you. Make him see that he's making a big mistake. Your mother is an extraordinary woman. I don't know how your father could be unfaithful . . ."

At this, I grabbed Zacarías by the shirt and shook him so hard that several of the buttons popped off and flew over my head.

"What do you know, you fucking *huevón*? You've never been married, you've never been laid . . . hell, you've never even kissed anybody. Just shut up, you nosy prick. What do you want me to do, call the cops? There's nothing I can do about it."

"There's always something that can be done," he said before walking out of the theater.

I followed him out. A cool breeze swept in down from Santa Lucía hill, scattering the sultry air of the street, thick with the smells of freshly fried potatoes.

"I know you don't believe it, but I do know what I'm talking about. Now's your chance. If you're not going to do it, then I will. Let's talk to the both of them. I don't think she'll feel so good if she knows that she's putting a marriage in jeopardy."

"Huevón," I said. "Stop talking like you're a grown-up. Where do you get these words from? Just cut it out. Come on, it's fine, let's just get a bus and go. Forget about it."

My father flashed the lights at us, but we were rooted there, mute and paralyzed. We heard a door open and saw my father get out of the car and start walking over toward us. Without his noticing, the woman got out of the car as well and lit a cigarette to wait. Though it was dark, I could see that she was attractive, and not wearing a bra under her white tank top.

"Is it already over?" asked my father.

"Yeah," I said, "and it was good too. Especially the ending."

"No," interrupted Zacarías. "I mean, yes, the movie was good, but your attitude hasn't exactly brought us together. We've got to go. Is something wrong? Maybe we can help you with it. You seem nervous."

"Huh?" asked my father.

From the look on his face I could tell that he'd rather Zacarías didn't exist and hadn't said anything. "Look, Beltrán, I have to . . . I've got to straighten out something at the office. . . . You know how things there haven't been very . . . Why don't you take a taxi, drop off your friend, and then head on home?"

"Sure," I said. "No problem."

"Excuse me, Uncle Soler, but I don't think we deserve to be treated like this. We may be young, but we're not blind. Why don't you introduce us to the lady?"

"I don't have to introduce you to anybody, you fucking asshole."

"Forgive me, I know that it's a delicate issue, but do you really understand what you're doing here? I'm not sure you do. Do you realize how it's affecting your son? This whole thing about going to see your—"

All of a sudden my father grabbed him with two hands and tossed him up and backwards through the air. Zacarías flew through the big front window of the theater right where a poster for *Rollercoaster* was plastered. The window exploded in hundreds of thousands of shards, and the deafening waves of Sensurround sound poured out into the street as if a bomb had gone off. For a fleeting moment, I had the vague and distant impression that it was snowing. Zacarías fell on the other side, with blood spurting from both arms, and pieces of glass in his hair, twinkling under the lights. If the poster hadn't been hanging in that exact spot, there was a good chance, according to the doctor, that a piece of glass could have slit his throat. I never found out the name of the woman my father was with; I only know that she was younger and prettier than I had ever imagined, and that it was because of her and the first aid that she provided that Zacarías survived.

In the end, my mother spoke with Zacarías's father, and there were no accusations or lawsuits. My father paid through the nose to cover the cost of replacing the theater's window and the bills at the Clínica Santa María. *Rollercoaster* was the last movie I ever saw with Zacarías Enisman. It was also the last movie that I would ever see with my father.

Close Encounters of the Third Kind, USA, 1977,
132 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Steven Spielberg

STARRING: Richard Dreyfuss, François Truffaut,
Melinda Dillon

SEEN: 1978, Cine Las Condes, Santiago de Chile

Nineteen seventy-eight was the year of Star Wars, Saturday Night Fever, Grease, The Spy Who Loved Me, and Flatfoot with Bud Spencer and Terence Hill. I wanted to see them all, and waited anxiously for the chance to do so. And I don't know exactly why—maybe it had to do with everything that happened—but I never did get to see them. At times I felt that everyone else had, and that I was the only one who couldn't offer opinions on them. They were always cropping up in casual conversation, crossword puzzles, and quiz shows. Sometimes I still think I'd like to rent one and watch it (if I had a VCR, of course), but then I always realize that certain films are only fun when you're a certain age, and that past that age they lose their aggregate value and reveal themselves for what they are: mediocre films made for teenagers.

A lot of people insist that *Star Wars* was the defining cinematic moment of their lives but—with the exception of Zacarías Enisman, who that year, with his arms full of scars, completed his first semester at the Instituto Hebreo—the cinematic event that everyone in South America wanted to be a part of was *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

My mother got four advance tickets for the Sunday matinee premiere. It was July, during winter vacation, and Manquehue Hill was blanketed in snow up to the Saint Luke athletic fields. She put the tickets in an envelope labeled "3er Tipo" and set it next to the phone. Betsabé, so as not to be left out, decided to take Olimpia to see it that same day, though downtown at the Windsor.

I spent so little time in the house that year that the details have become fuzzy. I know that my father ended his relationship with his business partners and ended up unemployed; he had almost gone to

jail again, but in the end it was Alex Zampelli who ended up in prison, at Capuchinos, with his picture on the front page of *La Tercera*. One night my father left the BMW outside, and it was completely ransacked: stones were thrown through every window, the air hoses were cut, and shit was smeared all over the seats.

Also that year, I was allowed—because I was a gringo—to hang out with Julio Facusse's group. Julio was the hero of the McArthur school. I started taking afternoon classes and went out after it was already dark out, meeting up with a half dozen or so other guys and leaving from the Facusse house near the Estadio Nacional. For the two years during which I was more or less a member of this closed circle, I don't think I ever got back to my own house before eleven at night. I'd sleep late in the mornings, not getting up until after everyone else had already left, telling myself that it was the best way to avoid getting involved in everything I knew was going on.

My father disappeared two days before the movie opened. Manuela asked where he was.

"I think he went to the beach," our mother told us. "He had to think."

Manuela asked if he'd gone by himself.

"Your father can never be alone."

At the theater, the excitement was palpable. We just couldn't stand the suspense. All the children were asking how much longer it was until it would begin. In the lobby we bumped into Aunt Luisa, Uncle Choclo, and my cousins. Milo was there with his girlfriend, an Andover girl with curly blond hair who blinked more than necessary. Luisa asked about "Juan," and my mother answered:

"I guess he's at the beach."

"Ah," Luisa said. "Now I understand."

"No, Luisa, you understand absolutely nothing."

Cine Las Condes was completely packed, from the top row of the balcony down to the first row in front of the screen. The only empty seat in the whole theater was my father's. Once the aliens kidnapped the little boy who thought they were "toys," I gave up hope that he would show up after all. In the end, Richard Dreyfuss goes up to

the mother ship, abandoning his children and wife to go off into outer space.

The whole theater cheered, but I couldn't bring myself to applaud. "We Are Not Alone," read the tag line, but we indeed were. *Close Encounters* had me believing in UFOs but not in families.

My father left—abandoned us—on August 5, 1978, the same night that Saturday Night Fever opened. We all went to the airport, along with some friends of my parents who to this day still don't understand why they were invited to be a part of something so private. Maybe my father invited them in order to distance himself from us. And the strange thing is that it wasn't a tragic farewell at all; in fact, it wasn't even a farewell. My father told my mother that he was just going for a couple of months to work, save up some money, and recuperate. He didn't say anything to us; that was for my mother to do. Fathers aren't made for speaking with their kids, but rather for sending messages. He said that he'd be back, that he'd send for us.

I remember the darkness of the road on the way home. Nobody said a word. Every so often my mother would throw on the high beams to light up the road ahead, and I looked out through the window to see if maybe I could have an encounter of the first kind.

Julio comienza en Julio, Chile, 1977, 120 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Silvio Caiozzi

STARRING: Juan Cristobál Meza, Felipe Rabat,

Schlomit Baytelman

SEEN: 1979, Cine Continental, Santiago de Chile

My father's departure was enough to cause me to start growing. In less than two years, I shot up to five foot eight, and while I wasn't exactly a basketball star, I was definitely the tallest kid at a school made up almost entirely of shorties. The other thing that afflicted me was a flood of testosterone: I started to store up so much fluid that I felt the imperious need to purge it every six hours or so. I jerked off so much that I had to go to the Clínica Alemana (luckily, the school provided health insurance) to have my foreskin treated. I had given myself a small sore from so much masturbation, probably from a fingernail. Instead of trying to abstain for a while, I tried to cure myself with a bit of Brut cologne that my father had left behind in his rush to leave (he also had left behind an impressive collection of Swedish and German pornography that I found in a rusty Coleman cooler). Twelve hours after applying the cologne, I went back to my little vice while watching What's Up Pussycat on TV.

As the days went on, the burning wound, hidden in a fold of skin, got bigger and became infected. I couldn't even stand wearing underwear. I couldn't walk. Julio Facusse, who wasn't doing anything else at the time, took me to the clinic in a taxi. I was embarrassed to no end. Luckily, the doctor, who wasn't very old and surely still masturbated himself, treated me and promised not to say anything to my mother, though he did forbid me from touching myself for three weeks, and told me to wrap a plastic bag around my penis when I showered.

Julio started his first semester just as Zacarías Enisman was finishing. Julio hated studying; he liked cumbias, gold chains, and playing videogames, and the knot in his tie was the size of an empanada. He

had money and the tendency to spend it (his parents owned several gas stations in the Sexta Región), and he had the gift of being able to talk for hours about his sexual experiences without seeming the least bit ostentatious. He was a year and a bit older than the rest of the class, and had to shave every day; he even got a five-o'clock shadow. He had a nose like a camel, very dark skin, and strikingly light eyes that caught the attention of Viviana Oporto and the rest of the girls in school. Julio, however, wasn't interested in going steady, meeting girls' mothers, or going to "chick flicks." He wanted to bang prostitutes, secretaries, nurses, and his mother's friends.

"Between a girl from school who won't do anything, and a good jerk-off, I'll go with my pal the palm."

He was into going to see *Julio comienza en Julio* not because it was Chilean or because it had won the CineUC prize that was given to the kind of artistic films that my grandmother liked, but because we all thought it looked hot and we were horny.

"I hope I can get it up at least twice during the movie," he said as our group, which numbered about eight, went into the theater, handing our tickets over to the usher.

The title *Julio comienza en Julio* masterfully summed up the movie's theme. A kid is about to turn fifteen, and his father takes him—of course—to lose his virginity. We didn't know what else was supposed to happen, but if that much did, we'd be happy. All of us were fifteen, and the majority were technically virgins. We couldn't hide from the publicity campaign, the photo of a stark-naked Schlomit Baytelman that ran in *La Tercera*, or the tag line that appeared in the paper: "The Best Gift for a Man Is a Woman."

From the previews, we knew that the film was in black-and-white (actually, it was in sepia) and that it was set in olden times and that all the characters were rural sorts, and that worried us a bit. But I had already jerked off to Schlomit Baytelman twice, thinking about what it would be like to lose my virginity to her, and all that I cared about was seeing her in her entirety.

Young Julio doesn't have a mother and lives in a big old country house sometime around the turn of the century. I'm not sure when ex-

actly, but there are no lights, televisions, or anything. His father is Don Julio, and the first time you lay eyes on him, you know he's a loathsome type, someone who thinks he can do whatever he wants. The conclusion lays it all out, and left us all nicely shocked. Julio starts the film as a virgin, but doesn't do badly at all with Schlomit, who plays the prostitute, though she doesn't have freaky vibes like the other prostitutes that Julio Facusse and I had talked to without daring to solicit.

Marjorie, Julio Facusse's grandfather's nurse, looked a bit like Schlomit. For a couple of Trencito candy bars or a bottle of Monix perfume or an Olivia Newton-John tape, she'd give you a hand job, and sometimes a blow job, and tell stories about her life in Cauquenes. Sometimes—and this was the bad part—when she'd talk about her hometown and her soccer-player boyfriends, she'd start to cry, which made me feel a bit sorry because I realized that what she did for us wasn't out of desire, like Julio said, but because she was lonely and just wanted company. Marjorie, who had a very clear complexion and couldn't have been more than twenty, refused to sleep with Julio or his four brothers or me or any of his other friends because she was a virgin and wanted to stay that way until someone proposed marriage to her. I never knew if this was really true or not. From the moment she was hired, Julio's mother made it clear that one of her duties was to "soothe" the old man, who was confined to his bed in his own little house across the patio.

Marjorie's room was plastered with posters of soccer players and smelled of patchouli and old sheets. She had us come in one at a time. That was usually on Saturdays, but sometimes we went over on Fridays. She always had *Concierto Discotheque* on the stereo. We'd go over to Julio's house early and hang out in the living room watching color TV while snacking on stuffed grape leaves and drinking his father's whiskey. There we each waited our turn in Marjorie's room. "Hey, you up for something?" was what you had to say. She always wore her white uniform, and you could see her underwear underneath. She made you get undressed, but would turn around while you did it. Then you'd stretch out on the bed while she sat on the rug next to it

and applied some aloe vera, which was always really cold. As she "soothed" you she would hum along to unknown songs.

"You're done, kiddo. Too bad, but now you're going to feel much better," she said always and to everyone, and then cleaned us up with tissues as if we were babies.

"You get hard faster but you also finish faster than Don Nezar," she once said without looking me in the eyes.

She almost never let us kiss or touch her, though she did once let me lick her nipples because she wanted me to try a new, flavored lip gloss she'd applied to them.

"You think my boyfriend will like it? Down south they don't have these kinds of things."

I said yes, that if I had a girlfriend who tasted like ripe watermelon, I'd marry her instantly. Players, USA, 1979, 120 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Anthony Harvey

STARRING: Ali MacGraw, Dean Paul Martin,

Maximilian Schell

SEEN: 1979, Cine Providencia, Santiago de Chile

In 1974, when we were still in Chile on vacation, we accompanied my mother to a house situated in front of a plaza sunk down into the ground. The house was very hot on account of the many stoves giving off smells of orange peels and eucalyptus leaves. The windows looking out over the patio were so covered in condensation that I thought it was raining. A friend of my mother's named Asunción del Solar lived there, but everyone called her Titi. Titi was married to one Rafael Celis, a freckled man who always wore white shorts, even in the winter. He was a tennis coach who owned a ranch that had both clay and cement courts as well as a square, filterless swimming pool.

Aunt Titi had three children: two girls who were older than me, and a son who was more or less my age. Renato, the son, had three pet tortoises and a room in the attic, which I found absolutely fascinating. We never became friends, since we didn't see each other much after that, but I always thought that someone with that many tortoises had to be a good enough guy. Renato's father was training him to become a tennis champion; everyone hoped he would be the next Jaime Fillol, but in the end, after being under so much pressure, he ended up becoming little more than a scrub.

I saw Titi and her family only twice, but those two times were enough for me to have never forgotten them. The first time was there at the house, and the other was at the departure of Almac de Pedro de Valdivia, around 1977. My grandfather had given me money, I remember, to buy a volume of the *Encyclopedia Salvat*. We didn't even get out of the car when we saw them go by.

"Look," said my mother. "How awful. There goes Titi del Solar and her children. Dear God, that woman's gone through some suffering." Titi didn't look then like she had before, and her children didn't either. They were bigger, of course, but more run-down and beat-up as well. I was surprised at how fat and dejected Renato looked, since their grocery cart didn't have a thing in it.

"After all they've been through, she ended up poor as a rat."

My mother went on to describe Titi and her children's life to us. It wasn't a very long or original tale: they were separated, they no longer lived in the house by the sunken plaza, and the tennis coach went off somewhere with the mother of a kid who couldn't get the ball over the net.

"The children took it badly," she went on. "So badly that their health suffered, and that ended up ruining Titi's life."

Renato had to repeat a year of school, and continued on down the road to obesity, never playing tennis again because of a sort of psychosomatic arthritis. The oldest daughter was wetting the bed.

"She wets herself at night, and even in school at times. She can't even go to parties."

I asked what had happened to the other daughter.

"She attempted suicide. Slit her wrists in a bathtub. Now she's being counseled by a psychiatrist. How that poor woman's life was ruined..."

We never again talked about the Celis del Solar family, but we were all clear on the significance of what we'd heard: in case of divorce, don't react like psychotics. The potential end of our family did not necessarily mean the end of each one of us individually.

"There's something called 'dignity,' and those people don't have it. A seventeen-year-old girl can't go around pissing herself just because her father ran off with a whore."

Two years later, the Soler Niemeyer family was in a similar situation, though without the "psychotic displays." It hadn't been easy, but, on the other hand, it hadn't been overly complicated either. At least, not how I would have imagined it to be. My mother chose to put her trust in us and let us do what we wanted. Betsabé didn't argue when people stopped showing up for meals; instead, she left, taking with her three cases of olive oil that she had kept hidden in the basement as if they were wine.

My father didn't send money because, according to the message he did send, he was "without a cent." First he had to build himself back up, start over from scratch. Bit by bit, we became poor. In my mother's eyes, we were well on the way to being destitute. She flirted with the idea of taking us kids out of school, because Manuela couldn't stand it that her whole class had laughed at her when they warned her she was delinquent in her payments. I begged her not to. I spoke with my grandfather and Uncle Choclo, and each took charge of the payments, which had already been reduced because of the "relinquishment of ownership of home" clause. I gathered that our income had taken a big hit, but the greater concern was that my mother's physical and mental strength was waning as well. We could get by on less than what we were used to, of course, but we also had to deal with how different and sensitive our mother had become. Sometimes she would break down and cry at the dinner table or at a red light. Manuela once asked her if she missed Dad.

"I wish it were that, but I was the one who asked him to leave."

After Bestabé left, my mother hired a part-time housekeeper named Zenobia, but she lasted for only three days because she talked to herself and took baths while listening to "Residencial La Pichanga" on the radio. So we moved on to life without a housekeeper, like we did in California, except that there my mother didn't work but here she did, and did a lot. The BMW went after a few months but, because it was dented, we got less than we'd hoped for it. With the money we got my mother bought a Fiat 147 and paid off a few debts. She probably could have haggled for a better deal, but now I think she did it not for the money but just to get the damn thing out of our lives.

I was never sure if my mother closed up the house on Doctor Ignacio Echaurren Arismendi Street just to save money or because she needed the support of her parents. The odd, inexplicable thing is that instead of asking my grandparents to move back into their original home, she decided just to close up the big old house. So we took what we could and moved into my grandparents' apartment. There was just one problem: we couldn't all fit, and so my mother divided up what was left of our family. Manuela (who got the good end of the deal) went to live with Aunt Chilaca, while my mother and I stayed with

the grandparents: she set up in my grandmother's sewing room while I was dumped in the shoddy little service room off the kitchen.

Their apartment looked out over Providencia Avenue, and the street was extremely quiet at night, for in those days there was no Providence, just the hole that would someday be the metro. I watched from the balcony as, day after day, they excavated the earth and later went about constructing the tunnel. To get from one side of the site to the other, you had to cross one of these narrow hanging bridges. Near there, on the other side of the immense ravine, was the Cine Providencia, which my grandfather still called "Marconi," its original name.

During the months that we all lived together there on Providencia, I started to go to that theater often, even at night and when I was alone. I walked the four blocks along the edge of the excavation, through some tight walkways that they left between the buildings and the gaping hole. I was a bit afraid at night because the alleys seemed just like the ones in cop movies, but I never saw anybody, probably because it was so complicated to get to that street that your average criminal wouldn't even bother.

I got off the bus coming back from Julio Facusse's house, walked to the Providencia, and bought a ticket to the ten o'clock show. I'd told my mother that I was studying and would be fine.

"I can't be both mother and father at the same time," she told me once. "You know what you have to do; you're fifteen now."

I saw many unimportant movies that year, and I almost always saw them in a theater that was as empty as it was cold. Before going in, I'd take out my scarf and gloves and ready myself for the show. The theater was so isolated that the only way to get to it was by walking. Since I was a good customer, the ticket taker let me in to whatever I wanted to see, although they almost never showed a twenty-one-and-over movie like *Tentación prohibida*, with Nastassja Kinski; just about every-thing I saw that summer was fourteen-and-over.

One cold, cloudy, and drizzly Tuesday, I walked by the theater and saw the ads for *Players*. I had no idea what it was about, but once I looked at the posters and saw that it was about tennis, I decided to skip

it and go home to bed. Then I saw Renato Celis. If the last time I saw him he was big, this time he was just plain fat. So much so that the bored employees were standing there watching him, dumbstruck. I bought my ticket and went in: other than a lone retired man, the place was completely empty.

I don't remember much about the movie because it wasn't about much: a blond tennis star travels the world, competing, winning, losing, and winning. Ali MacGraw is older but in love with the player, and loans him money or some such thing. What I do remember—indeed, what I still can't forget—is how Renato Celis cried quietly throughout while eating Negritas one after another. The sound of his sobbing coupled with the Negritas crunching between his teeth filled the room. The movie was neither sad nor good, but it was about tennis and about coaches and about his relationship with his father. As I watched *Players*, I realized that the movies that really speak to you are the ones that are really about yourself. I left the theater. I didn't want to see Renato Celis's tear-stained face and, above all, I didn't want him to see mine.

The China Syndrome, USA, 1979, 122 mins.

DIRECTED BY: James Bridges

STARRING: Jane Fonda, Jack Lemmon, Michael Douglas,

Wilford Brimley

SEEN: 1979, Cine Ducal, Santiago de Chile

Some people think that we fall out of touch with old friends or lovers or colleagues or relatives because they no longer have much in common with us. But that's not it. We fall out of touch—we avoid them—because they remind us of a time that we have no desire to remember.

Nobody wanted to go downtown with me to see *The China Syndrome*.

"I can't stand that scientific crap," Julio Facusse told me over the phone.

The film really struck me and took me back to my seismic youth and my interests in geology and plate tectonics. I regret not having gone with Grandpa Teodoro, but at that age it's often better to go to the movies alone rather than with your grandfather. Plus—and contrary to what I'd have thought—for those eight months when we lived in the same apartment, we moved apart more than we came together. My grandfather might have loved his grandkids, but he detested teenagers.

Anyway, I promised myself that I'd call him. I couldn't stop thinking about him when Jack Lemmon looked at his coffee cup and realized that the liquid was vibrating: immediately his expression changes and you can almost taste the terror sweeping through him. Only my grandfather could enjoy the premise of *The China Syndrome*: if the core of a nuclear reactor overheats, the free energy released would be enough to bore a hole clear through the earth all the way to China.

The theater was practically empty, and the Ducal management had decided to only open the balcony and not let anyone sit in the lower level. On my way out, I bumped into Zacarías Enisman, whom I hadn't seen since the *Rollercoaster* incident over a year and a half ago. He was

there with a girl named Samantha, who had tears in her eyes. I tried avoiding him by not saying hello, but it didn't work. He saw me before I could get away with it.

"Is that your girlfriend?" I asked him when she walked away.

"She thinks she's in love with me, but she's only fourteen and has a lot of baggage. All girls that age fall in a sort of terminal love. Anyway, be careful, Beltrán, with girls without fathers or whose brothers have killed themselves. They're very vulnerable, and it's easy to think that you can save them. Trust me: I know what I'm talking about."

We walked over to where the new movie posters were hung and looked at the one for *The Concorde: Airport '79*

"Plus, she's not a girl from the colony, so she doesn't have a chance with me. I just couldn't bring that kind of suffering to my father. He's already suffered enough. It's my responsibility to marry someone from the circle. Rebelliousness doesn't get you anywhere."

Zacarías hadn't changed at all; on the contrary, with every passing day he seemed to have a clearer and clearer idea of which roads to take to avoid all possible suffering in life. Enisman, I was sure, would have an extremely mediocre life, if a peaceful one. He'd been born with the benediction of accepting and amassing what little happened to fall into his lap. Zacarías wanted less; I, on the other hand, wanted something more.

"How's your new school?" I asked to break the silence.

"I have to study triple. But the challenge is nice."

Before heading back out into the street, he turned to me and said, "You're not responsible for what happened. You never wanted to be my friend, it's just that neither of us had anybody else. I forgive you, you can continue on down your own path in life in freedom. Your mother and your sister are going to need you. I hope you realize just how important that is."

The Swarm, USA, 1978, 116 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Irwin Allen

STARRING: Michael Caine, Katharine Ross,

Olivia de Havilland

SEEN: 1979, Multicine de Vitacura, Santiago de Chile

I saw *The Swarm* in the Multicine de Vitacura's green room on the night of December 25, 1979. I went with Julio Facusse and Kenzo Nobutami after spending all day at the Syria Club pool. In front of the shopping center's skating rink, we bumped into Viviana Oporto (Julio had decided to give her a chance) and two of her friends who weren't in school. They were sisters as well as synchronized swimmers, they smelled of fresh chlorine, and their eyes were as red as rabbits' from being underwater so much. I liked them right off the bat, and when they told me that they'd grown up in Chicago, where their parents were studying economics, I knew that we were kindred spirits and started chatting with them in English, something that understandably bothered Kenzo and Julio.

Besides the usual problems of having no house, no father, and no money, the truth was that things weren't all bad. I was popular, tall, and had a gang of friends. My grades weren't much to write home about, but I knew how to dance, and my accent had become indistinguishable from that of a local. I tried to think about what Zacarías had said to me, but I couldn't quite grasp the concept of responsibility. This was my time, and I didn't want anyone to take it away from me.

Julio's grandfather, Don Nezar, had passed away over the winter, and so Marjorie had returned to Cauquenes or perhaps moved on to the home of another old man who needed company. Anyway, my technical virginity was by then a thing of the past. It had been pleasantly and unexpectedly resolved during one of the alcoholic Fiestas Patrias in Papudo, where I had gone to spend a few days at the Facusses' house. Being in Julio's posse made things easy for me. I benefited from his crumbs, which was by no means a small thing.

Maybe for the people at Saint Luke's—starting with Manuela—

Julio Facusse was "racy and vulgar." His affinity for dressing like Tony Manero surely provoked a bit of unconscious shame, but at school and in the Grecia-Bustamante neighborhood, Julio was the undisputed king. Julio understood that it was women who were after the men, and the hard part, he said, was not in seducing them but rather in finding a way to escape once you felt yourself becoming trapped. Julio made us understand that it wasn't the muscles in your arms or the lines of your face that were important; it was your sense of self-confidence and, above all, your desires.

"If they sense you've got the hots for them, they won't go near you, but if you can manage to make them think you really don't care, they'll be breaking down your door."

In front of the arcade, on the way to the theater, we ran into my sister, whom I'd been seeing less and less of now that she lived with Aunt Chilaca.

"Hey, Julio. This is a surprise . . . what are you doing around here?" Julio didn't respond and instead moved aside with the two sisters and Kenzo. Viviana looked at my sister and immediately I realized that she hated her, and was going to be sleeping with Julio that night.

"Who are they?" Manuela asked me in a disparaging tone.

"Friends."

"Ah. Seems like the whole world's going to be there," she said, changing the subject.

She told me that Aunt Nora Brynner ("She divorced Yul and the poor guy is remarried but now sick with cancer") was then in Chile on vacation, as was our cousin Natacha.

"She sure is regal, holy shit."

Manuela was with José Covarrubias, a guy from school who at one time was our friend, but just when Julio decided that he wasn't worth it, that he didn't really add anything to the group or "pull any chicks who're worth a damn," José Covarrubias, whom I defended as being dumb but kind, fell for my sister. The complicating factor is that she, in turn, was crazy about him. And he'd just been expelled from school for bad grades (and being kicked out of McArthur really took some doing).

Also, Covarrubias possessed a certain fame thanks to the size of his

penis. Kids from all the classes would hang out in the locker room just to see him come out of the shower. It was no coincidence that his nickname was "Long John." The idea that my sister was hanging out (and surely sleeping) with a guy called Long John didn't exactly thrill me, but—despite what Zacarías Enisman said—I wasn't her father, and if I enjoyed having a good time, far be it from me to tell her not to as well.

"Are you taking care of yourself?" I whispered in her ear.

"Ay, huevón, what do you think, that I'm some sort of idiot?" Then she said, "I invited some friends from school. I hear the movie's terrible, but we're going to check it out anyway. You guys should come too. Better than hanging out at home, anyway."

Just then my cousin Isidora showed up, looking even more stunning than I remembered her. She was hand in hand (or hand in stump) with Orlando, her exceedingly tall boyfriend from Pirque who was considered something of a hick.

"After the show I told everyone that we'd meet them at El Gato Viudo. What do you think?"

Julio came up to me and said that the place stank, that why were we talking to these people, and that he wasn't about to go to some local yokel joint full of mama's boys.

"We should've gone to see that lame movie at the Rex. The only swarm here is the one of all your uppity relatives."

He and I went up to the ticket window just to get away from the group. Maybe Julio was right; they were self-absorbed, they were rich, and they had known nothing but happiness.

We just barely got seats. I found a couple down in the second row, separated from the rest of the group, and asked one of the sisters—Mariela—if she'd like to sit with me.

"We'll have to sit apart from the group."

I looked her straight in the eye and then lowered my gaze—just as Julio had taught me—before directing it off again at some other girl.

All this was a façade, a routine we had practiced once over at Julio's house. The unexpected part, however, was that this other girl whom I looked at just to rile my "prey" was none other than Federica Montt in

a green sundress. And the impressive thing, which wasn't at all part of Julio's plan, was that she looked—and smiled—back at me.

"Hi," she said. "I don't know if you remember me; I'm one of Manuela's friends."

"Yeah, I remember."

Just then Milo appeared, put his arm around her waist, and kissed her on the lips.

"You didn't tell me you knew my nerd of a cousin!"

"Yeah, for years. We were on a plane together."

Tom Sawyer, USA, 1973, 104 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Don Taylor

STARRING: Johnny Whitaker, Jodie Foster,

Warren Oates, Jeff East

SEEN: 1980, Channel 13, Santiago de Chile

I spent the night the '80s began with Federica Montt. We were at the same party, and, for me, that was enough. According to Milo, Federica was a "frigid bitch," despite the fact that two days earlier he'd told me that "the chick is no virgin, moron." I didn't believe everything I heard, though I was sure that this Federica Montt wasn't the Federica Montt that I thought she was. After all, she wasn't wearing pearl earrings anymore. A girl who no longer wears her mother's pearl earrings is a girl who no longer asks for her father's permission. Plus, she wasn't really interested in Milo; that much I could tell just by seeing how he referred to her.

"There's nothing easier than picking up orphans," he explained to me once he stopped going out with her. "Her dad took off and she flunked. They kicked her out of school. Consider it a gift from heaven. She's a piece of cake. All yours, cousin."

Uncle Choclo Bulnes organized a huge New Year's Eve party in Reñaca to usher in both the new decade and his new building, El Faro, which rose up over the Pacific. Despite the fact that many businessmen and other adults would be in attendance, a good part of the crowd would be made up of friends of Milo and Isidora. Everything was so overtly Saint Luke's that you almost expected to hear the bell ring, ending lunch.

"It's the party of the decade," said my sister, surprised to see me. "I thought you'd spend New Year's Eve at one of those all-night bar and grills that your friend Julio likes so much."

"People change," I said.

"For a while."

I couldn't even give Federica a hug at midnight, but that seemed like a trivial detail to me: I could still finish off the dregs from the

glasses that had been left behind, and listen to the song that was playing ("Stumblin' In," by Suzi Quatro and Chris Norman). As I watched the fireworks going off over the bay of Valparaíso, I hugged my mother and wished her a happy new year and the best of decades. I knew she was sad and alone and thinking about someone else. She'd fallen for a married man who was with his own family that night, and although she didn't know that I knew, for one brief moment, I felt her almost tell me about it.

The lighthouse-shaped building shone like a candle. All the windows were lit up, and from the top floor flew the biggest Chilean flag that I'd ever seen. Queen and the Clash fought hand to hand with the exhausted toxin that was the disco wave, while Federica, Isidora, Natacha Brynner, and my sister rehearsed the "Good Times" dance with which to announce that the future would be a splendorous one.

Around five in the morning, after dancing with Natacha (who every so often said to me, "I love this song; it reminds me of Paris"), I decided to try to crash in one of the building's many empty rooms. I noticed Federica down by the pool, splashing her feet. There was nobody else around, and it was so dark that all you could see was the light of the stars reflecting off the water.

"And Milo?" I asked her.

"Off trying to make a bigshot of himself."

I sat down next to her, took off my shoes, and dipped my feet in the water, which still retained the color of day. We didn't talk much, but I listened attentively to her silences. I studied her hair, snipped short and dirty. Federica chewed her nails and was capable of experiencing the full range of emotions, from the highest euphoria to the depths of sadness. Still, I thought, this is a person who—no matter what others or even she herself says—has never been truly happy.

"I used to have a pool," she said.

"Me too. We had a house and a pool. Smaller than this one and without a filter, but now that I think about it, it was a pretty good pool."

"We sold our house. Sometimes I think it'd be nice to go back there for a swim."

"If you want, you can come over to my house sometime for a swim."

"But it's not your house anymore."

"It's still my house; we just don't live there anymore. It's closed up, but we can get in."

"Why?"

"Things happened. Things like those happening to you."

I didn't really know what she was going through, but at the same time it wasn't hard to guess. They were boarding up houses all over the place, tearing down homes and draining pools.

"The last time I saw the pool was about a month ago. I have a key. Sometimes I go back there and think . . . Hey, are you afraid of rats?"

"No."

"Great. Then we won't have any problems getting in. The only thing is that the water's so stagnant and rotten now that it's like jelly. We can't just drain it, so when we go over we'll have to scoop it out with spoons. I swear. The thing is disgusting. We should have left it empty."

"Yeah, but think what could happen if there was an earthquake," she said. "The pool would have cracked in two."

After that night, I only saw Federica twice during the month of January: once by chance (actually, I followed her) and the other legit. I asked her out for an ice cream (we had four) and afterwards she wanted to go see a photographic exhibition at the Instituto Cultural de Las Condes, which I didn't understand because all the photos were out of focus. Then we walked back along Apoqindo and Lyon until we reached the apartment where she was living, across from the Plaza Pedro de Valdivia.

"I'd invite you up, but my grandmother is in bed and very, very sick. We don't have anywhere else to go, so we just have to settle in here. I hope I can get out soon, though."

Federica didn't get along well with her mother, and her father and brother were out of the country; I don't know why I never dared to ask why. We weren't dating or even friends, really, but I wanted to be both.

We started talking on the phone. Sometimes at night, for hours on end. I liked her husky voice, so typical of certain girls born into

money. We talked about everything and nothing, and gradually I was coming to realize that nobody had ever really listened to her before. I was ready to listen for hours, days, months; I wanted her to tell me all her stories and describe to me all the different characters who had passed through her life. I had the time and the desire to listen to everything, and to set her free.

I was at my grandparents' apartment one afternoon at the hottest time of day. Nobody else was at home, and the refrigerator sounded like it had asthma. My mother was coming home late because—it was clear—she was meeting with her lover, Juan Antonio Mancini. I got the impression that his family was on summer vacation, because my mother was coming home late at night for the entire month of January. Manuela was on some beach with some friend and, surely, the slow-witted Long John Covarrubias. My grandparents had left for Valdivia. They'd invited me to come along, but I didn't want to go. Julio Facusse was tiresome and predictable; after spending four days with him and his Addams Family in Papudo, I came back to Santiago.

I called Federica. "You ought to go stay with one of your friends," I suggested. "For a couple days, at least."

"I can't stand those people. I'm through with them."

The afternoon movie was about to come on the TV. I was about to shut it off when I saw that *Tom Sawyer* was the feature that day.

"But they're your people, your circle."

"I don't have friends anymore. They're all so frivolous."

I started watching the movie and, bit by bit, Federica's voice began to fade as the opening music began to permeate my grandparents' room.

"Have you ever seen Tom Sawyer?"

"No. I read the book once, years ago, back when I was a good little girl who read books."

"They're showing it now."

"What?"

"They're showing it now, on TV. I can't believe it . . . I've seen it a couple of times. I love it. Or, should I say, I loved it."

"On what channel?"

"Thirteen."

"With the river?"

"That's it. But it's for kids. Kind of childish."

"Hey, you might not believe this, but I was a child myself once. I was innocent as hell. Probably too innocent."

As a kid, I saw *Tom Sawyer* three times: once in Beverly Hills with my grandparents, then at the Topanga Plaza with Patrick Bellin, and finally at the Tarzana with my uncle Carlos Soler. I knew all the songs. We nicknamed the mailman Muff Potter and dreamed that the miserable, squalid Los Angeles River would swell into something like the Mighty Mississippi so we could build a raft and cross it. Patrick had the record and listened to it every day for a month. There wasn't a single boy in Encino who didn't want to be more like the rebellious and mysterious Huck, but I felt more like Tom, felt like we had something in common.

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"Federica . . ."
"Yes?"
"Could I call you later? After the movie . . ."
"You really like it, huh?"
"Yeah."
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The TV version was in Spanish, but all the songs were in English. The order wasn't quite what I remembered, with the picnic at the beginning instead of the end. But the most striking thing for me was seeing just how young Tom, Huck, and Becky really were.

The movie ends with Huck as free as the wind and Tom and Becky on board a riverboat heading for the big city where Tom would study and grow. The river looked very wide, the ship disappeared into the fog, and the song surged out of the background: "Oh the river is gonna flow to the sea, and the boy is gonna grow to a man." The first time I heard it, it terrified me. The idea that one day I would grow up was so disturbing that I didn't speak for an entire day. "Only once in your life—only one golden time in your life—are you free . . ."

I no longer felt like a kid—and was sad to have left those years behind me—but, on the other hand, it didn't seem so terrible. I was big and I was alive. I'd navigated the river, arriving safe and sound on the other side.

Just then the phone rang. I knew who it was.

"I love it," she said. "What a sad ending. But at the same time, what a great ending. The kid growing up. Ultimately, everyone does. There's nothing we can do to avoid it."

"Who did you like better, Tom or Huck?"

"Tom," she said. "I already know enough Hucks."

I switched off the TV.

"Wait for me," I said. "I'm coming over. There's something I have to tell you."

"You can't just tell me over the phone?"

"This is something I have to tell you in person. Hopefully as close as possible."

Ice Castles, USA, 1978, 108 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Donald Wrye

STARRING: Robby Benson, Lynn-Holly Johnson,

Tom Skerritt

SEEN: 1980, Cine Las Condes, Santiago de Chile

In late autumn of 1980, we moved back into the big house on Doctor Ignacio Echaurren Arismendi Street. Even though it was early February when Federica suggested we empty, clean, paint, and refill the pool, I had to go. Once we finished painting, and we kissed with our faces splattered in sky blue, we couldn't be apart except to go to school, and sometimes that was no more than a parenthesis.

Federica had to repeat the second semester at McMillan, a school for rebellious girls that was patently less expensive than Saint Luke's. Which is why she wasn't able to go on her school's big trip to Rio. I finished my third year at McArthur, where the school trip involved taking a bus up north, but I knew I wasn't going anywhere with them before the reservations were even made.

"Next summer we'll go to San Pedro together. We'll hitchhike," she promised me.

I saw Julio Facusse just about every day, but we didn't speak anymore. School was just a stage, I didn't learn much at all, and only woke up during physics class. The only reason it interested me, the only reason I studied it, the motivation for one day being able to prevent earthquakes, was she: Federica.

"You're hooked," Kenzo Nobutami said to me one day. "You're something else."

I replied that, yes, he was exactly right: I was something else.

"That's not a good thing."

"And all of you are jealous as hell."

When Federica saw that it was no longer enough to have a pool and a lawn cleared of weeds, we refinished the room that once belonged to my sister. The cold and darkness were starting to invade our garden; we needed a better haven in which we could be together. Manuela's room was cozy and it had the best light, thanks to a window that looked out toward San Cristobál. Once, after waking up from a long nap, I asked her if she didn't feel ashamed or nervous making love with the Virgin watching over us, but she replied that, on the contrary, she felt Her blessings upon us. Federica helped herself to a mattress from her grandmother's house and brought it over, since most of the furniture in my house was currently in storage. She filled the room with her collectibles, postcards, and scent.

Sometimes I just couldn't believe that Federica and I could be together; that we weren't just going through life together but were starting to fall in love. I never said it to her, and she never said it to me, but it was clear. After all, I'd never felt anything like that. If what I felt for Federica was not love, then I never want to know what it's really like, because it was clear that I would be physically incapable of experiencing, processing, or cherishing any more feelings than those I already had within me. I wasn't about to venture to ask her if she loved me or not. These are questions for soap operas and romantic movies made for people who don't have romance in their own lives. I didn't care what we felt; the important thing was to feel. That was everything. That was enough.

"She's with you because you gave her a home. For that, who wouldn't be?" Julio Facusse told me once, right before I swung and bashed his nose in.

The room and the house came later, I thought. She was the one who approached, she was the one who sought me out, she was the one who first kissed me.

"You saved me, Beltrán. I'll never forget that."

When Federica's grandmother died, I attended the funeral, though she did not. At the service, her mother came up to me and said:

"You two are playing with fire. Stay away from her. You're too young; you're not ready. You just don't understand."

Federica went to class less and less often, and was practically living in our little room. The bathroom worked fine, but there was no gas for the furnace, the kitchen was like a glacier, and rats were scurrying behind the walls and, later, across the floor.

"You're like the main character in the movie *The Little Girl Who Lives Down the Lane*," I told her.

"How does it end?"

"I never saw it. But I remember the poster."

"It ends badly, doesn't it? They kill her? Tell me."

"I don't know. But this room is here for us to be together in, not for you to live in permanently."

"Do you want me to go?"

"No. but . . ."

"Nothing but 'buts' with me."

I don't know what prompted my mother's decision to return to the house and reopen it. Maybe it was to eliminate my "little love nest," as my sister said to me with a touch of jealousy after Covarrubias left her for a preschool teacher older than he was. My mother didn't face the issue; she just said to me:

"I know what you're doing at that house, and I don't like it."

"I know what you're doing, and I don't like it much either," I replied.

Later I regretted having said that, because I was using the same words as everybody else who is either scandalized or scandalous. Juan Antonio Mancini was on the board at Saint Luke's, and at least my mother wasn't completely alone, even if there were still important or unexpected moments when she couldn't talk to him.

Grandpa Teodoro hired a team of professionals to repaint the house inside and out, including the walls that Federica had done. They knocked down a few walls and put in bigger windows to let in more light. If the possibility that my grandparents would move in with us was indeed discussed, the truth was that my grandmother had had it up to here with her houseguests, and the only thing she wanted was to see us go. I didn't much like the idea, but I knew that it was the logical, appropriate thing to do. The key was to recover Manuela, who, now that she was without an official boyfriend, had started to lash out at Aunt Chilaca, who felt too old to be punishing a girl who wasn't even her own daughter.

Federica didn't take "the eviction" well and even told off one of the professional painters, but after three hellish days of not having my calls returned, we saw each other over at her house, and every part of the act of reconciliation was so intense that it was like we were starting anew.

"I liked our room, but I like it better having a family again," I told her. "We'll still be able to see each other. My house is always empty, and yours is too."

"This piece of shit isn't my house."

"But mine is. We're going back, and I want you to come over whenever you want. Like it or not, you're my girl."

"Am I?"

"I suppose."

"Let's say that you're my boyfriend. Cool?"

"Cool."

We went to a Friday night showing of *Ice Castles* at the Las Condes. The theater was mostly empty except for some healthy-looking kids. They showed the preview for *Ordinary People* and the new Milo commercial, where Milo soars to victory in the pole vault while the capacity crowd at Maracaná Stadium goes wild.

The movie, about a figure skating champion who goes blind and is forced to struggle through adversity, wasn't so bad. Federica even started to cry, and I held her hand.

"We seem like ordinary people," she said.

I didn't respond but felt like a runner nearing the finish line. I'd finally arrived, and I wasn't even tired.

"Do you see?" I said. "With love, everything is possible."

"Ay, please, you're talking like they did in the movie."

It was September—the spring—and in two days Pinochet would hold a referendum to try to give legitimacy to his new constitution.

On our way out, Federica bumped into her friend Antonia, who was with a guy dressed in preppy clothes and a blue Lacoste vest, Gonzalo McClure. They greeted each other, and Antonia said she was just back from the school trip to Brazil, and asked how Federica was getting along with her mother.

"We straightened things out. What was I going to do? She's got a

boyfriend who's older and who has land. We live around here close by. Smells like stability."

Federica wanted to celebrate her return to "the Las Condes morals" and we went to Juancho's, where they knew her from before. The place was dark and the music very loud. Everyone there seemed tired. They looked worn, as if they had been adolescents for years, unlike me, who had just recently begun to feel like one.

"Paz, give us two vodka tonics."

"I don't drink."

"Tonight you'll drink and do who knows what else," Federica said before heading to the bathroom, where she ran into Matías Vicuña, one of my sister's old stalkers.

"Rio was good?"

"Better than this shit."

"Yeah, that's what they say. I've been there before."

Underneath his tanned skin and that vibe that only those who have the vibe are able to exude, Matías Vicuña seemed like a timid guy, unable to show his true self even for a single minute.

"Hola."

"Hola."

"So you're going out with Fede?"

"Yeah."

His hair was fairly long, disheveled, and bleached by the Rio sun; his eyes had the glazed look of pot, and they weren't focusing clearly.

"She's a great girl."

"She sure is."

"Just be careful, is all."

"You think I would ever do something?"

"No, but I think you might hurt her without even realizing it."

The barman slid over the two drinks. I sipped one; it seemed stiff and bitter.

"You want some cheech?" he asked, tapping his nose.

"What?"

"You know."

"No, thanks. I'm not into that stuff."

"You're missing out. It's free."

"Really, thanks, though."

"Have it your way."

Vicuña went into the bathroom and I stood there, watching the dance floor. Past that, at the bar, a curly-haired girl in a T-shirt with a photo of Barbra Streisand on the front was arm in arm with a guy drinking something straight, no chaser.

"So are you guys in love?" Vicuña had come back out of the bath-room.

"What?"

I looked at him. He was sweating but, at the same time, seemed cold.

"You digging this scene?"

"Yeah. Two things. I'm digging this scene, and the fact that I'm in love."

"Wow!"

"Yeah. Being young has its advantages."

"You think so?"

"Yeah."

"I don't. But it's all the same. Good for you, kid. For the two of you."

"You being serious?"

"Yes, jerk. Just chill out, man. No bad vibes. At least, not for you."

"Thanks."

"No worries."

"Cool, then."

"Peace. For now. But you're sure you don't want a line? It looks like your girlfriend was kind enough to leave some for us . . ."

An Unmarried Woman, USA, 1978, 130 mins.

DIRECTED BY: Paul Mazursky

STARRING: Jill Clayburgh, Alan Bates, Michael Murphy,

Lisa Lucas

SEEN: 1980, Multicine de Vitacura, Santiago de Chile

After my father left, my mother was far from well. It's not that she missed him; she just wasn't used to being—or didn't want to be—a single woman. Did and didn't. She read novels by Erica Jong and Nancy Friday and underlined passages in *Your Erroneous Zones*, but, for those first few months, before she broke down and decided to close up the house, the hardest thing she had to deal with was us.

Things weren't easy for me either. Not having a father didn't affect me much, because, in many ways, I'd never really had one. When he left, we felt like we had lost a houseguest, a tenant who never paid, or a stranger who wasn't even able to say hello.

But the thought of having to be the man of the house, like Zacarias Enisman had said, terrified me. For the "End of 1977" party, my mother took me as her escort to the restaurant La Estancia. Other times I had to accompany her to the grocery store or, if we were falling behind on payments, keep Manuela from running up the phone bill. Many times we just went to the movies; she'd take me to ones I wasn't old enough to get into by myself. I accompanied her, while she—I suppose—accompanied me. We saw movies that shouldn't have been seen, not because they had explicit sex scenes, but because they contained truths that clashed with my way of thinking. We saw *Interiors*, and when I got tired of waiting for Woody Allen to appear, I realized that that family drama wasn't so different from our own. We went to see *The Goodbye Girl*, for obvious reasons. Any movie that didn't have a father in it was one that we were interested in, and any film in which a husband did appear was a film whose villain was very easy to spot.

Juan Antonio Mancini was a civil engineer who used hair gel. He was unhappy because a brother of his was always on TV as a close

friend of the president, while he stewed in his anonymity. His appearance was, in the beginning, a gift from heaven. I idolized him not for what he was (nothing more than a poor Goodyear employee and one more member of the Saint Luke's school board) but because his presence gave me some free space. Without Juan Antonio Mancini, I know, I wouldn't have spent so much time with Julio Facusse; without Juan Antonio Mancini and his pathetic bifocal glasses, I would never have been able to get to know Federica Montt and open myself up to her.

If you'd bumped into Mancini on the street (I had done so twice, at Saint Luke's, when I'd gone to look for Manuela), you wouldn't have given him a second glance. Either that or you might have scoffed at him. Mancini was no Steve McQueen. No Charlton Heston. He could have been in a disaster movie, but he wouldn't have played the hero. Maybe that was part of his charm: that he never imagined he'd be able to play things to his advantage. Mancini was the complete antithesis of my father. That was all, and for us, that was enough to transform him into God.

"Mom, Mancini's on the phone," called my sister, and my mother blushed.

"Ay, you like him."

"He's a friend, that's all. Just a friend."

Juan Antonio Mancini appeared unexpectedly and disappeared the same way. Things happened quickly, without planning, as such things tend to do. What's more, it all came out as in an earthquake. My mother had started acting so strange (she stopped opening the curtains, came home early, wouldn't speak on the phone, and once she skipped work and slept for six hours) that I, not wanting to go around perpetually nervous, sad, and upset, decided to take her out one night. There was no need for me to ask what had happened.

I invited her to go to a movie with me. We hadn't been to one for so long that I felt like we needed it, and so I took her to see *An Unmarried Woman*. I'd read María Romero's review and was sure that things would end happily. No attempted suicides, no psychiatric clinics.

"It's for adults, you know," I said. "I don't know if they'll let me in."

"You're already grown up. Believe me."

"I'm sixteen."

"Sometimes—I don't know why—I feel like you're quite a bit older."

I hope my mother enjoyed An Unmarried Woman; at least, I think that it spoke to her. Jill Clayburgh's husband tells her that he's leaving her for another woman. My father left us for another country. Which is worse? I thought that maybe my father left because maybe my mother had another man in her life. Was that possible? I'll never forget the conclusion, not just because I didn't fully understand it but also because the image was so powerful. The unmarried woman is given an immense painting, a truly immense painting, whose dimensions are such that she can't even hold it in her two outstretched arms. I think it's a farewell gift from her lover, a bearded painter with five children and one more on the way. The woman doesn't mind betrayal as long as they don't leave, they stay, they forget it ever happened. The unmarried woman walks through New York on a very windy day, and the painting catches the wind, turning her into something of a weathervane. She remains alone, floating, moving everywhere, but relatively happy and at peace.

"Did you like it?" I asked in the car on the way home.

"I thought it was real. Especially at the end, when she's alone."

Here I lose myself, here my memory starts to fail me; here the times and facts crisscross and confound one another, but I do know that everything happened that one seminal week in November of 1980 when *An Unmarried Woman* was released.

Federica started acting strange (surprise parties that I wasn't invited to, and smoking, snorting, and boozing with the delinquents at Juancho's) and, above all, distant and hurtful. It was as if she didn't want to be with me even when she was with me. She didn't want to have sex, didn't even want to talk to me.

"I'm late," she said finally.

"Where do you have to go?"

Silence. A long and terrifying silence.

"If you don't know what I'm trying to tell you, then you're more of an idiot than I ever thought imaginable," she said with rage, fury, hatred, and fear.

I called Zacarías, but hung up when I heard his voice. I knew the sermon I was in store for. So I ran to Julio, who gave me a thousand bits of advice.

"How do you know all this?"

"Experience," he replied, almost proud, as if it were proof of his virility.

Julio and I worked our way through dark alleys and past gloomy downtown apartments to a toothless guy near the Estación Central. We waited there with a woman who had an apartment above the hair salon on Puente Street. I remember smelling depilatory wax while Julio checked the details and negotiated the fee.

Sometimes it seems that, as much as Juan Antonio Mancini provided me with respite and time to enjoy myself, it was him, or his wife, or his five kids and "the one on the way" who also closed doors to me and made me realize that it was time to grow up, that in the adult world, those who have a lot of luck are the ones who survive, and that even the truly happy ones are able to forget.

That night, as I slept, I felt a presence in my room. Someone was watching me. Bit by bit I realized that that person was crying. Crying at my side. It was a fragile, fractured, weak person. It was my mother who was crying there in the darkness. I instantly thought that she'd found out. Federica's mother had called her. There was nothing else to do, this was it, I could already see the look of disappointment on my grandfather's face.

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"Federica . . . "
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I could hardly breathe. The fire in the pit of my stomach went out. But my mother kept crying.

"We have a serious problem."

It was Manuela. It had to be her.

[&]quot;No."

[&]quot;Did something happen to her?"

[&]quot;No."

"What happened to Manuela?"

"It's not her, it's me," she said, and took my hand.

She continued to cry. At first I didn't understand, but then, with the dawn, I understood many things. I understood it all.

At 7 A.M. the phone rang.

"False alarm," Federica told me. "Thank God. It's over now. But learn your lesson, you asshole. We were saved, Beltrán. We were saved by a hair."

"Yes," I said. "You were saved. You're very, very lucky."

That afternoon I stopped a taxi and joined my mother inside.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

On the way there, she asked me:

"How do you know these things?"

"Experience. I went with a friend once. Everything's going to be fine. Just relax. I'm here."

The taxi stopped in front of the old building, and we got out. I pressed the button for the fifth floor. The elevator doors opened, and it smelled of depilatory wax.



A strong earthquake can destroy our most deeply-rooted concepts in an instant. The Earth, the very emblem of all that is solid, has moved beneath our feet like a fluid. In one second, our mind has created the strange idea of insecurity that hours of reflection have not produced.

CHARLES DARWIN, Reflections Upon Witnessing the Concepción Earthquake of February 20th, 1835



WEDNESDAY January 17, 2001

10:43 A.M.

Los Angeles, California

"Hello, Manuela?"

"Yes."

"It's your brother."

"Ah . . . hi . . . what's up?"

"Were you sleeping?"

"Yeah, the eternal siesta. What a way to sleep."

"Sorry for waking you up then."

"Don't worry about it. What time is it?"

"It's three-something down in Santiago. Here it's five hours less."

"Puerto Octay, I'm still here."

"Right . . . were you sleeping soundly?"

"Yes, very. Too soundly, perhaps."

"Were you dreaming?"

"Yeah. I was dreaming about the house on

Ignacio Echaurren. Remember it?"

"I haven't done anything but remember, Manuela. All those last days. What was the dream

like?"

"We were all out at the pool. A huge, end-of-summer barbecue. Milo was in the water, along with a couple of the Echaurrens. Remember them?"

"They were like Chilean versions of the Waltons."

"Exactly. They sang those songs from The Sound of Music."

"Right."

"Anyway, we were all there . . . but all of us, Beltrán. Everybody. You were in the water too, which you almost never did. You left home so quickly."

"At eighteen."

"Yes, but in the dream, Beltrán, we were all there. Grandpa Soler was alive. So were Aunt Chilaca and Tyrone Acosta Acosta. Remember him?"

"Sure I do."

"Everybody was there, dead and alive."

"Even Uncle Beltrán?"

"Everyone that I knew at one time or another."

"And Carlos Soler?"

"No, actually, Carlos Soler wasn't there. Strange, huh?"

"Not really."

"But Aunt Nora and Aunt Doris were there. So was Natacha, looking good as always, and even Uncle Yul, with his shaved head shining in the sun. We were all there, in the garden, when the earthquake of '95 started."

"You mean '85."

"That one, right. Or maybe it wasn't. I don't know. It could have been another one."

"There hasn't been another one. Not yet."

"Don't scare me, Beltrán. I don't know what quake it was. It was a dream. I'm confused."

"That's what dreams are for: to confound."

"That may be true, but don't confound me anymore, okay?"

"Sorry."

"The fact is that we were all there at the barbecue, under the porch, watching the meat grill. Then it started. Tata was the first one to notice it."

"How?"

"By the wine in the glasses."

"He saw it vibrating."

"Right. Then dust started to rain down from the shingles and a noise came from underground, like a freight train was rolling by right beneath us. The wine sloshed and splattered on the concrete, and the dogs started to howl."

"Were they Great Danes?"

"Yeah, they were. How did you know?"

"I guessed. We've been thinking about the same things, Manuela."

"You dreamed about it too?"

"No, I was writing it."

"Writing what?"

"Nothing. Maybe all the earthquake stuff flying around affected us."

"I'm terrified of earthquakes, Beltrán."

"It's the Earth's way of exorcising its demons."

"That's what Tata said."

"Right."

"He said it to calm us . . . but I think he was afraid of them too."

"So am I. But I respect them, I've got a great deal of respect for them. But what else happened in your dream? Tell me . . ."

"We all watched the pool, and Tata said, 'That was a nine.'"

"Nine?"

"Yes. The pool looked like the ocean in the middle of the worst of storms."

"The water jumped out and soaked the grass."

"That much. Then I saw one of the Echaurren boys shivering at the edge of the garden, surrounded by Great Danes. You were still in the water; it looked like you were laughing because the force of the water was tossing you up and down like you were jumping on a trampoline."

"And then?"

"Then the pool cracked. Because that's what really happened, remember? They warned us so many times to never leave it empty, and the only time we did was when Mom emptied it because none of us

were there. Then came March 3, and after all is said and done, the pool cracks. We couldn't use it anymore, Beltrán."

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"So it cracked . . ."
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"Yes, but in the dream it was more than that. It literally split in two, so much that you could see the ground underneath, and all the water ran out in a flash. You went with the water. Then my cell phone rang."

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"Huh?"

"I woke up. You woke me up."

"That's some dream."

"Yeah. Awful. You could call it a nightmare."

(Silence.)

"That was no good."

"It was a dream, Manuela. Relax."

"Yeah, I know, but now I'm worried."

"The pool cracked because it was empty. Nobody was in it. Don't worry; it's over."

"I know, Beltrán. It's not that . . ."

"What, then?"

"Nothing."
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(Silence.)

"You sure?"

"The quake of '85 destroyed our house. It didn't collapse, but I never went back there after that."

"They demolished it some time later."

"It could have been rebuilt perfectly. It wasn't so bad, Beltrán. The worst parts were the chimney and the pool and a few cracks here and there. Nothing serious; at least not serious enough to have forced us into such a drastic decision."

"In the long run, we all wanted to just close it down. Maybe for good."

"You weren't living there then. You were in that house on Toesca Street."

"Away from it all. Even so, I couldn't help but be affected by it. That big old house lost a whole wall and it came down."

"Do you remember the El Faro building?"

"It started to tilt, yeah. Like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. They had to dynamite it. That was the end of the Bulneses."

"They scattered all over the place once they left."

"Tata always told Uncle Choclo that that ground could give way."

"And it did."

"Everything does."

"Everything comes down, Beltrán."

"Everything comes down."

(Silence.)

"I have to tell you a couple of things."

"What?"

"There, when you go back."

"What?"

"Better there, Manuela. Face to face."

"Did you see . . . ? "

"No. But I saw Uncle Javi. He was strange . . . and good."

"Where?"

"At his place. He's living in the Valley."

"In Encino?"

"In Burbank. He lives by himself in one of those developments where all the houses are exactly the same."

"And Yayi?"

"She died two years ago."

"Really?"

"Yes. She was old. She passed away in a nursing home near the desert where it's always warm. It never got cold, but she couldn't understand what the other patients were saying. She never learned English."

"I don't know what to say."

"Nothing. Life ends. Those are the rules, Manuela. It's just what happens, it's what happens to all of us."

(Silence.)

"First I called our cousin Jason."

"What?"

"First I called Jason Soler; that's how I found Uncle Javi."

"But you don't even know him."

"Now I do. He was in the phone book. I took a quick look, saw a 'J,' and thought that it might stand for Javier. But I was wrong. There are more Solers in L.A. than I thought."

"What did he say to you?"

"Nothing. Not much."

"You spoke in English."

"Yes."

"Did he know you existed? That we existed?"

"Sort of, in a distant way. He knew he had relatives in Chile. But I hung up pretty quickly. He told me he wasn't interested in talking to me."

"He said that? What a jerk. Do you know why?"

"No idea."

"And . . . what's our other cousin's name?"

"Jenny. Javi told me about her later. She lives in Nevada."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"So what else did Jason tell you?"

"Not much. He said that he didn't keep in touch with the family, and even less with his son-of-a-bitch father. He said he didn't want to see or know about anybody with Soler blood in their veins."

"He really said that?"

"Yes."

"This whole family is full of hate. Nobody talks to each other; what a goddamned heritage."

"That's it."

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"Did Javi know anything about Carlos? Any news at least?"
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(Silence.)

"I've got to go, Manuela. I don't have much time."

"But tell me . . . you called me about this, no?"

"I have to get to the airport."

"You're finally leaving for Tokyo?"

"No."

"Beltrán, what are you doing?"

"I don't know. I'm going to San Salvador. The plane leaves in two hours. I'm late. Luckily I'm right next to the airport. Can you guess where I am?"

"In a hotel?"

"No."

"I really don't know, Beltrán. How could I?"

"Remember that giant doughnut, near Ash Street?"

"Yes, from pictures. There's one of the four of us standing in front of it."

"I'm here. The doughnut's good for shade. You should smell the chocolate and cinnamon here."

"So that's where you are."

"Yes."

"I can picture it."

"I like being here. But now I've got to get to San Salvador, Manuela. It's not a long flight, and I can get there in time for the funeral."

"Does Mom know?"

"No."

"Should I call her?"

"It's too late. I'll see her at the church."

(Silence.)

"How was Uncle Javi?"

"I really have to go."

[&]quot;Nothing. Never heard anything more."

"I know."

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"Fat, a bit lonely. But good. Caring. He gave me a lot of movies."
   "DVDs?"
   "No, movies of us. The movies of my life. Of our lives. From when
we lived here."
   "Those silent ones?"
   "Those. The eight-millimeter ones Grandpa shot."
   "I'd like to see them."
   "You will."
   "Good luck then. Have a safe trip."
   "Gracias."
   "It's been good talking with you. Important."
   "For me too, Manuela."
   "Yes?"
   "Yes."
   (Silence.)
   "I'll call you from there, okay?"
   "Do it. I'll be waiting. Then will you be off to Japan?"
   "Back to Santiago."
   "I could go meet you at the airport."
   "I'll call you. We'll see what happens. I still don't know the
dates yet."
   (Silence.)
   "You didn't see . . ."
   "No."
   "What did you find out about him?"
   "Abour our father?"
   "Yes."
   "Things."
   "Good things?"
   "All good things. But he doesn't live there anymore."
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"Where is he?"
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(Silence.)

"Since when?"

"I'm not sure. But it's been a long time. Years. I have his address and phone number."

"Tell me, where?"

"Two blocks from my house, I figure. On Gorbea Street. Neighbors for years, and we never found each other."

"Well, now you will."

"I'm just going to go knock on his door."

"And what are you going to say to him?"

"I'll say, 'Hi, Dad, it's been a while.' Maybe then I'll invite him to a movie."

[&]quot;Guess."

[&]quot;Las Vegas?"

[&]quot;Santiago."

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