

Chapter Three

Out of Life, Out of the Past

The wide-eyed little boy Héctor, *me*, presses his nose against the airplane's lozenge-shaped window. He is trying to feel the cold. Far behind is the torpor of Buenos Aires in January, and now, sitting next to his father, the ice on the window speaks of a frightening unknown that lay ahead. He wants to run from it, yet he also wants to "hurry up and get there." He is caught in an unmitigating web.

He hears his grandfather's anxious voice: "*Americanos! Van a volver cómo americanos!*" The grandfather was afraid of Americanization—assimilation meant ruination. He was afraid the family would abandon him, be lost and different. In many ways, the grandfather was right; he was abandoned and, at least for Héctor, there is loss and confusion.

What is grandfather afraid of? What is America? Are we so different?

In Argentina the little boy and his younger sister played games, trying to imagine the sounds of English. Gibberish, guttural sounds is all they spoke. They looped together squiggly lines on a page and labeled it "*inglés*"; they listened to their father, the only one in the family who spoke English, and imitated the strong nasal sounds so foreign to their romantic language. They would laugh, tensely and fearfully; they couldn't get the *inglés*. Spanish is melodious, a song, and English is preciseness, piercing: this is how the languages sounded to the little boy.

A few nights before their departure from Buenos Aires to New York, the entire family—grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins—sat beneath a starlit night and attempted to give texture to the unknown. The maternal grandparents' home in Rosario had a large courtyard in its center that etched a bright, velvet sky. Beneath, the family sat at a long and noble table: the cooked chickens' roasted skins glistened; candles lit the linen tablecloth and gave it a soft, inviting quality, a warmth;

dark bottles of wine were lined in a neat row across the length of the table; *Cinzano and soda in siphons*.

Noise and laughter.

The grandmother described how funny it was to watch the little boy round up the chickens in her backyard earlier that day: he chased them to her, and in the tumult, clouds of dirt whirling about their feet, she grabbed an unfortunate one that wandered close to her ankles, quickly twisting its neck in a fluid, circling motion, and dropped it into a steel vat filled with scalding water. She showed the boy how to pluck the chickens' feathers; they pulled out their innards, then stuffed them.

They reminisced; laughed nervously; imagined. They tried to push away the encroaching inevitability, though it persisted, coming closer and closer, until nothing else was visible.

Looking out the airplane's window at New York's Idlewild (Kennedy) Airport, life in Argentina is but a blur, unreal, someone else's. The little boy is mesmerized: concrete and snow and gray; red trucks, yellow trucks, blue and white trucks—all sizes and shapes—race about; planes and more planes. *Do not get up from your seats until the captain turns off the light*, is the first English sentence he hears, and he doesn't understand; his father pats his thigh, *Todo va ir bien. It will be okay. It will be fine, you'll see*.

It truly is another place, another land, forbidding and alluring, like the ocean, large and plentiful.

His heart races.

The airport: noise, crowds, people pointing: *this way, here*; Exit; No Exit; no Spanish; English only; bustling; huge carts like small cars to the little boy moving luggage about quickly; men in uniforms opening suitcases and running grubby hands through everything: *my underwear, mamá*; shops and more shops and more shops: everything's for sale; flags; reds, whites, and blues; *no speak English. Aerolíneas Argentinas*.

The cab: monstrous cars with chrome and lights and wings; speed and fury; the tick-tock, tick-tock of turn signals; lanes and white lines on the road; tall, ominous buildings; gray, and more gray; dirty snow high on the sides of roads; cars stuck in snowdrifts; cold, freezing, penetrating cold; plow trucks; a tunnel under the water? *what if it floods? tolls?*

Then, Manhattan: alien; noisy, and indifferent; traffic stopped, jammed; no sky, bits of sky; no sky again; pigeons; white smoke from the ground? people bustling and rushing and holding hands over mouths and newspapers around necks; ear muffs; wind in icy, stinging gusts; black snow; more cold; more people, crowds of people; more pigeons; the Empire State Building, Times Square and Broadway; Macy's and escalators; *wow!* sirens and air raid shelters; *the Russians are coming!*

Motion. Speed. Plenitude.

From the window of the Martinique Hotel, the little boy watches people in dark coats rush about in the snow and gray-black slush, crossing Greeley Square, scattering pigeons. So many pigeons in the square, perched on Horace Greeley and on the ledges of buildings, in the air. Throngs of people force their way into the abundance of Macy's; others come out with large bags filled to the top.

But something more powerful than the motion and speed outside the Martinique Hotel compels the wide-eyed boy inside: Television—where abundance is aestheticized, made into art and morality.

In Argentina, there were hardly any televisions in 1960, so the immigrant family didn't own one, having only heard of their mystique. They didn't even have a phone, though they were middle-class and lived in pristine Cofico, *un barrio*—a suburb—of Córdoba. Only a single family in their neighborhood, the Rectors, had one. Consequently, Matilde Rector knew everyone's business because everyone used her phone; she would run down the tree-lined Segunda Lavalleja, delivering messages to different neighbors. *Teléfono, teléfono*, she'd shout. *Mensaje*. Matilde was communication central. Matilde and electricity were the extent of the technology.

The family is split once more, the father admitted into Rusk Institute and the rest moving into an eighth-floor apartment in middle-class Riverdale (the Bronx), the Palisades visible at a distance. The black-and-white Zenith television distracts them from the difficulties of their sojourn in America. Solemnly, elegantly, it sits on a chrome stand in the living room. It is their most vital object, a valuable eye into this foreign land—and they honor it by bringing the family together to watch *Popeye* and the *Mickey Mouse Club*, the *Ed Sullivan Show* and *American Bandstand*, and the little boy's favorites, *The Flintstones* and *Bonanza*.

Before bilingual education appeared, television taught the immigrants English. The entire culture paraded before them: salesmen and appliances; Westinghouse, *you can be sure*, GE and Texaco; *American Playhouse*; cigarettes—*have a Lark, have Lark*—and TV dinners; violence and civil rights and war. John F. Kennedy.

"This is the new President of the United States," said the father. "Kennedy. John F. Kennedy, the first Irish Catholic President. He has asked Americans to help their country, rather than taking from it. He said, 'ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country . . .'"

"I love that," said the mother immediately captivated by the romantic allure of Camelot. "Argentina needs someone like Kennedy. What wonderful words."

"It's a very important time for Americans," said the father. "A new age. He's looking to transform everything. Kennedy is creating a *new society*, a *new*, more vital culture. It's an exciting time to be here."

The little boy hears, but doesn't understand his father. He doesn't know about America and *los americanos*. Everything *is new* to the little boy. The city, its speed and aggression, subways, above and below ground, the people, supermarkets, all America speaks a loud and powerful language that is decentering. The signs are illegible, literally: he is an outsider, yet there is no escape; he *has to be*—in America.

A nightmare: the little boy feels paralyzed, not knowing what is being said, not knowing how to act, how to be, what to do when people speak to him, so he stares back—silent. He can only smile and shake his head, *no*. They laugh, look the boy over, up and down, then shrug their shoulders saying things in unpleasant tones.

I felt it. I felt it within my silence. Silence became my companion; in it, I observed, listened, repeated. The aloneness became overwhelming at times. I learned to be with silence and aloneness—the outsider, always, to this day, the outsider.

I was learning to write, though I didn't know it yet. I was learning to see.

Thirty-five years later, he can still feel the kids' eyes focused on him back then, feel their power on the first day he entered St. Gabrielle's, in 1961, in Riverdale, a Catholic school just a couple of blocks off the Henry Hudson Parkway.

Crew cuts and Brillcream, *a little dab will do you*.

Brown uniforms and penny loafers.

He doesn't have a uniform, or loafers, and wears a funny-looking wool sweater knitted by his mother. No one has sweaters knitted by their mothers, only bought ones, from Macy's probably, he thinks.

Stares. Smirks. The power of the group!

He wants to be his little brother, who is too young for school and stays home with his father's aunt, Nené.

Introductions into public American life.

"This is Hector Vila, our new student from Argentina," says the nun.

He hadn't experienced the Americanized Hector, the strong *H* sound overwhelming the more sensuous, fluid Spanish, *éctor*, accent on the *é*; the *i* instead of the appropriate double *e* sound in Vila (*Veela: see*); the *g* of *gentle*, *Argentina*, instead of the Spanish *j* sound we hear in *heavy* and *height*. Everything bastardized, changed, more pragmatic—the American way.

"Welcome, Hector," the class joins in.

He hears his name in whispers and murmurs repeated as he walks up the aisle to his seat near the back of the class: *Hector? Hector! Hector Heathcoat . . . haha . . . Hector Lopez . . . Pancho . . .*

"Where's Argentina, anyway? Is it in Africa?"

The public can overwhelm the individual, driving him into silences. Retreat.

On the first day of his new experience, the nun signals for him to come to the board with other students. Waving, gesturing, like a cop directing traffic in a busy intersection, she repeats, "Come up, Hector. Come on up. Come."

Slowly, hesitatingly, he eases out of his private desk and walks to the public board; he senses the student's eyes, their grins: the foreign kid on display.

He stands facing the board, unlike the other five students poised with chalks in their hands, and tries to lose himself in its blackness, tries to enter it and pass through it. He witnesses the students' confidence, his fears, and stares into the blackness of the board. He feels different.

Dios.

"Spell, *cat*," says the nun.

A flurry of activity: everyone writes. He presses the chalk to the board, trying to will something, to understand, but nothing comes out. He looks at the other students, again. He can't decipher anything. He makes like he knows but can't recall. The nun turns his head and, with her index finger and a smile, taps the board before his eyes. Immediately, he hates her.

"*Dog*," she then says.

More activity, more writing. He can see that the others have two words, one beneath the other. In front of him are merely a few dots reminiscent of the games he played with his sister, nothing more. Squiggly lines. He draws from what he knows, thinking that *something*, anything might spring forth and satisfy the nun's scrutiny.

Sweat.

They are watching.

Murmurs.

"Quiet, please. Quiet. You should all be writing in your books. I'll be checking. Now, *Bee*. Spell, *Bee*."

He is lost, totally. He has an overwhelming feeling of aloneness. Tears well in his eyes: he clenches his fist and bites his tongue.

He thinks of home, of Cofico and friends left behind who he understands; his grandfather and *las Pampas*; *Spanish*. Television.

He damns his father.

He wants to go back. Run.

But *Hector* can't.

Where would *Hector* run?

Hector has to be here. There are no choices, except surviving this. No exit from performance!

"All right, everyone sit."

He tries a half smile when he faces the class and shrugs his shoulders as if saying, *I know I don't know. What do you want me to do?* They are humored by his oddity, the foreigner.

Harlequin.

During recess, in the school yard, like his sister, he wanders. Kids circle around, speak and gesture. *Yes, Yes*, he says, grinning. *No entiendo*. And nods pathetically. He stands against the fence, watching kids jump rope and play hopscotch and stick ball. Occasionally, a brash boy comes over.

Taunts.

He can tell by the laughter and the stares.

They think his silence a weakness. But his silence is a form of study. He listens intently, watching curiously, every gesture, and in overwhelming aloneness repeats words, phrases, eventually dialogues. He tries these out on his sister; compares them with what he hears on television; struggles with billboards; studies cereal boxes: the lexicon.

I started to feel less alone. I was not only learning a new language, I, too, was learning how to write. And I was learning how to learn.

But first *Hector* has to exist as if he lives in a cell, as if he's been jailed, incarcerated by everyone's marginalization of him—because he is different, a foreigner; he exists in solitary confinement and within his own imagination laboring to understand the signs being presented to him.

It is claustrophobic. It is hard to breath.

Days last an eternity, and recesses even longer. He hates recess. He is vulnerable there: alone, in the privacy of internal dialogues, yet totally in the public. He is negotiating, learning that the public and the private, as Cornel West says, are intertwined, perhaps one and the same. He is reluctant to give up his sense of the private, inner self for the public's demands. *Hector* wants to impose himself, (*h*)*éctor*, create himself, not be created.

* * *

One day, a boy that was always taunting him came over. By now, some things he understood: *Hey . . . Wait . . . Come over here . . . Wanna play? . . . Shit . . .*

"Hey, SPIC," the boy said menacingly. "You're a SPIC, right?" he repeated, smirking.

Hector wasn't ready. He became flushed. Surprised. Threatened.

He didn't know if it was the tone, the word or both. Spic. He knew it was directed at him, he was certain, feeling deep down inside that it wasn't good. Evil. The taunt was defining him in a public way—and violating him: a public violation.

Humiliation based on fear of the unknown: "He's a Spic everybody."

He lunged at the boy and hit him and hit him and kept on hitting him until a monitor separated them.

They were taken to Mother Superior. The menacing boy spoke and Héctor couldn't. So for two weeks, the boy went to recess and Héctor spent time in Mother Superior's office sitting, silent and alone, doing penance. He knew it was punishment, but found it to be a sanctuary from the tension of the school yard. It was another type of solitary confinement; it was a physical confinement that accented his psychological one. But he welcomed this time to ponder, decipher words on book jackets, listen and repeat dialogues in his imagination. He grew fond of the respite found in his forced solitude, his aloneness.

Tragically, the little boy was left back. He repeated first grade because he didn't speak English, hadn't made substantial progress. Like Richard Rodriguez in *Hunger for Memory* (1982), the little boy felt "extreme public alienation" (3), a "victim of two cultures" (5): in the intimacy of the home, everyone spoke Spanish, *español, castellaño*, forbidden to speak English, fearing the children would lose their *natural* language; everywhere else, it was English, *inglés*.

But the Spanish world grew increasingly smaller; English came in through the front door, television, books, and school—American noises. English overwhelmed; it dominated. The children began speaking Spanish to their parents, English to each other. Now as adults, when they speak on the phone, or at family gatherings, the children speak English to each other and Spanish to their parents, when spouses are not around. Spanish has been successfully driven to the margins, though it is still at the core of their being.

So it went, for nearly five years, one side of the little boy's education: taunts; aggression; fear and embarrassment; Mother Superior's office; penmanship; spelling bees; diagramming sentences; straight lines to the bathroom, to the lunch room, to confession, and to church; communion; the clicker; genuflection—in unison. The rhythms of order.

And always silent, the outsider, defining within himself a world he could live in.

This is how writing began: noticing that he was always the outsider, he needed to re-create himself.

* * *

The other sides of the little boy's education were the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Rusk Institute.

"This is a portrait of Sesostrius III," instructed his mother. "It's from about 1850 B.C. Try to imagine that. A long, long time ago, way before Christ was born. Look at how real it is. It's from what's called the Middle Kingdom, a time of great change. Look at it."

"From Egypt we get writing and arithmetic," his father also instructed. "That's when history began, with the invention of writing five thousand years ago."

A cultured family, a privileged immigrant family: the mother was a teacher and the father an aeronautical engineer who graduated with honors from Argentina's Air Force Academy. He was a propulsions expert, commanding knowledge of weapons systems and thermodynamics; a film addict and a colorful, funny storyteller—a critic—who brought his son along to the cinema, sometimes to two a day, out of one and into the other: *Tarzan, Laurel and Hardy, El Cid; The Longest Day; The Train*, with Burt Lancaster. The boy's mother, whose parents were reluctant to send her to college, hitched rides with girlfriends into the Rosario countryside to instruct illiterate peasant children in a hut erected out of wooden posts and pampas grass. An occasional cow would wander in and disrupt their work, done on small, portable chalkboards; no texts: the teachers taught from the heart and listened, without pay. But in the city, Rosario, she tutored students to pay her tuition. She was *called* to be a teacher, which means that she was dedicated to bringing out the best in students, what they knew. There was never any question: she was doing Freire before Freire knew what he was doing. *Conscientização*.

In the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a public place, the mother, and the father in a wheelchair, gathered their children in a tight, intimate circle before history's artifacts and exposed them to the chronicles of cultures, from the dawn of civilization to the modern, and speculated about the future: the Ancient World—prehistoric man, the Egyptian, the ancient Near East, the Aegean and the Greek; the Christian and the Byzantine; the Middle Ages; the Renaissance; and the Modern World, the little boy's favorite and what he would study in graduate school: neoclassicism and romanticism; realism and impressionism; Postimpressionism.

Before *multiculturalism* came into vogue because America had become so internalized and indifferent, compartmentalized, narcissistic, and consumed with itself—*Amero-centered*, not Euro-centered—the little boy, the silent, observant outsider, was exposed to the interconnectedness of civilizations. He was being taught to be a citizen of the world, not of a place. Humanism. The father's polio forced this on them.

He was also being taught how to teach, how to integrate disparate elements for creative results.

"What do you see here? *Que ves?*"

"Ah . . . ah . . . When I get close, they're pieces of colors. Small dots. When I move back, slowly, the dots come into focus and there's a painting where there wasn't one before. It's a show. Yeah, *Side Show*."

"Here, what do you think?"

"It's . . . it's like a photograph. So real. That's a painting? I want to touch it."

"*Muy bien*. It's Caravaggio. He was different for a Renaissance painter. So realistic. It's a religious theme with very *real* characters: armed men, the Roman tavern, and poor people. Look at Matthew's gloomy face. Very *real*. It's the lighting that makes the painting appear so sacred. See, the light comes from heaven. Remember Michelangelo? There's an influence here. Painters borrow from other painters; one generation learns from a previous and the new generation tries to use what they learn from the past, but in new ways, ways that demonstrate how the new age has changed."

The little boy was learning to *read*, to *reflect*, and to *criticize*; in the meantime, both the mother and the father whispered history into his ear: *this was done between 1887–88; it was a time of transition and experimentation; Europe was the center of the world and the United States was growing, becoming the power it is today, after the First World War; people weren't comfortable with conventional ideas, they mistrusted and looked for changes.*

He was learning to negotiate history with image. He was learning languages, their uses and implications—their force. Aesthetics and phenomenology. He was learning the importance of metaphor; that life is represented aesthetically: the Body of Christ; God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; original sin and venial sin; Edouard Manet, Monet, and Degas; Rodin's *The Thinker*; Van Gogh, all of him; and yes, Pablo Picasso, a Spaniard.

Everything could be used aesthetically to make a statement, metaphorically; objects are subject to interpretation, layered in meanings, he was certain, and this was fortified by supplemental interpretations: the Guggenheim, the Museum of Natural History and the Museum of Modern Art; music on the Fisher stereo, complete with radio: Caruso and Frank Sinatra, Harry Bellafonte and Chubby Checker; Handel, Mozart, and Haydn; Beethoven; the Supremes and Motown; the Beatles.

The little boy's original sense of America's cacophony was slowly leavigated by art. His parents prodded him to see, to reflect, and then to speak, to explain what he saw and why.

Interpretations.

He relished the subjectivity of it all; it gave him significance. They let him come to culture and history—to civilization; in it, he could place himself. He was attracted to his parents' teaching methods. It was inculcated in him, and natural. He learned that sculptures, paintings, and music are windows onto the world, which the outsider needs to rearticulate himself. It was—and is—an organic process.

He was less alone in his imagined partnerships with art; however, these relationships also punctuated his problematic existence, framed

by different realms which pushed him further to the margins: old, European-like Argentina and new, aggressive America; the inner sanctum of home and the public demands of school; natural Spanish and forced English rules; art and history; mobility and paralysis—dichotomies and ironies.

In each of these places, he began to feel somewhat at home, but also a foreigner, like an intruder or a tourist—passing through. Belonging and not belonging. Fractured. He was neither *in* nor *out*, but somewhere in between. This made him unsure; he became angered by his vulnerability—always angry. Confused.

The weekly subway trips into New York City to see his father at the Rusk Institute further confused his identity—and fueled his anger.

The Rusk Institute, a surreal place. In the lobby, off to one side, was a greenhouse. He would sometimes wander into the lush, humid room that housed a fountain and a parrot, and imagine himself in distant, exotic lands. (The little boy was also learning how to run, how to find places for escape from himself, from the confusion he felt.) It was a way for him to leave the Institute while he waited for his father to wheel down from the fourth floor on the way to the dreaded cafeteria: the Saturday family outing.

He hated the cafeteria. It was a haunted house of quadriplegics, paraplegics, amputees; nature's accidents and deformations; hydrocephalics: monsters and misfits in bibs, food and saliva running out of their gaping mouths and down their chins. All around, the sounds of choking, the sounds of misconnections struggling for logic—the sounds of despair for normalcy denied.

The boy couldn't eat, pushing the food down, gagging, teary-eyed. He would try to smile at his father, who demanded his son respect and accept the deformed—and look beyond. But his stomach hardened.

He had nightmares, tossing and turning and covering his head with his sheets, trying to dislodge the disfigured, who encroached on his mind.

His father's fourth-floor room was the Latin quarter: a Colombian who suffered a gun-shot wound to the spine (paraplegic); a Venezuelan, paralyzed from head to toes because of an automobile accident (quadriplegic); a Puerto Rican with a broken neck (quadriplegic); a Guatemalan electrician whose one arm and two legs had been fried by hot wires (amputee). They were all here, looking out over the East River, to learn how to live with their *handicaps* in a world inhospitable to the nonwalking, the non-whole and incomplete.

On the second and third floors of the Rusk Institute, the boy sometimes accompanied his father to watch him lift hand weights, stretch himself on pulleys, and drag himself with steel braces across parallel bars. In the swimming pool, his father was lowered by a sling

and a lift into the water that replaced the steel braces and the crutches and, finding partial liberation from paralysis, was able to slowly float about as if in suspended animation.

The Rusk Institute taught the *handicapped* how to put on clothes by themselves; how to go to the bathroom (by themselves); how to lift and pull their wheelchairs—those that could use their arms—over hostile curbs; how to drive a car with hand controls; how to cook; how to be independent, yet live with unfathomable physical dependencies in an indifferent world: how to become *un-handicapped* and approximate normalcy.

It was at the Rusk Institute—another marginalizing place, another place that drove the boy further into his imaginings, his aloneness—where the boy was again redefined.

“Thank God your father has a son with wide shoulders,” the mother would always say.

He learned how to live behind his father’s chair, pushing it first within the Institute, then eventually throughout New York City. *Watch out for people’s legs*. The boy became a wheelchair aficionado: he pushed his father over New York City streets, in department stores, in museums. First, he stretched his neck and head to peer over his father’s shoulders, then over his head, and eventually he towered over him. He saw the world of the disabled; he learned how his father thought, staring into the back of his head, listening and observing the logic of it all. An education.

When the father began driving, it was the boy who put the foot rests, the left-hand arm rest, seat cushion, and entire wheelchair into the trunk of the car, a Mercury Comet—their first American automobile. Then he sat next to his father. The Comet opened their horizons; it became new legs for the father, and the rest of the family. They went upstate, hugging the Hudson River, to Hyde Park to visit F.D.R.’s home, a family hero, not because he had been President, but because he too had achieved in spite of his polio; to Connecticut and Candlewood Lake; all the way to Florida, Miami, and Palm Beach—twice; to Canada; to Washington, D.C. (to the Smithsonian, of course).

All the time, it was the boy who pushed his father and received a bird’s-eye view of a world of boundaries—and the tremendous struggle to overcome them. He, too, realized that the physical boundaries designed by *the normal* were, in fact, metaphors for greater and more subtle intellectual and spiritual boundaries.

“Everything would be so much more comfortable, even easier, if architects and builders would build things for the handicapped,” his father said. “The non-handicapped would find things much easier for them too. The trouble is they don’t know *how* to think like someone who is handicapped.”

The boy learned. There was a logic to what his father said: the New York City streets and sidewalks, always obstructed by water or snow and ice or garbage, the entrance to buildings, the awkward public bathrooms, and the always-too-narrow doorways required forethought before every action—seemingly for everyone. People acted sometimes in unconsciously cruel ways. The boy noticed how the indifferent, physically mobile ran into each other at street corners, and pushed or shoved or tripped over his father, then looked down at him as if it were his fault, as if he shouldn’t be down there.

From behind the wheelchair, the little boy learned how disabled *the normal* are, how indifferent and callous, and how *un-disabled*, how really *normal* was his father with his lifeless legs. Handicapped Only: the boy hated these signs, this inaccurate designation. It was a lie.

His father’s polio opened his eyes and changed his vision of the world.

Years later, after a family luncheon at the Plaza Hotel, now a man with wife and children, *I* was very conscious of how easy and automatic it was for me to go to my father when it was time to leave. My father seemed to expect it, though he didn’t say a word. He was very much at ease with me behind him. *I* was easy with it. This familiar discourse was comfortable for both of us.

We went out the side door of the Plaza, its gilded front entrance too inhospitable for wheelchairs, and crossed the street to Central Park, where the rest of the family waited amongst the phaetons. It was a bright fall day. The air was crisp and the sun warm on our faces. Leaves were on the sidewalks; the smell of dung and horses and sweet sycamores hung in the air. It was romantic, genteel. It was the grandchildren’s turn to be introduced to the Met: Caravaggio was there.

Strolling easily up Fifth Avenue, *I* suddenly became very self-aware; my entire life, like a movie, passed before me in a flash, a single image. There *I* was, a *big* man, as people like to say, slightly bent at the waist, leaning over my father’s gray-haired and balding head, pushing his wheelchair up Fifth Avenue. All around us, the kids, my brother and sister, spouses—everyone—was involved in their own conversations, or chasing after the young ones. And *I* was behind my father, with my mother to my left, on the side closest to Central Park, walking beside me, her right arm linked through my left.

It felt bizarre, surreal—not because this was new to me, it was not—but because *I* had never realized the significance of it before: mother was strolling, as she had done so many times in her life before polio struck, down a boulevard in Rosario or Buenos Aires with my father, her husband; however, now, and many other times like this one, my father and my mother were carrying on silent rituals from their past through me. Old anger began to rumble.

I was involved in their intimacy. This had been my life, this had made all the difference in my world: the father, the mother, and the son in the middle; not quite inside, not quite outside, always in the margins. It's inhospitable in the margins.

The marginal existence is an accurate description for my life. I feel *almost* at home everywhere—but not quite. It's a life of incessant searching for a secret, lost other, out of the past. It's *a life* that has been lost because it was replaced by another, the one behind the chair in America.

I remember hearing Yves Montand and Maurice Chevalier on the Fisher stereo and my mother taking me in her arms and showing me how to dance. *Lead*, she'd say. *You determine where to go. Listen to the music.* Even then I realized that I was a surrogate for my father. *El hombre de la casa*, my grandfather labeled me when my father became ill. But those were hard shoes to fill, my father's, for this naive *man of the house*, the little boy. I was only six then. I've never come close. Still haven't. He set a high standard, a difficult standard—a common dilemma experienced by the first-born male in a Spanish household.

Or perhaps I have achieved different things, in different ways? Perhaps what I have achieved has been to learn to break away from the triangle.

I lived in the seams of everything. Upon reflection, however, these aspects of my life—the harrowing early years of *nonbilingual* education at the hands of unforgiving nuns (so much Catholicism, so little Christianity); the intimacy of the public Met; the Rusk Institute—these vastly different cultures nourished in me the sensitivity and insight to notice and appreciate students who themselves were marginalized, lost, meandering. I can sense where they have been fractured and disenfranchised. I am also certain of their limitless potential. I'm open to it, or better said, I've been opened to it.

We can all find this within ourselves.

I feel comfortable and at ease with the black, the Hispanic, and the white middle-class student who lives in what I identify as a *middle-class coma*: a lulling to sleep by complacency with lower standards and consumerism. These students, in turn, identify with me, though we have enormously different backgrounds: theirs limited, and mine arguably privileged. How is this possible? By means of mutual respect in an open classroom that they must dominate, define, and inhabit. I don't lie to them about their limitations; instead, I demand standards and realistic expectations. No kid gloves here, just honesty and good listening. Work.

Looking back through my history, all seems so simple and innocent now: tragedy was what brought my family together, and me to teaching; tragedy changed my family and opened up my vistas. Ironic. Of course, I wasn't aware then that I was actually witnessing how tragedy

creates; how it nurtures the imagination of those willing to openly accept drastic change and new impressions; how self-sacrifice—the *opening* of one's self to another—actually brings out the best in both, which is what Freire argues, as has Gramsci before. And Plato before that. But it's a sloppy process.

I now realize I was being formed to be a teacher on the day my father took ill. Circumstances formed me, and brought me here, to teaching. I'm convinced I can't do anything else. My family is an animated one: storytelling, impassioned political discussions, humor, and intense listening are always vital to our tight circle; we draw each other out. But the tragedy of my father's polio broke this circle; to regain it and to understand it, to live in its nurturing safety again thousands of miles away, without an extended family and in a foreign culture demanding assimilation for survival, required a troublesome journey, characterized by alienation, loss, and confusion. Disenfranchisement. Every member of my family here in America has had to remake himself and herself.

Self-empowerment, learning to create, I now know, requires the momentary loss of self—a letting go, a free fall—and then an arduous yet rewarding journey to redefine what was lost—the self—in imaginative ways. Something new is created. It's an endless cycle repeated throughout one's life. It's a cycle that must be re-created in the classroom so that both students and teachers can examine it and determine where exactly they exist in it. This is how we learn, and how we then revise ourselves. It's never easy, often painful—it's always a process.