

Edmund White

Cinnamon Skin

(UNITED STATES)

When I was a kid, I was a Buddhist and an atheist, but I kept making bargains with God: if he'd fulfill a particular wish, I'd agree to believe in him. He always came through, but I still withheld my faith, which shows, perhaps, how unreasonable rationality can be.

One of God's miracles occurred when I was thirteen. I was spending most of that year with my father in Cincinnati; my mother, a psychologist, thought I needed the promixity of a man, even though my father then ignored me and was uninterested in teaching me baseball or tennis, sports in which he excelled. My father and stepmother were going to Mexico for a winter holiday that would not, alas, fall during my Christmas school break, although it was unlikely that he would have invited me even if I had been free, since the divorce agreement specified nothing about winter vacations. One long weekend, I returned to Chicago to see my mother and sister, and fell on my knees beside my bed in the dark and prayed that I'd be invited to come along anyway. The next morning my mother received a telegram from my father asking me to join him in Cincinnati the following day for a three-week car trip to Acapulco. He'd already obtained advance assignments from my teachers; he would supervise my homework.

My mother had a phobia about speaking to my father, and spent thirty-five years without ever hearing his voice. If vocal communication was forbidden, the exchange of cordial but brief tactical notes or telegrams was acceptable, provided it didn't occur regularly. My mother's generation believed in something called *character*, and it was established through self-discipline. Anyway, my mother suggested that I phone my father, since court etiquette prevented her from doing so.

The next day I took the train to Cincinnati; it was the James Whitcomb Riley, named after the Hoosier Poet ("When the frost is on the punkin," one of his odes begins). At the end of each car, there were not scenes of rural Indiana, as one might have expected, but, instead, large reproductions of French Impressionist paintings—hayricks, water lilies. Notre-Dame, mothers and children *en fleurs* . . . This train, which I took twice a month to visit my dad when I was living with my mom, or to visit Mom when I was living with Dad,

was the great forcing shed of my imagination: no one knew me; I was free to become anyone. I told one startled neighbor that I was English and in America for the first time, affecting an accent so obviously fabricated and snobbish that it eventually provoked a smile. I told another I had leukemia but was in remission. Another time I said that both my parents had just died in a car crash, and I was going to live with a bachelor uncle. Once I chatted up a handsome young farmer, his face stiff under its burn, his T-shirt incapable of containing the black hair sprouting up from under it; he inspired a tragic opera that I started writing the next week; it was called "Orville."

On this trip, my imagination was busy with a thick guidebook on Mexico I'd checked out of the public library. I read everything I could about Toltecs, Aztecs, and Mayans; but the astrology bored me, as did the bloody attacks and counterattacks, and one century blended into another without a single individual's emerging out of the plumed hordes—until the tragic Montezuma (a new opera subject, even more heartrending than Orville, whose principal attribute had been a smell of Vitalis hair tonic and, more subtly, of starch and ironing, a quality difficult to render musically).

The year was 1953; my father and stepmother rode in the front of his new, massive Cadillac—shiny pale-blue metal and chrome and, inside, an oiled, dark-blue leather with shag carpet—and I had so much space in the back seat that I could stretch out full length, slightly nauseated from the cigars that my father chain-smoked and his interminable monologues about the difference between stocks and bonds. While in the States, he listened to broadcasts of the news, the stock reports, and sporting events, three forms of impersonal entertainment that I considered to be as tedious as the Toltecs' battles.

I lay in the back seat, knocking my legs together in an agony of unreleased desire. My head filled with vague daydreams, as randomly rotating as the clouds I could see up above through the back window. In those days, the speed limit was higher than now and the roads were just two-lane meanders; there was no radar and no computers, and if a cop stopped us for speeding my father tucked a five-dollar bill under his license and instantly we were urged on our way with a cheerful wave and a "Y'all come back, yuh heah?" My father then resumed his murderous speed, lunging and turning and braking and swearing, and I hid so I wouldn't witness, white-knuckled, the near-disasters. As night fell, the same popular song, the theme song from the film *Moulin Rouge*, was played over and over again on station after station, like a flame being passed feebly from torch to torch in a casual marathon.

We stopped in Austin, Texas, to see my grandfather, who was retired and living alone in a small wooden house he rented. He was famous locally for his "nigger" jokes, which he collected in self-published books with titles such as *Let's Laugh*, *Senegambian Sizzles*, *Folks Are Funny*, and *Chocolate Drops from the South*, and he made fun of me for saying "Cue" Klux Klan instead of "Koo"—an organization he'd once belonged to, and accepted as a harmless if stern fraternity. He was dull, like my father, though my father was different: whereas my grandfather was gregarious but disgustingly self-absorbed, my

father was all facts, all business, misanthropic, his racism genial and condescending, though his anti-Semitism was virulent and reeked of hate. He wanted as little contact as possible with other people. And while he liked women, he regarded them as silly and flighty and easy to seduce; they excited men but weren't themselves sexual, although easily tricked into bed. Men he despised, even boys.

My stepmother, Kay, was "cockeyed and harelipped," according to my mother, although the truth was she simply had a lazy eye that wandered in and out of focus and an everted upper lip that rose on one side like Judy Garland's whenever she hit a high note. Kay read constantly, anything at all; she'd put down *Forever Amber* to pick up *War and Peace*, trade in *Désirée* for *Madame Bovary*, but the next day she couldn't remember a thing about what she'd been reading. My father, who never finished a book, always said, when the subject of literature came up, "You'll have to ask Kay about that. She's the reader in this family." He thought novels were useless, even corrupting; if he caught me reading he'd find me a chore to do, such as raking the lawn.

My father liked long-legged redheads in high heels and short nighties, if his addiction to *Esquire* and its illustrations was any indication, but my stepmother was short and dumpy, like my mother, though less intelligent. She'd been brought up on a farm in northern Ohio by a scrawny father in bib overalls and a pretty, calm, roundfaced mother from Pennsylvania Dutch country, who said "mind" for "remember." ("Do you mind that time we went to the caves in Kentucky?") Kay had done well in elocution class, and even now she could recite mindless doggerel with ringing authority—and with the sort of steely diction and hearty projection that are impossible to tune out. She could paint—watercolors of little Japanese maidens all in a row, or kittens or pretty flowers—and her love of art led her to be a volunteer at the art museum, where she worked three hours a week in the gift shop run by the Ladies' Auxiliary. Oh, she had lots of activities and belonged to plenty of clubs—the Ladies' Luncheon Club and the Queen City Club and the Keyboard Club.

Kay had spent her twenties and thirties being a shrewd, feisty office "gal" who let herself be picked up by big bored businessmen out for a few laughs and a roll in the hay with a good sport. She always had a joke or a wisecrack to dish up, she'd learned how to defend herself against a grabby drunk, and she always knew the score. I'm not sure how I acquired this information about her early life. Probably from my mother, who branded Kay a Jezebel, an unattractive woman with secret sexual power, someone like Wallis Simpson. After Kay married my father, however, and moved up a whole lot of social rungs, she pretended to be shocked by the very jokes she used to deliver. She adopted the endearingly dopey manner of the society matron immortalized in Helen E. Hokinson's *New Yorker* cartoons. Dad gave her an expensive watch that dangled upside down from a brooch (so that only Kay could read it), which she pinned to her lapel: a bow of white and yellow gold studded with beautiful lapis lazuli. Her skirts became longer, her voice softer, her hair

grayer, and she replaced her native sassiness with an acquired innocence. She'd always been cunning rather than intelligent, but now she appeared to become naïve as well, which in our milieu was a sign of wealth: only rich women were sheltered; only the overprotected were unworldly. As my real mother learned to fend for herself, my stepmother learned to feign incompetence.

Such astute naïveté, of course, was only for public performance. At home, Kay was as crafty as ever. She speculated out loud about other people's motives and pieced together highly unflattering scenarios based on the slimmest evidence. Every act of kindness was considered secretly manipulative, any sign of generosity profoundly selfish. She quizzed me for hours about my mother's finances (turbulent) and love life (usually nonexistent, sometimes disastrous). She was, of course, hoping that Mother would remarry so Dad wouldn't have to pay out the monthly alimony. My sister was disgusted that I'd betray our mother's secrets, but Kay bewitched me. We had few entertainments and spent long, tedious hours together in the stifling Cincinnati summer heat, and I'd been so carefully sworn to silence by my mother that, finally, when one thing came out, I told all. I was thrilled to have a promise to break.

Kay and my father fought all the time. She'd pester him to do something or challenge him over a trivial question of fact until he exploded: "God damn it, Kay, shut your goddam mouth, you don't know what the hell you're talking about, and I don't want to hear one more goddam word out of your mouth! I'm warning you to shut it and shut it now. Got it?"

"Oh, E. V.," she wailed (his nickname; his middle name was Valentine), "you don't have to talk to me that way, you're making me sick, physically sick, my heart is pounding, and, look, I'm sweating freely, I'm soaked right through, my underarms are drenched, and you know—my high *blood* pressure." Here she'd break off and begin blubbering. She had only to invoke her blood pressure ("Two hundred and fifty over a hundred and ten," she'd mysteriously confide) in order to win the argument and subdue my red-faced father. I pictured the two of them as thermometers in which the mounting mercury was about to explode through the upper tip. Kay constantly referred to her imminent death, often adding, "Well, I won't be around much longer to irritate you with my remarks, which you find so *stupid* and *ignorant*."

My father filled his big house with Mahler, and played it throughout the night; he went to sleep at dawn. And the more socially successful Kay became the less she conformed to his hours. They scarcely saw each other. During the hot Cincinnati days, while Daddy slept in his air-conditioned room, Kay and I spent the idle hours talking to each other. I bit my nails; she paid me a dollar a nail to let them grow. When they came in, I decided I wanted them longer and longer and shaped like a woman's; Kay promised to cut them as I desired, but each time she tricked me and trimmed them short while I whined my feeble protests: "*C'mon*. I want them long and *pointy*. . . . Kay! You *promised!*" I danced for her in my underpants; once I did an elaborate (and very girly)

striptease. As I became more and more feminine; she became increasingly masculine. She put one leg up and planted her foot on the chair seat, hugging her knee to her chest as a guy might. I felt I was dancing for a man.

Perhaps she watched me because she was bored and had nothing else to do. Or perhaps she knew these games attached me to her with thrilling, erotic bonds; in the rivalry with my mother for my affections, she was winning.

Or perhaps she got off on me. I remember that she gave me long massages with baby oil as I lay on the Formica kitchen table in my underpants, and I sprang a boner. Her black maid watched us and smiled benignly. Her name was Naomi and she'd worked for Kay one day a week ironing before Kay married; afterward she moved in as a full-time, live-in employee in my father's big house. She knew Kay's earlier incarnation as a roaring girl and no doubt wondered how far she'd go now.

In fact, she went very far. Once when I told her I was constipated she had me mount the Formica table on all fours and administered a hot-water enema out of a blue rubber pear she filled and emptied three times before permitting me to go to the toilet and squirt it out.

My whole family was awash with incestuous desires. When my real mother was drunk (as she was most nights), she'd call out from her bed and beg me to rub her back, then moan with pleasure as I kneaded the cool, sweating dough. My sister was repulsed by our mother's body, but I once walked in on her and my father in his study in Cincinnati. She must have been fourteen or fifteen. She was sitting in a chair and he stood behind her, brushing her long blond hair and quietly crying. (It as the only time I ever saw him cry.) Later she claimed she and Daddy had made love. She said she and I'd done it in an upper berth on the night train from Chicago to Cincinnati once, but I can't quite be sure I remember it.

When I was twelve, Kay was out of town once and Daddy took me to dinner at the Gourmet Room, a glass-walled dome on top of the Terrace Hilton. The restaurant had a mural by Miró and French food. Daddy drank a lot of wine and told me I had my mother's big brown eyes. He said boys my age were rather like girls. He said there wasn't much difference between boys and girls my age. I was thrilled. I tried to be warm and intuitive and seductive.

Now, as we approached the Mexican border, Kay started teasing me: "I hope you have on very clean underpants, Eddie, because the Mexican police strip-search every tourist and if they find skid marks in your Jockey shorts they may not let you in."

My father thought this was a terrific joke and with his thin-lipped smile nodded slowly and muttered, "She's serious, and she's a hundred percent right."

Although I worried about my panties, I half hoped that a brown-skinned, mustachioed guard in a sweat-soaked uniform would look into them, and at my frail, naked body: even though I was convinced that I'd never been uglier. I had a brush cut Kay had forced on me ("You'll be hot if you don't get all that old hair out of your face"), and my white scalp showed through it. I wore

glasses with enormous black frames and looked like an unappealing quiz kid, without the budding intellectual's redeeming brashness. I was ashamed of my recently acquired height, cracking voice, and first pubic hairs, and I posed in front of the foggy bathroom mirror with a towel turban around my head and my penis pushed back and concealed between my legs. In public, I'd fold into myself like a Swiss Army knife, hoping to occupy as little space as possible.

But at the border the guards merely waved us through after querying my father about the ten cartons of Cuban cigars in the trunk (Dad had to grease a few palms to convince them the cigars were for his own use, not for resale). We drove down the two-lane Pan-American Highway from the Rio Grande through an endless flat cactus desert into the mountains. Kay encouraged me to wave at the tiny, barefoot Indians walking along the highway in their bright costumes, their raven-black hair hanging straight down to their shoulders. Sometimes they'd shake their fists at our retreating fins, but I seemed to be the only one who noticed.

From the highway, we seldom saw villages or even houses, although from time to time we noticed a red flag that had been tossed into the top of a mesquite tree. Daddy said the flag signified that a cow had just been slaughtered. "Since they don't have refrigeration," he informed us through a cloud of cigar smoke, his tiny yellow teeth revealed in a rare smile, "they must sell all the edible parts of the animal and cook them within a few hours." I don't know how he knew that, although he had grown up in Texas, worked summers as a cowboy, and must have known many Mexicans. I was struck by his equanimity in contemplating such shameful poverty, which would have disgusted him had we still been in the States; in Mexico, he smiled benignly at it, as though it were an integral part of a harmonious whole.

My father had a passion for travelling long hours and making record time. He also had ironclad kidneys. Kay had to stop to pee every hour. Perhaps her blood-pressure medicine was a diuretic. "Anyway," she whined, "I don't understand why we have to rush like this. What's the hurry? For Pete's sake, E. V., we're in a foreign country and we should take a gander at it. *No es problema?*"

Before her marriage, when she was still just my father's secretary and "mistress" (my mother's lurid, old-fashioned word), Kay would have said, "For Christ's sake." If she now replaced "Christ" with "Pete," she did so as part of her social beatification. She might actually have said "take a gander" when she was a farm girl in northern Ohio, but now it was placed between gently inverted commas to suggest that she was citing, with mild merriment but without contempt, an endearingly rural but outdated Americanism. Like many English-speaking North Americans, she thought foreign languages were funny, as though no one would ordinarily speak one except as a joke. "*No es problema?*" was her comic contribution to the mishap of being in Mexico, the verbal equivalent of a jumping bean.

Halfway to Mexico City we stopped at a beautiful old colonial-style hotel that had what it advertised as the world's largest porch, wrapped around it on all

four sides. Meek Indian women were eternally on all fours scrubbing tiles the garnet color of fresh scabs still seeping blood. That night, Kay and Dad and I walked past banana trees spotlit orange and yellow and a glowing swimming pool that smelled of sulfur. "Pee-you," Kay said, holding her little nose with her swollen, red-nailed fingers.

It's a sulfur spa, Kay," Dad explained. "The Mexicans think it has curative powers."

We entered a roomy, high-ceilinged cave in which a band was playing sophisticated rumbas. The headwaiter, broad and tall as a wardrobe, wore a double-breasted jacket.

"Uno whiskey," Dad said once we were seated, showing off for our benefit. "Y two Coca-Cola por favorita."

"Sí, señor!" the headwaiter shouted before he reclaimed his dignity by palming the order off with lofty disdain on a passing Indian busboy in a collarless blue jacket.

All the other guests at the hotel appeared to be rich Mexicans. No one around us was speaking English. The most attractive people I'd ever seen were dancing an intricate samba, chatting and smiling to each other casually while their slender hips swivelled into and out of provocative postures, and their small, expensively shod feet shuffled back and forth in a well-rehearsed, syncopated trot.

Daddy was decked out in a pleated jacket with side tabs that opened up to accommodate extra girth; I think it was called a Havana shirt. Suddenly both he and Kay looked impossibly sexless in their pale, perspiring bodies. In my blood the marimbas had lit a crackling fire, a fiery longing for the Mexican couple before me, their bodies expert and sensual, their manner light and sophisticated—a vision of a civilized sexuality I'd never glimpsed before. Outside, however, the heavy sulfur smell somehow suggested an animal in rut, just as the miles of unlit rural night around the cave made me jumpy. There was nowhere to go, and the air was pungent with smoke from hearths and filled with the cry of cocks; in the distance were only the shadowy forms of the mountains.

In Mexico City, we stayed in a nineteen-thirties hotel on the Reforma. There were then only two million people in "México," as the citizens called their beautiful city, with a proud use of synecdoche. People swarmed over our car at each stoplight, proffering lottery tickets, but we kept our windows closed and sailed down the spacious boulevards. We saw the Ciudad Universitaria under construction outside town, with its bold mural by Diego Rivera—a lien on a bright future, a harbinger of progress. We visited the Museum of Modern Art and ate in a French restaurant, Normandie, a few blocks away. We ascended the hill to the fortress castle of Chapultepec, where the Austrian rulers, the lean Maximilian, the pale Carlota, had lived. We were poled in barques through floating gardens and climbed the Aztecs' step pyramids.

We were accompanied everywhere by one of Daddy's business associates and his wife. After I corrected this man ("Not the eighteenth century," I snapped, "that was in the *sixteenth*"), Daddy drew me aside and said, "Never

contradict another person like that, especially someone older. Just say ‘I may be wrong but I thought I read somewhere . . .’ or ‘What do I know, but it seems . . .’ Got it? Best to let it just go by, but if you must correct him do it that way. And by the way, don’t say you *love* things. Women say that. Rather, say you *like* things.”

I had always been proud of noticing the fatuous remarks made by adults. Now I was appalled to learn that my father had been vexed by things I said. I was half flattered by his attention (he was looking at me, after all) but also half irritated at how he wanted me to conform to his idea of a man.

We went to Cuernavaca and saw the flower-heavy walls of its mansions, then to Taxco, where Kay bought a very thin silver bracelet worked into interlocking flowers. The heat made her heavy perfume, Shalimar, smell all the stronger; its muskiness competed with my father’s cigar smoke. Only I had no smell at all. Daddy warned us to look for tarantulas in our shoes before we put them on.

We arrived at Acapulco, still a chic beach resort, not the paved-over fast-food hellhole it would become, and stayed at the Club de Pesca. I had a room to myself on a floor above my father and Kay’s. The manager had delivered baskets of soft and slightly overripe fruit to our rooms; after a day, the pineapple smelled pungent.

One night we went to a restaurant in a hotel on top of a cliff and watched teen-age boys in swimsuits shed their silk capes and kneel before a spotlight statue of the Virgin, then plunge a hundred and fifty feet down into the waves flowing into and out of a chasm. Their timing had to be exact or they’d be dashed on the rocks. They had superb, muscled bodies, tan skin, glinting religious medals, and long black hair slicked back behind their ears. Afterward, the divers walked among the crowd, passing a hat for coins, their feet huge, their faces pale behind their tans, their haughty smiles at odds with the look of shock in their eyes.

The popular song that year in Mexico was “Piel Canela” (“Cinnamon Skin”), an ode to a beautiful mulatto girl. In the States, reference to color was considered impolite, although everyone told racist jokes in private; here, apparently, a warm brown color was an attribute of beauty. In the afternoons on the beach, young water-ski instructors stretched their long brown arms and legs, adjusting themselves inside their swimsuits, offering to give lessons to pale tourists, both male and female. We gringos had a lot to learn from them.

A singer and movie star from Argentina, Libertad Lamarque, was staying in our hotel. When we rode up in the elevator with her, she was wearing a tailored white linen suit and had a clipped, snowy-white Chihuahua on a leash. It turned out that her room was next to mine. I became friendly with her daughter—I don’t remember how we met. Although Libertad was in exile from Perón’s Argentina, her daughter still lived most of the time in Buenos Aires, where she sang American ballads in a night club. One night she volunteered to sing “You Go to My Head” at the Club de Pesca—yes, that must be

how I met her. I went up to congratulate her and was surprised to discover she scarcely spoke English, though she sang it without an accent.

Libertad's daughter must have found me amusing, or perhaps docile, or a convenient alibi for her midday mid-ocean pastimes. She invited me to go out on her speedboat late the next morning; after dropping anchor, she and the handsome Indian driver kissed and embraced for an hour. I didn't know what to do with my eyes, so I watched. The sun was hot but the breeze constant. That night I was so burned Kay had to wrap me in sheets drenched in cold water.

I moaned and turned for two days and nights in wet sheets. A local doctor came and went. My fever soared. In my confused, feverish thoughts I imagined that I'd been burned by the vision of that man and woman clawing at each other on the varnished doors that folded down over the speedboat's powerful motor.

The man who had accompanied Libertad's daughter on the piano was a jowly Indian in his late thirties. Perhaps he smiled at me knowingly or held my hand a second too long when we were introduced, but I honestly can't remember his giving me the slightest sign of being interested in me. And yet I became determined to seduce him. My skin was peeling in strips, like long white gauze, revealing patches of a cooked-shrimp pink underneath. My mirror told me the effect wasn't displeasing; in fact the burn brought out my freckles and gave me a certain raffishness. Perhaps soon I, too, would have cinnamon skin. Until now, I'd resembled a newly shorn sheep.

One night at ten, my well-sauced father, atypically genial, sent me off to bed with a pat on the shoulder. But, instead of undressing and going to sleep, I prepared myself for a midnight sortie. I showered in the tepid water that smelled of chlorine and pressed my wet brush-cut hair flat against my skull. From my chest I coaxed off another strip of dead skin; I felt I was unwinding a mummy. I soaked myself in a cheap aftershave made by Mennen and redolent of the barbershop (witch hazel and limes). I sprinkled the toilet water onto the sheets. I put on a fresh pair of white Jockey underpants and posed in front of the mirror. I rolled the waistband down until it revealed just a tuft of newly sprouting pubic hair. I danced my version of the samba toward the mirror and back again. I wriggled out of my undershorts, turned, and examined my buttocks. I kissed my shoulder, then stood on tiptoe and looked at my chest, belly button, penis.

At last, my watch told me it was midnight. I dressed in shorts and a pale-green shirt and new sandals and headed down toward the bar. My legs looked as long and silky as those of Dad's pinups. I stood beside the piano and stared holes through the musician; I hoped he could smell my aftershave. He didn't glance up at me once, but I felt he was aware of my presence.

He took his break between sets and asked me if I wanted to walk to the end of the dock. When we got there we sat on a high-backed bench, which hid us from view. We looked out across the harbor at the few lights on the farther shore, one of them moving. A one-eyed car or a motor scooter climbed the

road and vanished over the crest of a hill. A soft warm breeze blew in over the Pacific.

Some people lived their whole lives beside the restless, changeable motions of the ocean, rocked by warm breezes night and day, their only clothing—the merest concession to decency, their bodies constantly licked by water and wind. I who had known the cold Chicago winters, whose nose turned red and hands blue in the arctic temperatures, whose scrotum shrank and feet went numb, who could scarcely guess the gender, much less discern the degree of beauty, under those moving gray haystacks of bonnets, mittens, overcoats, and scarves—here, in Mexico, I felt my body, browned and peeled into purity, expand and relax.

The pianist and I held hands. He said, “I could come up to your room after I get off at four in the morning.”

“I’m in Room 612,” I said.

I looked over my shoulder and saw my very drunk father weaving his way toward me. When he was halfway out the dock, I stood up and hailed him.

“Hi, Daddy,” I said. “I just couldn’t sleep. I decided to come down and relax. Do you know Pablo, the pianist from the bar?” I made up the name out of thin air.

“Hello, Pablo,” They shook hands. “Now you better get to bed, young man.”

“O.K. Good night, Daddy. Good night, Pablo.”

Back in my room, I looked at the luminescent dial on my watch as it crept toward two, then three. I had no idea what sex would be like; in truth, I had never thought about it. I just imagined our first embrace would be as though we were in a small wooden boat floating down a river by moonlight. Pablo and I would live here by the sea; I’d learn to make tortillas.

I woke to the sound of shouts in the hall. Oh, no! I’d given Pablo not my room number, 610, but that of Libertad Lamarque, 612. I could hear her angry denunciations in Spanish and Pablo’s timid murmurs. At last, she slammed her door shut and I opened mine. I hissed for him to come in. He pushed past me, I shut the door, and he whispered curses in Spanish against me. He sat on the edge of the bed, a mountain that had become a volcano. I knelt on the floor before him and looked up with meek eyes, pleading for forgiveness.

I was appalled by the mistake in room numbers. In my fantasies love was easy, a costume drama, a blessed state that required neither skill nor aptitude but was conferred—well, on *me*, simply because I wanted it so much and because, even if I wasn’t exactly worthy of it, I would become so once love elected me. Now my hideous error showed me that I wasn’t above mishaps and that a condition of cinematic bliss wasn’t automatic.

Pablo undressed. He didn’t kiss me. He pulled my underpants down, spit on his wide, stubby cock, and pushed it up my ass. He didn’t hold me in his arms. My ass hurt like hell. I wondered if I’d get blood or shit on the sheets. He was lying on top of me, pushing my face and chest into the mattress. He plunged in and out. It felt like I was going to shit, and I hoped I would be able to hold it in. I was afraid I’d smell and repulse him. He smelled of old sweat.

His fat belly felt cold as it pressed against my back. He breathed a bit harder, then abruptly stopped his movements. He pulled out and stood up. He must have ejaculated. It was in me now. He headed for the bathroom, switched on the harsh light, washed his penis in the bowl, and dried it off with one of the two small white towels that the maid brought every day. He had to stand on tiptoe to wash his cock properly in the bowl.

I sat on the edge of the bed and put my underpants back on. The Indian dressed and put one finger to his lips as he pulled open the door and stuck his head out to see if all was clear. Then he was gone.

A couple of years later, when my dad found out I was gay, he said, "It's all your mother's fault, I bet. When did it first happen?" He was obsessed with such technicalities.

"I was with *you*, Daddy," I said, triumphant. "It was in Acapulco that time, with the Indian who played the piano in the Club de Pesca."

A year later, after he'd made another trip with Kay to Acapulco, he told me he'd asked a few questions and learned that the pianist had been caught molesting two young boys in the hotel and had been shot dead by the kids' father, a rich Mexican from Mexico City. I never knew whether the story was true or just a cautionary tale dreamed up by Daddy. Not that he ever had much imagination.

Recently I was in Mexico City to interview Maria Felix, an old Mexican movie star. She kept me waiting a full twenty-four hours while she washed her hair (as she explained). I wandered around the city, still in ruins from a recent earthquake. The beautiful town of two million had grown into a filthy urban sprawl of slums where twenty-four million people now lived and milled around and starved.

I returned to my hotel. My room was on the fifteenth floor of a shoddy tower. I had an overwhelming desire—no, not a desire, a compulsion—to jump from the balcony. It was the closest I ever came to suicide. I sealed the glass doors and drew the curtains, but still I could feel the pull. I left the room, convinced that I'd jump if I stayed there another moment.

I walked and walked, and I cried as I went, my body streaked by passing headlights. I felt that we'd been idiots back then, Dad and Kay and I, but we'd been full of hope and we'd come to a beautiful Art Deco hotel, the Palacio Nacional, and we'd admired the castle in Chapultepec Park and the fashionable people strolling up and down the Reforma. We'd been driving in Daddy's big Cadillac, Kay was outfitted in her wonderfully tailored Hattie Carnegie suit, with the lapel watch Daddy had given her dangling from the braided white and yellow gold brooch studded with lapis lazuli.

Now they were both dead, and the city was dirty and crumbling, and the man I was travelling with was sero-positive, and so was I. Mexico's hopes seemed as dashed as mine, and all the goofy innocence of that first thrilling trip abroad had died, my boyhood hopes for love and romance faded, just as the blue in Kay's lapis had lost its intensity year after year, until it ended up as white and small as a blind eye.