

Advance Praise for *Retribution*

"*Retribution* is a complex and deeply moving work. It is a saga of love, courage, determination, and acceptance, in which three generations of women confront political upheaval and subsequent repression, find strength and consolation in their friends, lovers, and family, and link together their lives in Chile and Canada, two countries whose histories have become increasingly intertwined. Carmen Rodríguez brings a warm, human, yet realistic voice to the tragedy of the Pinochet coup d'état and the inspiring resilience of the Chilean people."

Hugh Hazelton, author and winner of the 2006 Governor General's
Award for Translation

"...[T]he important story of family, love, political repression, and resistance in this novel of the Pinochet dictatorship and its repercussions in the lives of people and the nation."

Amy K. Kaminsky, author of *After Exile*

"The retribution attained in Carmen Rodriguez' novel is neither vengeful nor violent, but a beautifully human way of countering the world's evil. Rodriguez' direct and often poetic language, rich in vivid detail, conveys the growth from innocence to awareness of a mother and daughter, Soledad and Sol... The novel's themes—political divisions within families, social transformation, torture, betrayal, class consciousness—are rare in Canadian fiction, and the book is a valuable gift to this country's literature."

Cynthia Flood, author of *The English Stories*

-Continued-

"A compelling novel that takes the reader into the everyday experiences of a Chilean family before, during and after the Pinochet coup and dictatorship. Carmen Rodriguez has written a powerful story of lives shattered and regained, and of great courage and resilience in the face of unspeakable brutality."

Nancy Richler, author of *Your Mouth is Lovely*

"I was in Chile three years after the assassination attempt against Pinochet, when the catchword amongst friends was still *casi lo matan*—they almost killed him. Carmen Rodriguez has imagined a worse fate. She has written a stunning and heart-wrenching work of fiction about several generations of Chilean women whose histories revolve around the coup and dictatorship. *Retribution* is a rich tapestry, epic in scope, painstaking in its detail, and an important reminder that while forgetting is not an option, love and decency are the ultimate revenge against violence."

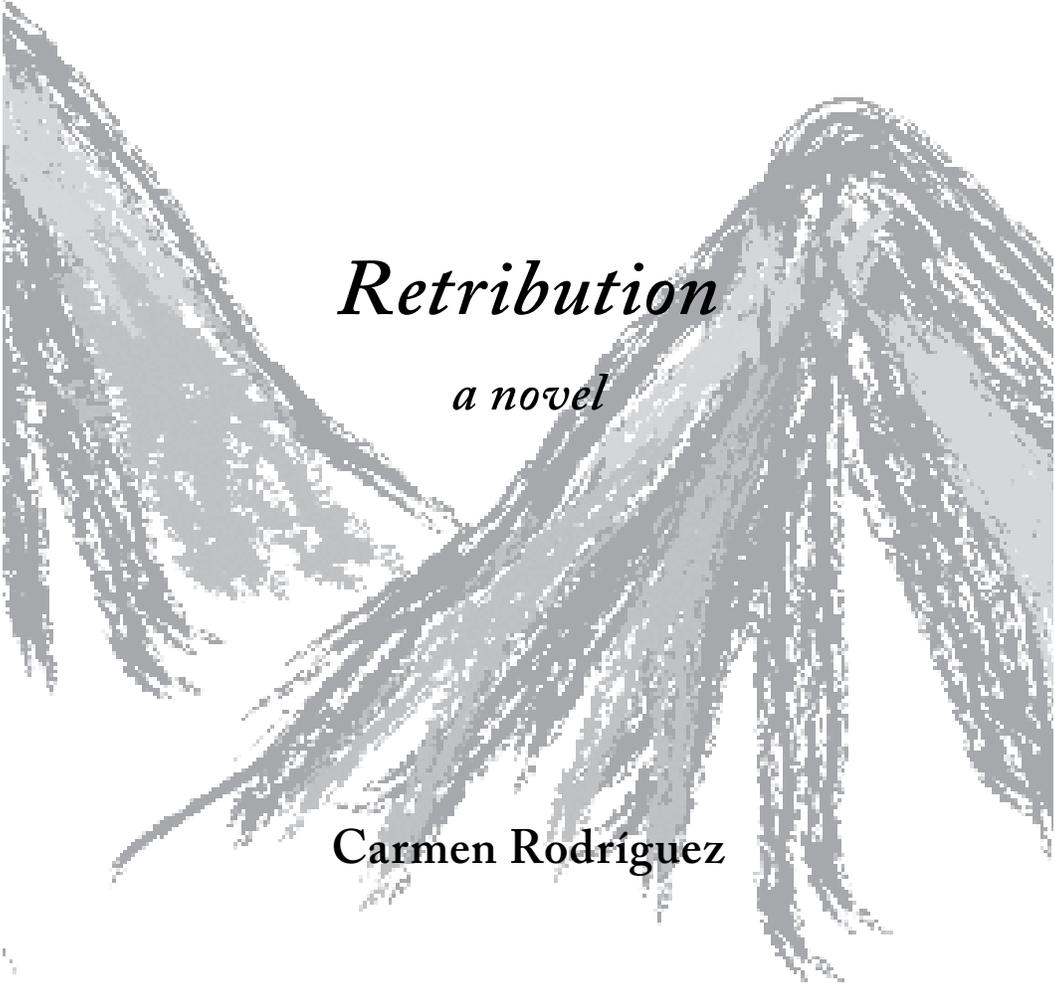
Gary Geddes, author of *Drink the Bitter Root: A Writer's Search for Justice and Redemption in Africa* and winner of the Gabriela Mistral Prize

"Each sensuous detail in *Retribution*—spanning the domestic to the poetic—is a lyrical tribute to the strength of women whose love has transformed their suffering. Candidly moving, pulsing with a deep love for the land and its inhabitants, *Retribution* sings of the tenderness of those who love and are loved, refusing to surrender vibrant legacies to the poison of hatred."

Lydia Kwa, author of *The Colours of Heroines* and *Pulse*

Retribution





Retribution

a novel

Carmen Rodríguez

Women's Press Literary

Toronto

Retribution

Carmen Rodríguez

First Published in 2011 by
Women's Press Literary, an imprint of Three O'Clock Press Inc.
180 Bloor St. West, Suite 801
Toronto, Ontario M5S2V6
www.threeoclockpress.com

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Three O'Clock Press gratefully acknowledges financial support for our publishing activities from the Ontario Arts Council, and the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund. We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts which last year invested \$20.1 million in writing and publishing throughout Canada.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Rodríguez, Carmen, 1948-
Retribution / Carmen Rodríguez.

ISBN 978-0-9866388-1-7

I. Title.

PS8585.O373R48 2011 C813'.54 C2011-905656-9

Poem excerpt from: Peri Rossi, Christina. "XXIV." *State of Exile*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2008.

Cover Photo: Copyright © <http://www.istockphoto.com/stock-photo-15378522-dark-sunset.php>
Cover Design: Sarah Hope Wayne
Printed and bound in Canada by Transcontinental



Canada

*For the essential ones: Armando and Carmen, my parents;
Choche and Nelson, my brothers; Carmen and Alejandra, my
daughters; Ted (Lalo), my son; Finn and Santiago, my grandsons;
and Alan, my partner in life.*

*Es seguro que nuestra venganza será el amor
poder amar, todavía
poder amar, a pesar de todo*

For sure our revenge will be love
to be able to love, still
to be able to love, in spite of everything

Cristina Peri Rossi

Vancouver, Canada
March, 2011

Tania

Thirteen days ago, a letter from Chile arrived.

White envelope.

Registered.

Official looking.

Signed by Judge Arturo Leiva.

A bomb concealed in a handful of circuitous sentences.

Judge Leiva writes that he would be extremely thankful if I were to approach the Chilean Consulate in Vancouver to arrange for a sample of my blood to be tested. He explains that a certain Marcelino Romero is on trial for allegedly having performed acts of torture and rape against female political prisoners at the Londres 38 detention centre in Santiago, following the military coup of September 11, 1973. There is evidence to believe, he continues, that one of those women would have been Señora Sol Martínez. There is further evidence to presume that these unspeakable acts

might have resulted in Señora Martínez becoming pregnant with Marcelino Romero's child.

Señora Sol Martínez is my mother.

Judge Leiva needs my DNA to determine whether Marcelino Romero is my father.



Until now, Miguel Rivera has been my father.

Miguel—curly fingers, hair shooting up to the sky, face of a naughty boy—principal violinist of Chile's Symphony. Miguel, one of the country's thousands of "disappeared."

I never met Miguel, but he has always been an integral part of my life. My mother and grandmother made sure that I grew to know him as thoroughly as the palms of my hands. My mom would tell me over and over again the story of how they came together when she was twelve and he, fourteen. My grandmother never tired of describing his humble demeanor and the magic of his violin playing.

But my grandma's accounts went much further back in time, to her life as a young woman in Santiago, when all she wanted was to become an elementary school teacher. She insisted on providing detailed explanations of the Chilean cultural and literary scene in those times and, at the drop of a hat, would begin reciting her favourite verses.

She was so passionate about poetry that even her term of en-

dearment for me came from one of her most cherished poems. While my mami had countless names for me—*mi gatita*, “my kitty cat”; *mijita*, “my little daughter”; *chiquitita*, “little one”; *cosa más linda*, “loveliest thing”; “darling”; “lovie”; “precious”; *regalona*, “cuddly one”—for my grandma, I was always “my queen.” Morning, afternoon and night, rain or shine, whether I had behaved well or misbehaved, I would be my grandma’s queen: “My queen, go and do your homework right now!” “My queen, stop scratching your crotch and sit like a lady.” “My queen, come here so that I can braid your hair.” “My queen, how can you go out looking like *that?*”

When Queen Elizabeth appeared on television in her ludicrous hats and carting a little purse with who-knows-what inside, I felt completely and utterly cheated. Why on earth would my grandma ever want to call me “my queen”?

One day I mentioned it to her. She burst out laughing and then explained that she didn’t call me “my queen” because of Queen Elizabeth, but rather because of a Gabriela Mistral poem called “We Would All Be Queens.” In that poem, Mistral talks about her childhood in the Elqui Valley and the friends that she used to play with, imagining that one day they would all have a life of gratification and joy, their dreams and hopes fulfilled forever; that they would all become queens. While brushing my hair, my grandma went on to tell me that when she was a girl she also had wanted to have a prosperous and happy life, but destiny had decided to play havoc with her dreams.

“And as if that hadn’t been enough, destiny also decided to mess with my daughter’s life!” she added.

“That’s my mami,” I interjected.

“Yes, my queen, that’s your mami,” she confirmed as she set the brush down and picked up two colourful hair pins in the shape of butterflies from the top of her dresser. She put one between her teeth—the same way she would hold half a dozen pins when she was doing her sewing—carefully placed the other one on the left side of my head, took the second pin out of her mouth, positioned it on the other side, looked approvingly at me in the mirror and then continued speaking as she rested her hands on my shoulders.

“So, when you were born, I decided to do everything in my power to help you become a queen; to make sure that you can realize your dreams and be a happy, happy person. That’s why you’re my queen, not because of Queen Elizabeth.” She chuckled and then kissed the top of my head. “Now go play!” she commanded, giving me a pat on the butt.

In addition to her recitations and explanations about poetry, my grandmother also offered vivid portraits of the beautiful trees to be found in Santiago’s many parks. She also drew and coloured them for me so that I could appreciate the particular shade of lilac of a jacaranda in bloom; the magnificent trunk and red, succulent flowers of a *ceibo*; the vibrant crimsons and golds of *liquidámbar* in autumn. But while I enjoyed her botanical descriptions and her poetry, I was far more interested in hearing about the pleats and cuffs of her chocolate brown school uniform, the cut and length

of the home-made percale dresses she wore on Sunday and, most of all, about her engagement and marriage to my grandfather, Andrés—a charming young man who, according to her, looked just like Clark Gable, a famous movie actor.

While my grandmother's memories of her youth intrigued me, the family's stories during the time they lived in a little house on Esmeralda Street in Valdivia enthralled me to the point of delusion. This was the place where my mom had become a rebellious teenager, where my uncle Andresito had fallen in love with his friend Carloncho, where my grandmother had witnessed her son's murder at the hands of the military.

As a child, I was immersed so deeply in those stories that I believed that I had been a witness to them all; that I had lived on Esmeralda Street with my grandma, my mom and the rest of the characters that populated their past.

When I grew old enough to realize that these were nothing but borrowed memories, I felt completely betrayed and for quite a while stubbornly insisted that I had indeed attended the Valdivia Youth Orchestra's concerts; laughed at my grandfather's jokes as the family shared tea and apple *kuchen* at the kitchen table; celebrated Chile's third place in the 1962 World Cup at the town square; travelled to Santiago with my grandmother and met her shrewd and fashionable sister Amparo.

But, by the time I reached my teens, I lost interest in my mother's and grandmother's accounts and even resented not being *Canadian-Canadian*: born here, with a family history that

didn't include military coups, concentration camps, resistance movements and relatives who had either been killed or made to disappear.

In those years, my best friends were Karin Russell and Vicki Richards. The three of us lived at Mariposa Housing Co-op, went to Britannia High School and played hockey for the East Vancouver Pee wee team. We were like triplets—walked to school together, went to practices and games together, did homework together, hung out on Commercial Drive together, went to the movies together... I never talked about my “Chilean life” with them. They never heard any of my family stories, never learned what had happened to Miguel and my uncle Andresito, my mom's and grandma's ordeal before coming to Canada. Nothing. For them, my family's story was pretty straightforward: my dad had died in an accident, my grandfather of a heart attack, and my mom and grandma had decided to emigrate to Canada.

Karin and Vicki rarely came to my house, as I'd much rather go to theirs. Karin's mom was divorced and worked evening shifts at the telephone company, which meant that Karin could basically do whatever she wanted after school. So, at her place we tried cigarettes and booze for the first time and also watched porno movies that we rented from a fat, sleazy guy who peddled them at Grandview Park.

“Mmmm... I'm sure these beautiful young ladies will want to know what Snow White and the Seven Dwarves were really—and I do mean *really*—doing in that cute little house of theirs in the middle of the forest, eh?” he remarked in a low, enticing tone

as he winked and smiled a crooked smile. We were tired and disheartened, having just lost a game to the Westside Thunderbirds, and had stopped to look at the rows and rows of video boxes displayed on a dirty blanket on the grass.

Vicki, who had crouched down to look at the titles and hadn't seen Fatso's gestures, looked up at Karin and me with narrowed eyes and blurted out, genuinely curious, "What the hell does he mean by what Snow White and the Seven Dwarves were really doing?"

"Never mind, let's just go," I urged as I started to walk.

But Fatso wasn't giving up. Now he was waving a video at us and delivering his sales pitch. "Okay, girls. I'll tell you what. Given that obviously you don't know how much fun the fairest one of all and those naughty little men were having in their lovely cottage, I will let you take the video for free. What do you think?" He looked at us inquisitively, waiting for a response.

We shrugged and replied in our usual triplet way, "Sure."

"Okey-dokey then," he continued, sticking his hand into a duffel bag, taking out a few videos, looking at them closely and, finally, offering us the right one. We all reached for it, but he retracted it quickly as he smiled his crooked smile.

"Not so fast, girls, not so fast. Now, you can have this one for free, but you have to promise to bring it back the day after tomorrow and then *rent* another video from me, okay? I only charge four fifty and you can keep it for two days at a time. Isn't

that a great deal? I don't really make a profit, girls, I just want to keep young people informed and entertained," he explained with a straight face. "Inform and entertain—that's my motto," he concluded as he now handed us the video.

By the time we got to Karin's place we were *dying* to be informed and entertained. We grabbed a bag of chips and some sodas and made ourselves comfortable on the couch. The first few minutes looked just like a regular movie—an aerial view of a beautiful forest accompanied by romantic orchestral music which then gave way to the sound of deep, masculine voices singing, "Heigh-Ho, Heigh-Ho, It's home from work we go." A line of seven short, muscular men with big beards appeared on a trail in the woods and then we saw the home they were walking towards: a cute little cottage with a red-tiled roof, a rounded wooden door and widows covered with lace curtains. As the men reached the cottage's colourful front garden, the door opened wide and there she was: Snow White herself, a gorgeous white woman with jet black hair and green eyes. She was dressed like Heidi, only she had boobs the size of a football field, and as she walked down the pathway to meet the men she was pursing her crimson lips and rocking her hips just like the hookers we had seen on the Drive.

What Snow White and the seven dwarves did inside their little cottage was very informative and entertaining, indeed. We would've never imagined the many forms that screwing could take between one man and one woman, never mind all the other possible combinations: seven men and one woman, seven men, two men and one woman, two men, etcetera, etcetera. We jumped

around the room screaming and giggling, laughed so hard that we wet our pants, replayed some scenes to make sure that we had got it right...

Two days later, we handed the video back to Fatso and rented our next one. He was very interested in our feedback, but we didn't let on that we had actually enjoyed it. We faked a bored expression and declared in a monotone, indifferent voice, "It was okay."

After four or five video sessions, we *did* begin to get bored. They were all variations on the same theme—screwing—except for one that really grossed us out, as it involved a huge, vicious dog, and another one that scared the shit out of us with displays of sadomasochism.

So, when we returned the last movie and Fatso insisted on sticking another one in our hands, we explained that we didn't have time for movies anymore; we had to get ready for final exams, and walked away as fast as we could.

By then we had also lost interest in booze and tobacco. We had finally admitted to each other that drinking and smoking wasn't as fun as it was purported to be; actually, it made us feel like zombies suffering from an acute bout of bronchitis combined with morning sickness, so we began to spend more and more time at Vicki's. She had a stay-at-home mom, a dad who drove a city bus and an older brother in university. I loved their home—it exuded a feeling of "normalcy," completely devoid of any sense of tragedy or loss. There, we would do our homework, listen to

music and watch *Degrassi Junior High* and *Street Legal* on television, all under the benign supervision of Vicki's mom.

In the summertime, Kits Beach was our favourite place to be. We'd play volleyball, go swimming or just lie lazily on the sand. Once in a while we'd meet boys from the West side and talk and flirt with them, but overall, we just minded our own business.

I often brought my sketch pad along and took down the scene: sailboats like huge birds hovering over the white caps; people of all colours, shapes and sizes enjoying the sun; good-looking, agile guys and gals reaching for the volleyball; cute little kids with their plastic buckets and shovels building sand castles... When I got home, I loved going over my sketches and turning my favourite ones into paintings—airy expanses of blue over which I laid out the whites, golds, greens and reds of the lively figures all about the beach.

When I turned fourteen I took a refereeing course and began to work at the Britannia Ice Rink; I enjoyed reffing the little kids' games, the pay was good and I also welcomed the opportunity to get a few extra hours of skating each week. By then Karin and Vicki had stopped playing hockey and were working at Tim Horton's, so we hardly ever spent time together anymore.

As we drifted apart, I also began to pay attention to the other kids in our school. There were lots of First Nations students who kept pretty much to themselves but turned out to be really friendly when you approached them. That's how I became friends with Dwayne, a fifteen-year-old from Port Hardy who was always

carving beautiful sculptures on pieces of red cedar. We would spend hours together at Grandview Park—me, drawing and sketching everything I saw, from the children in the playground to the Vancouver skyline and the North Shore Mountains, and him, working on his latest piece.

He was the first kid from school that I entrusted with my family's stories and it didn't take long for him to start telling me about *his* family and community. That's how I learned about the abuse, and even torture, that Dwayne's grandparents, parents and most of their generation had suffered in residential schools; about the real reasons behind the poverty and epidemics of alcoholism and drug addiction among First Nations people; about the youth's determination to learn about their culture and move forward with their lives.

At Britannia High School, there were also tons of students who had come to Canada as refugees, just like me: Vietnamese who had left their country in squalid boats, Salvadorans and Guatemalans who had literally walked all the way up to Canada, and plenty of Iranians, Ugandans, Ethiopians and Somalians who had also fled from violence.

One of the last times Karin, Vicki and I got together, I told them about Ayanna, a Somalian girl who had disclosed her story to the Current Affairs class I was taking with Ms. Yew. We were having a pizza at Sunrise and the two of them were chattering away about a boy that Vicki really liked, but I just couldn't get into the conversation.

“Hey, Tania, what do you think?” Karin asked me point blank as she pinched my arm.

”Think about what?” I responded absent-mindedly.

“What’s the matter with you, woman? Don’t you care about your friends’ love lives? Get with the program, eh?” she went on in a miffed tone.

“Sure,” I answered. “It’s just that I can’t get this girl’s story out of my mind...”

“What girl?” they both wanted to know.

“Ayanna, a girl from Somalia, a refugee. She came here with her mom and her two younger sisters after the father and little brother were killed in their own home,” I explained, and then asked, “can you imagine witnessing your own father and brother’s murder?”

“Holy shit! That’s horrible!” Vicki replied, crunching her face.

“Thank God we were born in Canada and not in some weird, violent country like... Where did you say she was from?” Karin asked as she reached for another slice of pizza.

“Somalia,” I repeated.

“Where’s *that*?” they both asked.

“East Africa,” I responded somberly.

“Mmm... Never heard of it,” Karin commented while she chewed on her pizza and screened her mouth with her hand.

“Me neither... But that’s really horrible. Poor girl...” Vicki added, letting out a big sigh and shaking her head. “Anyway, where were we?” she continued chirpily, turning her head towards Karin.

I felt like crying. *I* had been born in one of those weird, violent countries and my whole family was from there as well. Not only that, Karin and Vicki didn’t even know that Canada was also a violent country, that unspeakable injustices had been committed against the people who had lived here from time immemorial—way before any Europeans had set foot on this land. Somewhere in my heart, I had hoped that Ayanna’s story would serve as a bridge so that I could finally disclose *my* family’s story to them; that I would finally be able to say, “You know what, you guys? I wasn’t born here either. I was only three days old when I came to Canada, which basically means I’m Canadian, but I was born in Chile. My mami, my grandma and I came here as refugees. My dad was killed, my uncle was killed, my mom was in a concentration camp”

But, that evening, I decided that I couldn’t tell them any of that, at least not then. Not for a long time; perhaps never.

Eventually I stopped spending time with Karin and Vicki, got closer and closer to Dwayne and became best friends with Ayanna. My mami and grandma were delighted that I was at home most evenings now and welcomed Dwayne and Ayanna with open arms. My grandma expressed her approval of my new friends by preparing her best Chilean specialties to treat them. Dwayne lived with his grandma, mom and siblings just a couple of blocks away in a nice complex that housed urban First Nations

families, but Ayanna and her mom and sisters could only afford a small, dark basement apartment near Nanaimo Street. So, my mom encouraged them to apply to Mariposa Housing Co-op and a few months later they moved to the suite upstairs from us.

By now Dwayne, Ayanna and I knew everything there was to know about one another's lives. Hearing their stories, I had come to realize how sheltered and easy my own life had been; I had learned what I knew about suffering through my mom and grandma, but hadn't experienced any real trials and tribulations myself. So I was curious to know where my friends found the strength to keep going in spite of the hardships in their lives. Often, Ayanna got anxiety attacks and I had to hold her until she finally broke down, sobbed for a while on my shoulder and, eventually, calmed down. Dwayne, on the other hand, was the oldest of five kids and had to play the role of father to the family, as his dad was an absent alcoholic. To top it all off, when the man chose to show up at the house, he beat up the grandma, the mom, and the kids, and stole everything in sight before disappearing again. He had been doing that for years, but now that Dwayne was older he had taken it upon himself to fight his father back and keep him off the rest of the family.

According to Ayanna, living with the memory of her dad's and little brother's murders was very hard, but for some mysterious reason she had never considered ending the suffering by choosing death; she wanted to live, to wake up every morning and live. Dwayne would speak of the history of his people, of his desire to contribute to a revival of First Nations' culture.

Humans' love of life had always mystified me. Since I had been able to understand my family's tragedies I had wondered about my mami and grandma's desire to keep on living. Not letting yourself die after your most beloved had been killed was beyond my comprehension.

Whenever I asked my grandma about it, she would hug me effusively and plant kisses on both my cheeks before declaring, "It was all about you, my queen. I wanted to live on so that I could be with you, you, you!"

My mom, on the other hand, would take on a solemn stance when explaining her reasons for choosing life over death. She would stop whatever she was doing, take her glasses off, wipe the lenses with the tail of her shirt, clear her throat and then explain, "First of all, as I have told you many times before, my love, I wanted to raise you and make sure that you grew up to be a good and happy person. When I was in the concentration camp, a few times I did feel like dying; I wanted to die. But when I realized I was pregnant with you, I wanted to keep on living."

"How did you know you were pregnant with *me*?" I would ask for the zillionth time, yearning for the sound of the words I had heard over and over again along the years.

"I just knew it my beautiful kitty cat. I pictured you in my mind exactly the way you are: green eyes, dark hair, long and thick eye lashes, just like Miguel's."

By now my mom's serious face had given way to smiling eyes as she continued, cupping my face in her hands, "But most im-

portantly, I pictured you as the strong, kind and bright girl that you are.”

“And that’s why you named me Tania, after the heroic guerilla that fought together with Che Guevara in Bolivia,” I would add as I felt a good dose of pride surge up to my face.

“That’s right, *mijita*,” my mom would confirm. “But you know that there was also another reason why I wanted to live on.”

“To fight for a better world,” I would offer.

At this point, she would nod approvingly for a few seconds before launching into her usual lesson about social injustices. “Yes, my precious. Because too many people in this world are starving to death.”

“Like in Africa,” I would add.

“Yes, but in other continents as well.”

“In Chile too?” I would ask.

“Yes, my loveliest thing. Many people in Chile go hungry, don’t have a house to live in, are sick, don’t have a job—”

“So, they don’t have any money to buy anything...” I would interject.

“That’s right, my darling. And on top of all that, Pinochet and the army are mean to the people,” my mom would conclude.

Most certainly, in Canada my mami had the opportunity to continue working for her ideals. She had dedicated long hours

to her job as a social worker assisting immigrant women and was also very active in the international movement against the Chilean dictatorship.

But for her that had not been enough. Back in 1986, when I was eleven years old, my mom joined the armed resistance in Chile.

The evening that I heard the truth about her long absence that year was unusually warm for the month of April. The radio was tuned to the six o'clock CBC news. As my mom checked on her chicken casserole and I put the finishing touches on a green salad, we heard Nelson Mandela's voice announcing the formation of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

"That's great!" my mom commented as she took the clay pot out of the oven and placed it on top of the stove. "I hope theirs is more successful than the Chilean Rettig Commission," she added, opening the lid and breathing in the scent of the food.

"I thought the Rettig Commission had done a good job," I ventured while I tossed the salad.

"Well..." my mother responded, tilting her head to one side, crunching her face into a cluster of wrinkles and gesturing with her right hand from side to side—her very personal way of letting you know that she disagreed and that a thorough explanation of her views would follow shortly.

Here we go, I thought. My mami was so opinionated that sometimes she irritated me to no end. I hastily called my grandma to

the table in the hope that dinner would make my mom forget about her critique of the Rettig Commission, but a couple of minutes later, as we sat down to eat, she picked up where she had left off.

“You could say that the Rettig Commission did a fairly good job, but I think it would’ve been better if they had waited a few more years. 1990 was too soon after the end of the dictatorship; people were still afraid of talking about what had happened to them,” she remarked. As she passed the salad bowl to grandma, she continued, “The other problem was that it didn’t have any power; they collected quite a bit of information, but nothing came of it, no trials for the torturers and the murderers.”

By now my poor mom was getting agitated, her voice had gone up an octave and her cheeks were beginning to colour.

I put my hand on hers in an attempt to calm her down, but she was on a roll, “Besides, many people never presented their cases—people like me, who were in prison after the coup and later took part in the armed resistance movement.”

“What do you mean, armed resistance movement?” I shot out, pulling my hand off hers.

My mom went pale when she realized what she had revealed. She held my shocked gaze for a few seconds, her eyes filling with tears. She reached for my hand, but I snatched it away. I couldn’t believe what I had heard. After almost dying in prison following the coup, after all they had gone through to escape the country, my mami had gone back to Chile and risked her life? I couldn’t

fathom my mother, a peace-loving person, taking part in armed operations. And to top it all off, she had left me behind.

My grandma got up, walked around the table and bent over to hug her daughter. By now my mother wasn't looking at me anymore. Her eyes were closed, her hands clutching her head.

"In 1986, your mother went to Chile to be part of the armed resistance movement," my grandma said in a calm, clear voice while she rocked my mom in her arms and looked me in the eye. "Obviously, we couldn't tell you the real reason for her going away. You hadn't even turned twelve yet."

"You could've been killed! You could've been imprisoned all over again!" I cried as I felt my throat begin to tighten.

I was livid. But underneath the anger, I was sad. My mami's political convictions were more important than me.

I found myself standing by the stove, my back to the table. I heard my mom get up from her chair and walk towards me. She rested her hand on my back for a few seconds and then spoke in a low, hoarse voice. "I had to do it, Tania. I had to make a real contribution. I felt that what I was doing here was not enough, so when I was asked to go... I'm sorry that I left you behind, my darling. And you're right—yes, I could've been killed, I could've been imprisoned, but... I don't know how to explain it to you. In my heart, I knew that I would come back in one piece and I did, see?"

I felt my mom's firm grip on my shoulders as she tried to turn

me around. I let her do it—my body had gone limp.

My mom's eyes were smiling now as both her hands travelled the length of her body and she repeated, "See? I'm here, *mijita*. Nothing happened to me."

We hugged, then my grandma joined us and the three of us hugged. We cried together. After a while, my grandma suggested that we finish our dinner. For a few minutes, the only voices in the room were those of the radio announcers. I still felt betrayed.

Finally, I heard myself say, "You loved your revolution better than you loved me."

In the silence that followed, I gave up on a response and was getting ready to leave the table when I heard my mother clear her throat—without a doubt, a sign that she was going to offer a lengthy reply. I sat down again.

"I can see how you would come to that conclusion," she said, "but I know what's in my heart and I know that I don't love you any less than I love my ideals. For me, it never worked like that."

She got up and walked to the window. Her breathing was now audible and I could tell that she was fighting back tears. She placed both her hands on the window sill, as if to steady herself, before she continued, "I hate this society that makes us believe that life has to consist of lists—lists that prioritize everything from the most to the least important, even feelings! Well, I'm sorry, but I don't believe in those lists! That's not the way it works for me. Not at all!" she cried out as she turned around.

“Tania, I love you immensely, my darling,” she went on after a while, her voice soft and low now as she walked towards me. I started to sob.

My mother knelt next to my chair, put her arms around me and went on speaking. “There are a few things that I need to explain to you—I don’t expect you to understand them right away or even ever. I don’t expect you to agree with me either, but please listen to what I have to say, okay?” she asked. My grandma handed me a tissue; I blew my nose and then nodded. My mami took my chin in her right hand and looked me in the eye.

“I believe that life must integrate everything, my lovie—it must be like a circle, not like a list. A circle where everything comes together: my ideals, you, grandma, my work, our friends, our dead loved ones, everything and everybody.” My mom let go of my chin, sat at the table again and reached for my hand.

“When I was asked to join the armed resistance movement, you were almost twelve and grandma was willing and very capable of taking care of you on her own. At the beginning I hesitated, but finally decided to accept because I wanted to do something significant to help end the dictatorship,” she added, her eyes looking for a reaction in mine. But I was still unwilling to yield.

She got up and walked to the sink. She poured herself a glass of water, turned around and then went on, “It’s all part of the same love, Tania. It breaks my heart to see people in pain—I want the world to be a better place for everybody, you know that. In 1986, many Chileans were suffering. Pinochet was escalating

the violence and there was a strong resistance movement trying to stop him; to get rid of him.” She put the glass down on the counter and walked towards me. “I feel honoured to have been part of that movement, *mijita*. Can you at least feel a little bit of pride in your mother?” she asked as she poked me playfully on the ribs.

I had always felt proud of her, but at that moment I wasn’t sure whether or not I would ever be able to understand her involvement in the armed resistance in Chile, never mind feel proud of her because of it.

I didn’t respond. I blew my nose again and then got up and hugged her. She had left me for almost a year; she *had* chosen her ideals over me. But she was my mother, and I loved her.

We were still in each other’s arms when we heard my grandma’s voice. “Well... Nobody has asked for my opinion, but I’m going to say what I think anyway, if that’s okay with you, m’ladies...”

My mami and I let each other go as we exchanged furtive smiles. “Sure,” we said in unison, sitting down in our respective chairs.

“I think that if your mother had joined the resistance movement against Hitler, you would be proud of her, right?” she asked me point blank.

“I guess so...” I responded tentatively.

“And, I’m sure that if your *father*—if those beasts hadn’t killed him—if your *father*, and not your mother, had joined the resis-

tance movement, nobody would be talking about whether or not leaving his daughter behind was a good or a bad thing, whether he loved his daughter this much or that much, don't you think?" she went on, still looking me in the eye.

"I guess so..." I repeated.

Grandma stepped closer to me, her voice rising angrily. "Then, for heaven's sake, why can't you take pride in the fact that your mother was part of a movement against a dictator as cruel and ruthless as Hitler, that she went down to Chile to help put an end to the killings and the torturing?"

By now my grandma's face was two inches away from mine and she was yelling. I was taken aback. She hardly ever got angry with me.

"I have to think about it... I don't have a switch to turn my feelings on and off, you know," I responded defensively, getting up and leaving the room.

It took years, and many conversations with my mother about her political views and underground experiences, before I finally came to appreciate why she had gone to Chile in 1986.

When I listened to my mami's stories, I wondered what I would've done if life had dealt me similar circumstances. In all likelihood, I would've joined the exuberant movement striving for justice in the Chile of the sixties and seventies. Maybe I would've taken part in the literacy campaign in the shanty towns of Santiago, the way my mom did. I'm sure I would've offered

my art—just like Miguel did—to bring hope to the poor, but I don't know if I would've taken part in the armed resistance to the dictatorship. Even though I grew to admire my mom's courage, I'm glad I haven't had to make those kinds of choices myself.

As for the letter from Judge Arturo Leiva, I've yet to decide whether I'll act on it or not.

The first few days following its delivery, I was both shocked and filled with insatiable curiosity. I carried the letter in my pocket at all times, fingered it, pulled it out, read it, put it back in my pocket once again. I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep. All I could do was think about the message enclosed in those oblique, yet clear words: there was a strong chance that Marcelino Romero, and not Miguel, was my father.

I knew that my mom had been abducted the day of the coup, but I didn't know when she had been taken to Londres 38, the torture centre where Marcelino Romero operated. I spent hours researching calculators for childbirth due dates, but basically they all offered the same information: conception and birth are approximately two hundred and sixty-six days apart. That meant that I would've been conceived on September 23. However, all the calculators also cautioned that many births happen up to two weeks before or after the estimated due date. The answers, then, didn't lie there.

I considered confronting my mother. A few times, I took the letter out of my pocket and practiced in my mind the wording of the bomb I would drop on her. Once, I made it as far as her bed.

But, in the end, I decided that she doesn't deserve this bomb, particularly now that she's so close to the end. She lived a life fraught with hardships and has gained the right to die in peace.

My mami is dying of cancer of the bones, the same ailment that took my grandmother in 1998. It's not surprising, given that they shared so many things in life. Now I wonder if they also shared the knowledge that Marcelino Romero, and not Miguel, may be my biological father.

After the initial shock and curiosity brought on by Judge Leiva's letter, I entered a state of supreme wrath. How could anyone even begin to suggest that a repugnant torturer and rapist might be my father? When I felt as if I was about to explode, I would get in my car and go for long drives on the freeway. There, hidden in the insular protection of my vehicle and tempered by the noise of the traffic, I'd scream and scream until I had no voice left.

Now, I have arrived at a place of exhaustion and exasperating indecision. I don't know what I'll do about Judge Leiva's request. One minute I believe that I will not be able to go on living until I know the truth, but the next I convince myself that Miguel, and only Miguel, is my father. A few days ago, I went as far as picking up the phone and dialing the Chilean Consulate's number, only to hang up before anybody could answer.

Until I muster the courage to make a decision, I will rely on my art to help me pull through these disturbing times.

Yesterday I began working on an exhibition based on my family's history. Every surface of my studio is covered with the

sketches, drawings and paintings I have produced along the years. I have also been going through my notebooks and our photo albums, gathering the various objects that my grandma and mom brought with them to Canada: my mother's tapestries, my grandmother's pottery pieces and watercolours.

But as I sit here, surrounded by a disarray of memories, keepsakes, images and words, I wonder if I will ever be able to do justice to the stories that took my family through its many journeys. I don't know if I'll manage to convey the ordinary, yet unique ups and downs of my mami and grandma's daily existence before the Pinochet coup; if I'll have the courage to portray the horror that followed; if I'll dare trace and bring out the underlying forces that shaped my mother and grandmother's lives.

Most daunting of all, though, is the unavoidable challenge of having to delve deep inside myself. If I really want to understand my family's history, I will have to do my best to understand myself as well. After all, a good part of who I am is a result of that history and, conversely, a good part of that history was shaped by my passage through this world.

Art will be my compass, my lens, my tool.

Art as memory.

Art as healing.

Art as creation and beauty.

Art as truth.