

BUNDLE OF LETTERS activity

Time needed: 2 class periods

Materials needed:

Copies of *Gringolandia* by Lyn Miller-Lachmann (Curbstone Press/Northwestern University Press, 2009)

Assortment of pens (of different colors) and pencils

Lined notebook paper

#10 envelopes

Plain and patterned stationery and matching envelopes

Stickers

String, yarn, or rubber bands

Scissors

Reread the following sections from *Gringolandia*:

Chapter Two [when Marcelo is in prison]

They didn't torture him to death that day. And the next time a guard came to get him, it was to release him from solitary. When he returned to the cell he shared with the *compañeros*, a bundle of letters was waiting for him. Two years' worth of letters from Victoria, who after his arrest had taken their children to the United States. How ironic, he thought, that they would end up there, in the home of the CIA that had installed the dictatorship. The postmark read Madison, Wisconsin. She wrote about the children, her graduate studies in sociology, and her meetings with people to secure his release. Commander Gonzales sent down pens, paper, and instructions for him to write her back: "Write that you are in good health and being treated well."

"And if I don't?" he asked the guard.

The guard shrugged. "Just write what he said."

"I'm not going to write a lie."

The guard took the pens and paper away. (p. 14)

Chapter Three [when Marcelo arrives at O'Hare Airport in Chicago, and Daniel and his mother see him for the first time in nearly six years]

"*Mira*," Mamá whispers, holding my arm. "There he is."

"Where?"

"Coming up the ramp."

There's a thin man with gray hair long enough to cover his ears and the back of his neck. He walks slowly, swinging his left leg outward. His foot drags along the floor. "No way," I say to her in English.

She hesitates, as if she isn't so sure either. The man shows no sign of recognizing us. His gaunt face is clean shaven, though with a couple of days' stubble, and he wears no glasses. One eye looks smaller than the other; as he comes nearer, I see it's almost closed. He wears a faded, stretched-out blue turtleneck and black pants frayed at the cuffs. His clothes hang off him, scarecrow-style.

"It's him," Mamá says. "Ileana told me about the limp."

"Oh, no," I murmur. Then it hits me, right in the stomach. This is what I did, by getting out of bed when the soldiers came.

I step toward him. Mamá holds me back. "Give him a chance to see us first. He doesn't have his glasses, and we don't want to rush at him."

"Why not?"

"He's okay, but Ileana says he's a little nervous about being touched."

I nod, but inside my down coat I'm shaking. Sure, she told me about Papá being tortured, and it was on the leaflets, too. But that was just words. This guy is really messed up. Maybe he isn't Papá. Maybe this is some kind of sick joke, some way they have of torturing the family, killing Papá and sending this crippled guy to take his place.

"Victoria! Danielito!"

Six years and all doubts disappear with that voice. I'm eleven again, and Papá is calling me—his voice low, tight, and smooth like the radio announcer he once was.

My parents hug. Ignoring what my mother just said, I throw my arms around both of them. I feel Papá stiffen and pull away.

Did I hurt him? "*Bienvenido*, Papá," I say, my voice choked up more than I expected. My father hesitates, then grabs me. His grip is weak, unbalanced. I wrap my arms around him and feel his bones, hard and sharp against my hands. I ease up, afraid of squashing him. He's no taller than I am—how did that happen? He hangs on to me as if I'm propping him up, and I don't want to let him fall.

"I hardly recognized you. You've gotten so big," he says in Spanish.

But Papá is so much smaller. "How are you?" I ask, in our language. Soon enough, I think, he'll have to learn English. (pp. 20-22)

Avoiding the sleeping airport policeman, I bring the van around to the TAXIS AND LIMOS ONLY exit, load the suitcase in the back, and help my father climb to the front passenger seat. I notice he can barely use his left arm. His wrist is stick-thin, and the skin is paler and smoother than that of his hand. I wonder if he'd hurt his wrist earlier and reinjured it lugging the heavy suitcase.

"You're driving?" he says to me.

"Yes."

"Unbelievable." He shakes his head.

"I got my license a year ago. I'm an experienced driver."

"And the last time I saw you, your feet didn't reach the pedals. Remember you tried to drive the taxi to your friend's house and ended up in a ditch?"

Embarrassing memory. I was really dumb once.

"Nice van, you two. Is it yours?"

I answer. "No, it's my friend Willie's. We're in this band together called Firezone, and he lets me use it sometimes."

Papá sits up straight. "A band? What kind of band?"

"Rock, mainly. And reggae. I play lead guitar, and Willie's the drummer. Another guy, Trevor, is the lead vocalist, and his brother Paul is on bass." Just talking about the band makes me excited. I want to tell him everything. I want him to come hear me perform. "We play in a teen club called the Jam, every Friday night." I jerk the van out of the parking space, almost popping the clutch.

"So you're a rock and roller now that you're in Gringolandia?"

The coldness of his tone shocks me, even more than him calling this country Gringolandia. I always knew the United States government had something to do with the coup and still supported the dictatorship, so it confused me when Mamá told me we were moving up here for her to go to graduate school. Even now, my whole body tightens up when I see a policeman. I rush to explain. "I play everything. On Sundays I play Latin American music at a church. A friend of mine, her father—"

"You play in a church?"

"It's a gig, Papá. They pay thirty dollars a week."

Papá lights another cigarette. "Okay, I used to work with the church too, when I was doing my newspaper. They're good people, as long as you don't start believing any of it. So do you have to play religious songs?"

I lie. "No. Only Latin American songs." As the smoke wafts over to my side, I open the window a crack and shiver at the icy wind. I get the point. He has no interest in my music.

Papá coughs and turns toward my mother in the back seat. "Has the other one adjusted this well?"

She hesitates as if she too is surprised by the way he's asked the question. I think he should be proud of how we've done. Except for poor Tina.

"It's been hard," Mamá says. "Daniel's helped a lot, especially with his sister. I thought he'd have the worst time, being older."

"It wasn't that bad," I mumble. I don't like to think about the first few months, when I couldn't understand what anyone was saying. I had no friends and sat alone in my bedroom playing the guitar my favorite uncle, *Tío* Claudio, had given me before I left Chile. My first soccer team changed all that. After a year or so, I learned enough English to avoid being a complete social and academic zero, and now I speak it with an accent that makes girls go wild.

"Well, don't get too comfortable," Papá says. "We're going back to our country."

My mouth drops open. "Marcelo," my mother says in a low voice, almost a growl.

"As soon as I convince the rest of you to come with me."

You're crazy, I want to say. After all they did to you, you want to go back? And what about our lives here? But I wait for Mamá to answer first, the way I've been raised to do.

"They gave you three days to leave. I assume you're banned from returning."

Papá takes a final puff of his cigarette, drops it on the floor of Willie's van, and grinds it out with his good foot. "I have my ways."

"Forget it. It's too dangerous."

Papá glares at her, like she's not supposed to backtalk him either. I press my lips together as tight as I can and ease the van onto the interstate. I can't go back to Chile. Not even Mamá knows this, but I've written for the papers to get my U.S. citizenship, and

when I turn eighteen, it's going to be official. I glance at Mamá through the rear view mirror. She looks helpless, confused, and small.

I turn the radio on low while Mamá and Papá talk about the situation in their faraway country. On the sports station they're still rehashing the Bulls game that finished a couple of hours ago. I listen until the station begins to crackle and fade. (pp. 26-28)

Questions for comprehension:

1. What do we know about Marcelo from what you're read here?
2. What do we know about Daniel?
3. What do we know about Daniel's mother?
4. Daniel's younger sister, Tina, who is twelve years old, doesn't appear in these scenes because their mother didn't want to bring her. Why might she have been left behind? What does this tell us about Tina?
5. Why didn't Marcelo write his family back when he got the letters in prison?
6. Why is Marcelo afraid of being touched?
7. Why does Daniel tell his father about his band?
8. Why does Daniel's mother not want to go back to Chile?
9. Why does Daniel not want to go back to Chile?

Activity:

Imagine that you are Daniel, his mother, or his sister Tina. Write a letter to your father in prison, telling him about your life in the United States. You may draw pictures on the letter, too.

Choose the kind of paper, envelope, and pen or pencil you would like to use for your letter. Be ready to explain why you made your choice.

When you are done, fold the letters into an envelope and seal. Wrap all letters into a bundle for "delivery" to Marcelo.

Once the letters are bundled, they may be delivered to Marcelo—that is, opened and read aloud. Students then take on the role of Marcelo: How did the letters make you feel? Would you write back? Why or why not? If you were going to write your family back, what would you write?

For more background information, questions, activities, and supplemental readings for *Gringolandia*, please visit the Teacher's Guide on Lyn Miller-Lachmann's web site: <http://www.lynmillerlachmann.com>. All materials from the guide may be copied into a text file.