

**ADVENTURES WITH MY
MEXICAN FRIENDS IN THE
1980'S**

JEAN WELLS

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Lifescapes

SILVIA AND JUAN PEREZ

It was July of 1980 and I was going out one morning on what I considered my job – visiting a Mexican family to ease the difficulties in adjusting to life in this new country. Probably I'd been their first Anglo friend. I'd gotten into this job a year and a half earlier by becoming a volunteer tutor of English through a local organization. I did like the friendships that had developed between me and several of the young families. Although some of the fathers had been in this country working for several years and knew a smattering of English, the mothers and children had all come quite recently.

My Spanish was good enough so I could speak with them easily. I tutored some in family groups and others alone. In addition I served as interpreter for many things including apartment hunting, bill paying, job interviews, doctor and dentist appointments, and even just shopping.

This morning I had promised to take Nieves, whom I had known for several months, to pay her telephone bill. But this particular morning I was very surprised to meet Silvia Perez and her four year old daughter, Teri. They had just arrived from Mexico the day before. Silvia and Nieves were married to brothers, Juan and Tomas Perez, so they had already known each other in Mexico. Silvia was three months pregnant and had not had any prenatal care yet. Neither Silvia nor Juan wanted her to go to a welfare clinic but to a private obstetrician. Juan planned on making time payments to the doctor. He did have some medical insurance from his job at what was then the MGM. He wanted to pay his family's way.

I did locate the right obstetrician – a young woman who had just begun working with my own gynecologist-obstetrician. She was perfect for Silvia because she'd lived in Arizona before coming to Reno and there she had learned enough Spanish to be able to take care of the mothers in the delivery room. Back in 1980-81 the hospitals here did not have bilingual employees to fill in when needed. Patients were expected to bring their own interpreters. This was also true of other businesses. Now most of them have easy access to interpreters.

I took Silvia to all of her appointments. We usually brought Teri along, too. Teri had developed an instantaneous affection for me the first day we

met. As I was seated on the sofa with Silvia and Nieves, Teri came and seated herself snugly beside me, all the time glowing with pleasure. On the way back home from the appointments we often stopped for a snack or lunch which Silvia insisted on paying for.

I would see most of the three or four families and individuals I'd gotten involved with at least once a week. When it got very near Silvia's time to deliver, her doctor said to me, "You'll come and stay with her to interpret during labor, won't you." I was flabbergasted. I had never dreamed of doing anything like that. And then I thought if I'm being asked to do this, I'm sure help will be there if I need it. So I consented.

Since Silvia's husband worked on Sundays, it was Silvia's brother-in-law, Tomas, who called me early on Sunday morning to say Silvia had gone into labor. I agreed to meet them at the hospital. After a preliminary exam in the delivery room, the emergency doctor said she had a long way to go yet. She should come back later when the contractions were a couple of minutes apart. Out of the blue I suggested she come home with me where it would be quieter. Her family was still living together with relatives, and lots more would be going on there. So we spent a quiet 24 hours or so at my house, watching TV, chatting, and Silvia getting much more sleep than she would have had at home. The next morning we went to see her obstetrician, and she insisted we go right over to the hospital.

I was of real help filling out the forms and answering the questions of the nurses as she was being settled into her labor room. I'm sure Silvia was much more at ease having me around than being left alone with nurses with whom she couldn't communicate.

The doctor showed up in good time to do her part in the delivery room, and I waited around to hear the outcome. Meanwhile Silvia's husband had gotten off work and had come to join me. We were two joyful souls on hearing the news of Johnny's arrival the morning of February 9, 1981. Now the family was complete with a boy and a girl. Silvia had told me if the baby had been a girl, they'd have named her Juanita after me, my name to all of my Mexican friends.

Both baby and mother did splendidly. I got an unexpected perk from my involvement. The hospital that they were in gave a steak and champagne dinner for the parents the night after the birth. Juan couldn't get off work to come for it, so I took his place, facetiously wearing my pant-suit and derby.

Silvia and Johnny went home from the hospital the next day. A few days later Silvia gave me Johnny to hold for the first time. She kept him very tightly swaddled. Another Mexican friend, Hilda, told me that's done until

the baby is about two months old. After that they only do it when the baby is sleeping. They also do this in Mexican hospitals. The idea is that a baby's flailing arms tend to awaken and frighten him. They do indeed flail from time to time when given a chance. Johnny's warmth and breathing felt wonderful to me, and his face seemed to show he was going through a great variety of emotions brought on by his dreams.

A few days later I went to Silvia's house again, and we sat around the table drinking herb tea. Silvia brought out a box which contained papers they needed. She took out the unofficial birth certificate with the darling little footprints. They wanted to be sure it was filled out correctly - probably by me. I suddenly found myself offering my Armenian friend Vahe Kochyan's services as a calligrapher for such an important document. I left with it soon after and found myself going directly to Vahe's. He answered the door in his pajamas and robe. He said I had come at the perfect time, because after today he'd be too tied up to do it. So I sat with him, as he wanted me to, watching him and helping him get the words spelled correctly in all the places. He was very willing to do it and said he'd do that for me any other time, too. I'd known him since the first year he was in this country and did not speak or understand English well. We had both played violin in the same casino band, and I would always talk with him between shows while other players avoided him. The birth certificate turned out absolutely beautiful. I had it framed and it still hangs on the Perez's wall today.

When Johnny was six weeks old, I took my son and daughter-in-law over to meet Silvia and her kids. Conway and Gail fell in love with Johnny, and both took turns holding him. Silvia was very pleased. And they kept saying how darling four year old Teri was. Teri played with Conway's computer watch, and he was very impressed by her intelligence. When we left, Silvia told Gail and Conway to please visit again to watch Johnny grow. Conway and Gail didn't know any Spanish and Silvia and Teri didn't know any English, but that didn't spoil the fun.

I found a pediatrician for Johnny and on the first visit Juan and Teri came along, too. When Johnny was called into his office, Silvia motioned for me to come in with her. Johnny had gained 14 ounces in 11 days. Dr. Crawford was from South America and fluent in both Spanish and English. He told me he'd love to have Johnny as his patient. After having several appointments with Dr. Crawford, Silvia told him that she and Juan had decided to take Johnny to a Well-Baby Clinic, because it was much cheaper. Dr. Crawford said he understood that, and that he would miss seeing Johnny.

One day after Silvia and I had been running errands in my car, we bought some food and went to my house to eat it. Silvia put sleeping

Johnny on the sofa and propped him up a little with my sofa pillows. Just before we sat down to eat, I was inspired to call up Marion, my 80 year old next door neighbor, and invited her to come over in 20 minutes to see the most spectacular thing I'd ever had in my house – not even hinting what it might be. We were still eating when Marion rang the bell. She was incredulous at seeing the baby. I put a chair near the sofa for her so she could have a really good look at him. She was delighted, and also very happy to meet Silvia and Teri. She chattered away at them as if they understood what she was saying. I told her they understood nothing of what she said, but to keep it up, because her good will came through. When Marion left she was very happy. I translated her complimentary remarks about Teri and Johnny for Silvia, and Silvia replied with, "Thank You." in English!

In August of 1981, six months after Johnny was born, I began taking Silvia to various places where she might be able to get a job. At the El Dorado Silvia had to fill out the application for work in English. I had to help her. The woman who was working there said Silvia's English was too limited. They needed people who were able to communicate with their English speaking guests. Then Silvia said we should go on to Harrah's where there was a Job Jamboree in the convention center, hiring lots of people on the spot. A young man who knew both English and Spanish interviewed her, then three other people did, and they decided she had not passed in English comprehension. The man who first interviewed her said if she would work hard on her English for several weeks, she would be good enough to be hired.

As we ate lunch together Silvia told me how sorry she was for all the time she'd lost NOT studying English since she'd come to Reno a year ago. Very early on in our relationship I'd given her a lesson writing things out for her and asking her to let me know when she was ready for another lesson. She never mentioned it again, so I assumed she didn't care to learn. Now she asked me to tape words and sentences for her to practice saying. I used some phrase books I had at home that I had used with other people. I told her she should ask Marisa and her kids and Francisco, all close neighbors, to talk English to her as much as possible so her exposure would be much bigger.

A couple of days later I went to her house and we worked on her English for one and one half hours. Two days later we had a two hour session. That day Silvia told me she'd finally begun to understand things people said to her in English, some of them neighbors and others people at the supermarket. She said until these last two times when we've been working so hard on English, she's never put her mind to understanding English, and now she sees it can be done and is excited about it. She did eventually learn to speak and understand English well enough to get a

job. For many years she worked as a maid in what is now the Reno Hilton. One year she won their Employee of the Year Award, which in her case turned out to be four round trip tickets to Mexico for the family and \$4,000. There was a full page in the local paper about the prize complete with Silvia's picture.

When the Perez family came to Reno they were practicing Catholics. I had attended Spanish Mass with them several times. Juan had learned how wealthy the Catholic Church was, but he was distressed at how uninvolved they were with the congregation. Juan had other Mexican friends and one relative who had joined Evangelical churches in this country. They were much happier there. Juan and Silvia and the children finally joined the Spanish speaking congregation of the Assembly of God where they found a real home; so much so that after extensive training, Juan became a full-time minister of that church. His casino kitchen days were over. He puts his heart and soul into his ministry, and it is very fulfilling. Even before he became a minister he'd spend his two days off work distributing food and clothing to the needy through his church.

Several years ago Silvia invited me out to see their new home and their new grandson, Caleb, Teri's son. I had attended her wedding a couple of years before that. Teri is married to a young Mexican man who is a minister in Carson City at the same kind of Spanish speaking church Juan ministers to in Reno.

The congregation sent Juan and Silvia to Israel to see where Jesus had lived. Another time they sent them to Hawaii to celebrate their 25th anniversary. Johnny is studying for the ministry in Los Angeles, but he plans to have a church in Reno when he's ready.



Silvia & Johnny, Teri & Jean ~ 1981

THE CRUZ FAMILY

In my mailbox one day in 1994, I received a picture postcard of an obstacle course at Fort Jackson, South Carolina army base. It was signed by Private Cruz-Hernandez. Private Cruz is my friend, Patty, and she was nineteen years old at that time. Her family came into my orbit in 1981 when the mother and four children, two boys and two girls, were finally brought from Mexico City to Reno by their father who had worked in the United States for several years off and on. I had already met him through other Mexican friends. I even knew one of the mother's cousins, and it was he who urged me to start teaching her English as soon as possible.

So that's what I did. I already had been tutoring English to several Mexicans for about two and a half years. At the beginning tutoring Maria, the mother, was a thankless job. She rarely studied and did nothing but giggle in embarrassment when I tried to get her to repeat words or phrases. After a few months I just stopped tutoring her at all for a while. At that time I wouldn't have bet two cents that anything good was ahead for Maria that needed English skills. When I began tutoring her again, she tried harder and did better.

I have always maintained contact with the Cruz family and over the years functioned as their interpreter in a variety of circumstances. Shortly after their arrival I went with the father and the oldest daughter, Yvette, to register her in school. The other kids weren't old enough to go. As a friend I went with them periodically to Sunday evening Spanish church services at St. Thomas Cathedral in Reno, and most especially to the annual Mexican Festival of the Virgin of Guadalupe celebration each December. At their home, I enthusiastically ate lots of wonderful Mexican food. Maria often gave me some to take home, too.

Several years later I was photographer for the very special occasion Mexicans make of a girl's fifteenth birthday, this one for Yvette. There is a mass at the Cathedral and a huge party afterward.

Because the Cruz family had arrived in the United States in August, 1981, they qualified for amnesty when it was offered to illegal aliens by the United States Government in 1986. Any people who had come after 1981 did not qualify. In order to get amnesty, each person who qualified had to take forty hours of English speaking, reading, and writing and then pass a test in it. Maria became so involved with the English classes that she continued going for several years. She also had a series of menial jobs but had never chosen to work in a casino. Her husband usually worked in one or another casino.

For eight years Maria worked in a pet store where she learned, among other things, to bathe and groom animals. The customers were almost all English speakers so Maria had to talk English with them. That helped her English skills a lot, too. In 1991 she divorced her husband. He had treated her badly. In 1993 she got a loan to buy her own business – a grooming and boarding place for cats and dogs. She still runs it and has several employees. She handles the English speaking clientele with ease.

Yvette had graduated from Hug High School in 1992. I was very proud to see her among the group of scholarship winners on stage for their awards. Yvette was the only Hispanic among them. Yvette attended the University for one year on that scholarship. Then in 1993 she joined the Army, knowing the government would pay for her education if she served three years. She actually served four.

For a while she was stationed in Germany doing advanced training in air traffic control. When she had time off she went to Rome, Italy and especially enjoyed seeing the Vatican. On some later time off she went to Paris where her favorite thing was the Louvre Museum.

Patty graduated from high school in 1994 and although her grades had been even higher than Yvette's, she got no scholarship. So she joined the Army, also.

Both girls came home on leave for the 1994 Christmas holidays during which Yvette married a Mexican fellow soldier. A fragment from a letter she sent me on her return to Germany said, "Miss Jean, you have been there for most of our sadness, and I'm glad you were with us for what just became the first of many happy moments." Happy moments indeed! Back in Germany a year later she got an annulment because her errant husband was waiting to become a father by another woman.

Next the Army sent Yvette to Hungary where she was stationed in a small town with only six other American GIs. They were all affiliated with the airport. She enjoyed the village and villagers although she spoke no Hungarian nor they English. She even attended Mass at the Catholic

Church. When she was sent back to the States, many of the local people came out to bid her farewell.

While still in the Army, Yvette did marry an American soldier and now they have two daughters, Destiny and Liberty. Yvette left the Army after four years and is now going to Truckee Meadows Community College. She plans to become a nurse. When her husband came back to Reno after he was discharged from the army, they lived together for a while but finally decided to divorce.

Patty also served four years on active duty which included Panama and Korea. Then she was on inactive reserve for three years. She has stayed back in the eastern part of the country and has held various jobs there. When 9/11 occurred in 2001, she served again in the Active Reserve. It was not by choice. She was volunteered as were many others.

When she left active duty for good, she continued going to school and working odd jobs. She just wanted to get the basic school courses out of the way. Six months later she got a job as a medical receptionist which introduced her to the medical field. After a year she moved on to being a medical assistant. Although she had no formal training for the job, she'd seen enough as a medical receptionist to think she could handle being an assistant. She succeeded well. After the year the head physician she'd been working with suggested she try surgery. But first she tried respiratory therapy. Then she realized she would really prefer being a surgical assistant and transferred to that. Then, with that training behind her, she went to work at a hospital.

Patty really enjoys surgery because it is so varied: plastic surgery, total joint replacements, cataracts, sports medicine, general surgery, and head trauma. She is aiming at getting her First Assistant Registered Nurse Degree. She already has been accepted at George Mason University for the fall of 2005.

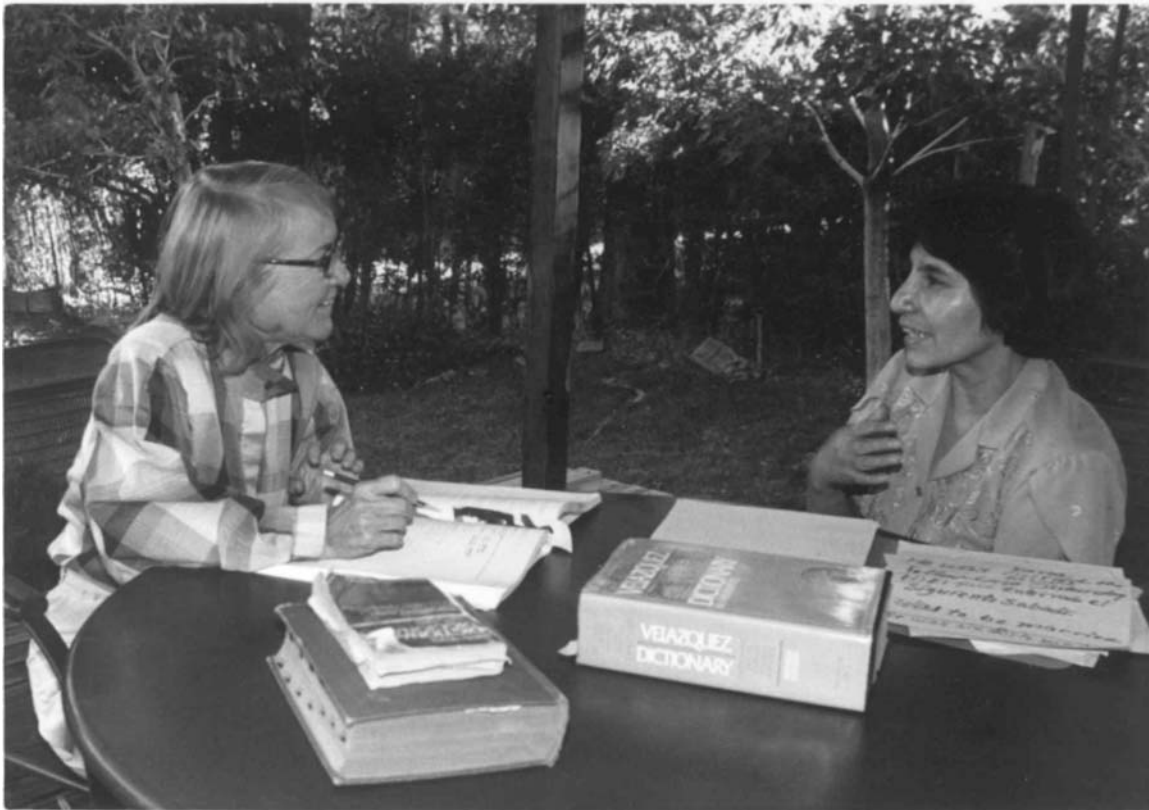
As for the boys, Noe graduated from Hug High School in 1998. He is in the Marine Reserve and did serve in Iraq for several months. He works part-time as an athletic coach at Hug High School. He has a full time job at Stein Mart as well. He lives with his mother, sister, and two nieces in Sparks.

Jose graduated from Hug High School in 1999. He worked in the Reno area for two years and then went into the Army. He spent ten months in Iraq. He has earned enough time to have the government fund him while he is going to the University. He wants to be an architect.

Maria recently told me about a letter of recommendation that she had gotten from one of her teachers at Truckee Meadows Community College. This was well before she owned her own business. The teacher suggested she show the letter every place where she was applying for a job. The letter said that Maria was a prominent and permanent figure at the college. She was a member of the 500 Hour Club, part of the English study program. She also wrote, "Maria is fluent in English now and she has an exceptional sense of responsibility toward her work ethic, which serves to suggest other good qualities, too."

When I look back on the early days of her learning English as my private student, I would never have imagined that she would become the best speaker of the Mexicans with whom I spent so much time, not just tutoring, but also familiarizing them with how things are done in the Reno area compared to how things are done in Mexico. Maria became an American Citizen on November 22, 1996. I went to the ceremony and felt very proud of her.

I began taking Spanish conversation classes in 1976. At that time I had no idea what a big world it would open up for me.



Maria Cruz studying English with Jean

PRELUDE TO A THANKSGIVING

My husband and I spent his last Thanksgiving with old friends in Berkley. He and I had made the stop there en route to Reno from a cancer clinic in Texas. He was on permanent disability retirement from work. Two months later he died of cancer. For the next several years I continued spending each Thanksgiving in Berkeley with these friends, Bob and Clara Stern. The holiday in 1981 was not typical.

At 7:30 p.m. on Tuesday, November 24, two days before Thanksgiving, I got a call from my Mexican friend, Teresa, who was in labor and leaving for the hospital by cab. She was letting me know I should go to the hospital now because Teresa knew almost no English. Her obstetrician had asked me to be there to act as interpreter. Teresa had arrived in the U.S.A. only four months before, from a rural area near Guadalajara, Mexico. Gabriel, her husband, had been in the states for several years already, and he knew a lot of English. He was staying at home ostensibly to take care of the girls, but maybe he also wanted to avoid being present at all the goings-on in the hospital. Teresa was nineteen, several years younger than Gabriel.

I'd met Gabriel Lopez, a casino salad bar tender, at his job when a friend and I had lunch where he worked. I have a penchant for talking with foreigners, so he and I got on easily. He told me his wife, Teresa, had recently arrived here and was pregnant. She brought their daughters, ages five and two with her. When I asked if she'd seen a doctor, he answered, "No." I said I'd find one for her if he liked, and there began my association with the family. I found a good inexpensive clinic and took Teresa to all her prenatal appointments. I filled out all the forms for her and served as her interpreter. Back in 1981 most places did not routinely have any Spanish interpreters available, so if I went along, it made the process much easier for both Teresa and the medical staff. I'd already served as interpreter for several other Mexican families whom I knew through having given them English lessons in their homes. I went along to help at dentists, doctors, finding new apartments, and getting children registered for school.

Teresa was very shy of me in those days. When Gabriel was present she spoke to me only through him. In the hospital we did not chat together,

but she always responded willingly when I'd relay questions to her that the nurses or doctors asked. She'd never been in a hospital before. Her two daughters had both been born at home with a midwife in attendance and without the aid of any sophisticated medical technology. In Reno, in prenatal care, she'd gotten used to the routine of nurses taking her temperature, blood pressure, and drawing her blood for tests. In retrospect, however, I was astounded by the aplomb she showed when they attached the fetal heart monitor to her huge abdomen. Maybe on the inside she was terrified, or – more probably – the stoicism I've seen in many Mexican friends was just part of her nature. I did feel that she had learned to trust me by that time and knew that I wouldn't let anything bad happen to her. She watched TV between contractions and nurses' care. At that time there was no Spanish-language TV channel in Reno, and she couldn't have gotten much out of the English speaking programs, but the television had saved her from the discomfort of having to try to talk with me.

It was a long night. I had periodic social conversations with the nurses who came to check Teresa's progress; they were always nice to her. I did take one break to go to the hospital cafeteria which was almost deserted. Coffee was available on the maternity floor, and I had a couple of cups during the night. I'd brought along my Spanish-English dictionary – just in case – and I also had a paperback book to read, though I can't remember what it was about. I even watched a bit of TV since its sound made concentrating on my book difficult. The night passed calmly while I sometimes catnapped uncomfortably in my chair.

I had had the good sense to seek out a small, current medical book in Spanish and English. Although this was relatively early in the massive Hispanic migration to the U.S.A., the book did have a section on childbirth, so I memorized the key words and they served me well during both Teresa's labor and delivery. None of my University Spanish courses had ever gotten into anything like this gut level stuff.

Next morning when Teresa's cervix was dilated sufficiently for the birthing, she was taken to the delivery room. I was given a shirt, long pants and a mask to put on so I could go along. I also was given disposable covers for my hair and shoes, and then a nurse told me to scrub my hands up to the elbows. I hadn't known what to expect. No one had given me a run-through in advance. The doctor was glad to see me, and then the nurses accepted my presence easily. I was seated on Teresa's right side, just above her head. The birthing area remained out of my view from that point all through the delivery. From time to time the doctor told me minimal instructions to give Teresa: push, don't push, now push very hard. Meanwhile the nurses constantly monitored her vital signs and the baby's heartbeat.

The baby was born with relative ease Wednesday morning at 10:19. He was eight pounds one and a half ounces of healthy boy. I sighed with relief and Teresa and I smiled broadly at each other. I even had the pleasure of telling her it was a boy. I didn't dare hug her with the doctor and nurses still working over her, but I did give her shoulder a squeeze. One of the nurses asked me if I had ever done this before. I replied, "No," and she said, "You did very well." I was so gratified to hear that and thanked her. Both Teresa and the baby were cleaned up and wheeled out into the hallway together on a gurney. I followed them. Their room wasn't ready yet, so as we waited, I dialed Teresa's home number for her on a nearby public phone. She told Gabriel he'd finally gotten his son. I heard a loud joyful response on the other end of the line. I took a picture of Teresa with the baby cradled in her arms; he lay there wrapped in a blanket and wearing a little white knit cap, sleeping. Teresa smiled contentedly. I asked about the baby's name but she wasn't sure yet. She told me Gabriel was thinking about choosing Charlie, which he ultimately did. When we finally were admitted to her room, I realized I'd been at the hospital about fourteen hours. I was happy but exhausted, so I said goodbye and promised Teresa a call when I returned to Reno after the Thanksgiving holidays.



Teresa & Charlie Lopez at the hospital ~ 1981

I began this story with my Thanksgiving plans for 1981. Because I was committed to being present at Teresa's baby's birth, and it occurred the day before the holiday, my regular schedule had to be changed to give me time for much needed sleep. I called Clara and told her I would be coming down on Thursday, the day itself, instead of Wednesday, and that I'd probably need a nap before pitching in. "Ok – drive carefully," she responded. But Wednesday during the day I couldn't sleep for very long at a time, so I just took what amounted to a couple naps up to bedtime when I got back to my normal sleeping routine.

The next morning an impressive snowstorm fell over the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Funny, all the years we'd lived in Reno my husband and I almost never went to the San Francisco Bay Area in the winter. After all, who knew when it might snow? And who liked that mountain driving in the snow? But here I was, knowing there was a big storm, and deciding just to go anyway. Where did the incredible new confidence come from? I guess I had in mind that since I'd done my job in good faith staying up all night with Teresa for the baby's birth, some unseen power would take care of me on this trip.

I was virtually a neophyte driving in snow – never having done it in the mountains before. Chains were required so I paid a chain monkey to put mine on. A while further down the road an inspector was waiting to see if every car passing was now indeed chained up. Fortunately he stood on the left side of my car, because the right chain had already fallen off soon after being put on. I was aware of that but had just left it in the road. I was bloody well determined to get on with this journey.

It snowed very hard and my windshield wipers weren't doing their job properly. But I didn't dare stop and get out to clean the glass. I was afraid of getting stuck in the snow. So I chugged along slowly as most others were doing. The space I could see through was a half-moon shape with about a six inch base. It took intense concentration to keep my focus on that small area. Normally I listen to my car radio all the time when I'm driving. On this trip I had turned it off very early on. It was just too distracting an element to add to my immediate job. Nevertheless I was still buoyed up by my conviction that I would make it OK.

Somewhere before Auburn, a hundred miles west of Reno, the chain requirement was dropped. I managed to get my one chain off by myself, though not without getting wet, even in a raincoat and with a headscarf. The snow had turned into a steady rain. It was wonderful no longer having the snow-restricted view through my windshield. Finally I dared to make a pit stop for lunch and a much needed rest. Being on my feet and moving around for a while felt great. When I got back into the car, I

turned the radio on and found a golden oldies station, which was just what I wanted. I sang along lustily with those I knew. I really wailed on “Sentimental Journey” and “Kalamazoo.” And I’m fearlessly creative about putting in my own words when necessary. This time my singing along proved inordinately energizing and kept me alert all the way to Berkley.

I had left Reno at 8:23 a.m. and got to Berkley at 3:00 p.m. That was two hours longer than the usual trip. For the second time in two days I’d accomplished something brand new for me: first the interpreting in the labor and delivery rooms; then the drive over the mountains in a snowstorm. I was elated. But I did go directly from hello hugs with the Sterns to my usual room there for a nap, complete with ear plugs.

INTERPRETING FOR A MEXICAN IN THE HOSPITAL

Once when I was visiting a Mexican friend in the hospital and talking with her in Spanish, the head nurse heard about our conversation and came into the room to talk to me about it. She suggested I sign up at the hospital as a volunteer interpreter for the Mexican patients. It seemed like a good idea to me, so I signed up at both St. Mary's Hospital and Washoe Medical Hospital. In the early 80's there were very few Spanish speakers at either hospital.

Not long after signing up I got an early morning call from St. Mary's asking me to come to the emergency room right away to act as interpreter for a young Mexican man who had just been admitted into the hospital. It was 8:00 a.m. and I went right over to emergency and located Roberto Garcia. We introduced ourselves to each other and then we got right down to business. Roberto told me that he had passed a kidney stone about a year ago in Mexico, but that the pain was in front then and in a different place now. It had begun about a week ago and was rather severe. We were assigned to a room of our own, with my leaving while he undressed and put on the hospital gown.

A nurse came in. She was a French Canadian speaker but needed my help to translate Spanish speaking. She read what had already been written down about Roberto and got other information through my asking him what more she wanted to know. She asked me to ask him to wash his penis very well, and then urinate a little first into the toilet bowl and then into the plastic cup, not touching the cup's sterile inside or the top inside, then finishing in the toilet bowl. I did all that easily and Roberto taught me the word for toilet bowl.

Then a small attractive black man from Kenya, Africa arrived. I had seen him before, probably around the University Campus. He'd been in Reno for seven years and was studying to be a medical tech. He took a blood sample from Roberto's right arm, immediately realized he'd not taken enough so he had to take more from the left arm. He apologized for that and I conveyed it to Roberto. The student and I chatted in that very short time. The clincher was when he asked why people didn't speak Swahili

when they came to Kenya instead of English. It was Kenya's colonial language. He had to know English before enrolling in UNR. I did mention that Kenya was a much smaller country. It was all spoken with good feeling. I hoped I'd run into him again. He did know Sedou Richard, a young African man I'd spent some time with.

In the more than three hours Ricardo and I were together, we covered a lot of history. We talked mostly about our feelings about religion, marriage, fooling around, opportunities for talented children to learn, the Mexican life versus that of the U.S.A., and the character traits of Mexicans. He was a month older than my daughter, thirty, and had four kids with one more on the way.

Among other things, he'd been a postman working for tips or whatever, since postmen receive no salary in Guadalajara. The people he gave mail to either paid him a little money or something else for his trouble. He'd met his wife on his mail route and had really fallen for her. Her picture showed she was very beautiful and very Indian looking. She'd actually done some modeling before they married. He said he'd been a virgin when they married because running around didn't appeal to his strong moral convictions. And he didn't cheat on her because he didn't want to. He loves her so much and it was unfair to expect her to be faithful if he wasn't. He writes to her a lot.

He was twenty-two when he married and his wife fifteen or sixteen. Their oldest child, a girl, is very bright. His wife teaches her and the five year old reading and writing at home, admittedly rare in a Mexican home. His folks have a "ranch" which is a small private home on a piece of land. It's in a little town about 1½ miles from Guadalajara. Roberto hopes to move his family there because life there is morally purer than in the bigger cities like Guadalajara. He wants only the best for his children. He showed me pictures of them, and I showed him pictures of my children and my one granddaughter. I even had some pictures of Mexican friends in my purse and also showed them to him.

Roberto didn't want to be away from the kids for long because he thought they'd lose respect for him if they didn't know him. He'd been in Reno seven months and had worked at the Onslow Hotel only two months as a busboy, so he had no insurance coverage. He'd also worked in California at several places in Los Angeles and in Oregon. He hated the atmosphere of Reno with its gambling and wanted to leave to work elsewhere, but he was here with three younger brothers, one of whom was really a victim of our milieu and whom he was awfully worried about. He said in other states Mexicans only spend too much money on drink – which is necessarily limited. But here, if they fall into gambling habits, they can

end up with nothing. The girls in particular go down very fast, since if they lose their money, they sell themselves to or go with anyone. He felt very strong about all this. Roberto talked ninety miles an hour, was never at a loss for words, and obviously trusted me a great deal.

When I mentioned going to a lecture with my novio, he laughed and said a woman of my age did not use that term. I was fifty-five. Only someone never having been married used it. He said everyone would laugh at me if I said novio. I asked what to say instead and he said, “querido”- meaning darling or dear. I said that seemed too loaded for me, but he said it wasn’t.

Even though Roberto talked very fast, I understood almost everything he said. Miraculously, I thought to bring my medical personnel handbook and a dictionary. I let him browse the former and he did for a few minutes. I looked up bladder in the dictionary for explaining to the nurse his pain. In the course of conversation, I also looked up scholarship and dogma, the latter explaining my church to him. The handsome young doctor who came in did know a few words of Spanish but definitely needed my help.

I finally got so hungry I got a cabbage salad, buttermilk, an oatmeal cookie and coffee from the cafeteria. The cashier gave me employee prices (\$.60) when I told her why I was there. The cafeteria was closed to visitors.

I insisted Roberto sit on the only stool in our room, explaining I always chose to stand because it’s more comfortable for me. Finally, however, I sat down on the floor for a bit because I needed a change of position. I got up very gingerly afterward and he asked why. When I explained my back problem, he marveled at the fact I was there in emergency helping him and I had my own problems.

Roberto told me about another job he’d had in Mexico. He made things in a factory – darling little benches, containers, and other things as well. All were very beautiful and selling very well. The factory said they would take him back whenever he wanted to come.

He spoke of his parents’ loving devotion, and I suggested perhaps that had taught him to be the same. He also spoke of his father’s many serious illnesses and how supportive he’d been, and his father had appreciated him saying, “But I’ve got many sons and you’re the one who’s here!”

At work Roberto had an offer to change to a dishwasher, but he didn’t take it because it was boring, though less liable to make for difficulties

on the job. He liked being a bus boy because there's constant contact with people. He's got really good vibes. He told me how he finally learned what people mean when they say hot tea, iced tea, or just tea. And he said he knows he can learn the basic things on any new job fast.

He found Americans much friendlier and more helpful than Mexicans as a general rule, and fewer bad ones among us. I told him about the Pink Ladies, women volunteers who wear a pink garment to identify themselves. They do a variety of things for patients. His wife would like to work but he won't let her. He thinks women are weak and the bad ones she could meet at work could corrupt her morals.

We had spent over three hours together, and we parted with thanks, a handshake and a, "Mucho gusto" from me.

A CHRISTMAS STORY

It was mid-December and I was in the toy section of a store looking for an appropriate Christmas gift for my little Mexican friend Edgar, aged two. For several months I had been tutoring a group of six adults, all from the same family, in English. Most of them had arrived recently and knew almost no English. Edgar's mother, Mago, was among them. She still had a four year old daughter in Mexico.

So there I was, hunting carefully along the toy shelves, when I came upon a cute black and white stuffed dog about fourteen inches long. The tag attached to him said to wind him up and he would talk. I tested it. He said, "My name is Buttons." A pause and then, "I like to be petted." And finally, "Please take me to bed with you."

I liked this dog a lot, so I looked for his price tag. It was nowhere on the dog. So I hunted the shelves for another one like it but found none. He was the last one. Then I told myself, "I don't care how much he costs. It's a perfect gift for Edgar. It'll even teach him a little English."

I took the dog to the check stand and stood in line behind several people. Before it was my turn, a friend came and stood directly behind me in the line. When my turn did come, the check out girl couldn't find the price either. So she called the manager who went to get the records on that purchase. It was \$5.39. The friend behind me said, "Well look at that! You buy a much better toy than I do, yours even talks, and it costs less than mine." I was surprised too, but I paid the bill and left.

When I got home, I carefully looked over the dog again, and this time I saw in plain sight the small tag – it said \$11.99. This was about twenty years ago, in the early eighties. I wondered how that had happened. We all three missed seeing it before. Some how I felt I should call my spiritual counselor and ask her what had happened. Her reply was, "You were wholeheartedly practicing the Natural Law of Love, and Harmony when you said you didn't care how much it cost, it was so right for Edgar. And miracles happen when we are living at our highest and best."

Lifescapes