

*Asi es La Vida*

*en*

*Mexico*

Carole Little

Copyright © 2012 Carole Little

All rights reserved.

ISBN-13: 978-0-9857004-3-0

## DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my family for their support and encouragement.

*'The world will continue to define you,*

*UNTIL you define yourself to the world.'*

*-Unknown*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Special thanks to all those who believed in me on the journey thus far. Many thanks to Jane, for being a wonderful audience and great encourager. Finally, to my writing coach, Max Regan, whose gentle coaching and sage wisdom guided me through this fabulous process.*

## PREFACE

In the early 80's, I was given the opportunity to participate in a teaching exchange program in Mexico and I jumped at the opportunity to become bilingual English/Spanish. The Hispanic population was steadily growing in the U. S. and being bilingual would make me much more effective in the social service field.

Initially, I had contracted to spend two months in the tiny province of Orizaba, Veracruz but unbeknownst to me, the plan would change. In the end, I learned much more than a second language.

The subsequent story is a chapter taken from my bestselling memoir, *Cutting the Strings*, which available on Amazon and Barnes & Noble.

## Mi lindo Mexico

The trip from Bangkok to Mexico City took thirty-six hours, with stops in Hong Kong, Taipei, Seoul, Tokyo, Los Angeles, and Dallas. There was an eight-hour layover in Los Angeles. This was my first look at the United States after traveling around Asia for more than a year. I realized just how much I had adapted to the conservative way of dress and behavior when I saw a blonde American girl on roller skates wearing Daisy Dukes, a skimpy halter top, headphones, with a cigarette hanging out of her mouth. I now understood the meaning of culture shock and realized why I was treated poorly in other countries from time to time.

As the plane touched down in Mexico City, I looked at the dirty, fraying strings that were hanging from both wrists and decided my journey from Bangkok to Mexico City was over so there was no need to keep them on any longer. The strings had been tied around my wrists by Hmong refugees at a farewell ceremony as part of a Buddhist blessing for “great luck, great riches, a great new job, and a safe journey.” The practice of Sai Sin is especially popular in Northeast Thailand, where I had been living. I was told to wear the strings until they fell off, as to cut them off might bring bad luck.

While in Thailand, the strings seemed to have won me new found respect with the Thai people as I slowly made my way south toward Bangkok, taking one last look at the country where I had learned so much during the last fifteen months. Once I left Thailand, the strings elicited the same question of “What do the strings mean?” by every curious traveler I met en route from Bangkok to Mexico

City. After two weeks, the once-white strings were now gray and more of a nuisance than a help. When the plane landed, I quickly cut them off and put them in my pocket.

The thirty-six-hour trip had taken its toll, but somehow as I made my way to the information counter at the airport, I felt a renewed sense of energy. I thought I could easily make the four-hour bus trip to Orizaba, Veracruz. When I reached the desk, the smiling hostess asked, "How may I help you, Miss?"

With every intention of completing my journey that day, I asked, "Can you please tell me how to get to the bus station to go to Orizaba?"

Her response was totally unexpected, "It's a four-hour ride to Orizaba, and you need to rest before traveling there. It is better for you to get a hotel today and after you rest, you can make the trip. Would you like me to arrange a hotel for you?"

Not giving up just yet, I said, "I'd rather get to the bus station, can you please help me do that?"

Unwavering, she said, "I'll help you get a hotel room so you can rest after your long trip. Then you can go to Orizaba in the morning."

As if it were settled, she made a call then pointed to the line of taxi's waiting outside the main exit, "Give this slip of paper to the driver."

Since I didn't speak Spanish, I could only hope the taxi driver spoke English. When I got to the first car in line, the driver quickly got out to help me with my luggage. "Do you speak English?" I asked.

He shook his head and replied, "No English."

I tried one last time to tell him the name of the bus station and town where I wanted to go, but he didn't understand so I handed him the slip of paper resigned to the fact that I would not be traveling to Orizaba that day, trusting that I would end up at a clean, safe, affordable hotel somewhere in Mexico City.

The ride to the hotel took about thirty minutes and as we weaved in and out of traffic through the streets of Mexico's historic capital, I couldn't help but compare it to Bangkok. There were a lot of traffic, smog and run-down areas in certain parts of town. As we neared the center of the city, the architecture became much more ornate, the streets were wider with beautiful plazas, fountains, and



parks. There were street vendors at every light and political signs for the PAN and PRI parties plastered everywhere.

At long last, the taxi pulled up in front of a small, older hotel called the Hotel Valle. I paid the driver and made my way to the front desk with the luggage. Back then, my bags did not have wheels so I struggled with the bulging, oversized bag. The lobby was tiny but clean and obviously from a previous era, with its timeless worn marble and mahogany front desk, black and white tile floor, and brass fixtures. A silver-haired desk clerk with a moustache and glasses greeted me in English. I gave him the reservation slip from the airport courtesy desk, and he began to check me in asking me how long I intended to stay. I indicated I would only be staying for one night. When I pulled out my wallet, the clerk announced they only accepted credit cards or pesos. I indicated I only carried US dollars to which he offered, "I'll be glad to exchange your dollars for pesos, however the rate will be less favorable than a currency exchange place."

Under the circumstances, I had to accept whatever rate he was willing to pay since I had not thought to exchange my money at the airport. I gave him a hundred-dollar-bill in exchange for a handful of colorful bills that meant little to me at this point. Since I was paying cash, I had to settle in advance, and he promptly took several hundred pesos back. When I got to the room, I figured out the rate was higher than what I would normally agree to pay, but one night wouldn't hurt. I still had plenty left to get me to where I was going and to tide me over until I started teaching English.

The grumbling in my stomach reminded me that I hadn't eaten since I left Los Angeles eight hours ago, so I decided to grab something in the little coffee shop next to the lobby. Trying to decipher the menu was more of a challenge than what I anticipated, so I ordered *una hamburguesa con queso y tocino*, which I guessed to be a cheeseburger and something else. I figured if I didn't like whatever it was I would just put it to the side. It turned out to be a bacon cheeseburger with lettuce, tomato, and fries. Not too bad, I thought. Later I would learn it was the worst thing you could order in a Mexican restaurant.

After dinner, I decided to explore a bit while there was still daylight but realized I was pretty worn out and opted to return to the hotel. I laid down on the bed and the next thing I knew I was waking

up with a violent urge to run to the bathroom. My head was spinning and the nausea was overwhelming. I washed my face, got into my pajamas and went back to bed only to repeat this same process over and over for the next forty-eight hours. I knew I had to get help and after several attempts to communicate with the front desk. The clerk kept hanging up on me. I found the number to the American Embassy in the phone book. Miracle of miracles, the clerk understood that I wanted to make a call, and fortunately I knew my numbers in Spanish. Much to my delight, the line was ringing and a male voice answered in American English, “United States Embassy,” then went on to say, “We are currently closed in observance of Columbus Day and will re-open Tuesday, October 13.” That was three days away. I would run out of money by then. I was so violently ill; at one point I just lay in the shower and turned the water on occasionally to rinse myself off.

After three days, I somehow got myself dressed, packed, and down to the front desk. It seemed like it took me forever. Once I paid the hotel, all I had left was \$100. They had really taken advantage of me on the exchange rate, but I had little choice. I walked slowly to a taxi waiting at the curb. The driver helped with my luggage and stole occasional side glances at me as I gingerly made my way into the back seat of the taxi. My stomach and intestines were so distended and painful, I could not stand up straight nor could I sit normally. I had to lean as far back as possible so as not to bend my waist. Every move I made was excruciating. When I finally settled in to the cab, I glanced at the rear view mirror and saw the driver watching me.

I said, “ADO—Orizaba, por favor,” which was the name of the terminal and the city I was going to. The driver glanced at me as he pulled away from the curb into traffic. As he darted in and out of the congested roadway, the pain from being jostled to and fro was more than I had ever experienced in my life. After a few minutes, the driver said, “You no go Orizaba.”

I couldn’t believe it. What was up with these people? First the woman in the airport refuses to help me get to Orizaba, now the taxi driver.

Once again I said, “Si, por favor, ADO a Orizaba.”  
He shook his head “No.”

At which point, I closed my eyes and thought, I guess this is it. It is the end of the road. I'm going to die in a foreign country and no one even knows I'm here.

After several turns, the driver turned and looked at me saying, "You no go Orizaba. You go doctor."

I laid my head against the back seat and closed my eyes. I could feel the tears streaming down my cheeks. I was too weak to protest any more. A few minutes later, the cab stopped in front of what appeared to be an elementary school. The driver got out, motioning me to wait and said, "Esperase."

He disappeared into the building and a few minutes later came out with a woman. They stood in front of the doors talking, looking at me from time to time. Then the woman disappeared inside the school and moments later reappeared only this time had another woman with her. All three of them approached the car and the second woman leaned forward as I rolled down the window.

In the most beautifully spoken English I had ever heard, she said, "My name is Mrs. Aleman, and this is Jose Hernandez and his wife, Maria del Carmen. Mr. Hernandez brought you here so that I could translate for him. He is concerned for your well-being and would like to take you to a doctor."

I began to recount the events of the last few days, trying to hold back the emotion, but it felt so good to finally be able to tell my story to someone who understood me. I explained that I had little money left and needed to use it to get to Orizaba.

"I have not been able to communicate with the director of the language institute to let her know I am in the country and explain why I did not arrive on time."

Mrs. Aleman kindly explained. "Mr. Hernandez will help you contact your director after taking you to see the doctor since there is no way you can make the trip in your current condition. Don't worry, they are good people, and you will be in good hands." Her smile reassured me and I was overcome with emotion.

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Aleman, and please thank Mr. and Mrs. Hernandez for me. I am so grateful for their kindness."

When she finished translating, Jose and his wife nodded and smiled at me. Jose drove me to a nearby clinic, and it was not long before I was ushered into an examining room where the doctor and

Jose had to help me up on to the table, since I could hardly stand at this point. The pain in my lower intestines was unbearable.

The doctor introduced himself in perfect English. "I am Doctor Morales, and we are going to do this in stages, since you are in so much pain. First we will help you lay on your side, and then we'll help you roll over on to your back, okay?"

With tears streaming down my cheeks, I nodded, overcome once again with the joy of knowing that I was with someone I could communicate with and that I was about to get relief from the intense agony I had been experiencing for days. I answered questions about my general health and the incidents leading up to this point.

Then Doctor Morales said, "I am going to give you an injection that will alleviate the pain and antibiotics to eliminate the infection. Once I give you the shot, we will wait fifteen minutes for the medicine to take effect. Then I'll come back to check on you."

As I lay on the table waiting for the medication to take hold, I couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if I had not met Jose and his wife, Maria del Carmen. When the doctor returned, he asked, "Do you think you can sit up now?" Surprisingly, the pain was gone! In fact, I could even stand up straight.

"Whoa! Hold on, not so fast," Doctor Morales warned. "You are still in a very delicate state. You are extremely dehydrated, and if you don't continue with the shots every four hours, you will feel even worse than before. I'm going to give you a prescription, and Jose will take you to the pharmacy. You will then have to find someone to give you the injections for the next ten days. You must also stay on a clear liquid diet for the next few days. Please make plans to find a doctor in Orizaba who can do a follow-up exam to make sure you have healed properly."

I was so grateful and relieved at how much better I was feeling.

"Thank you so much, Doctor Morales. Where did you learn to speak such perfect English? Did you study in the States?" I wondered out loud.

He smiled and said, "Yes, I went to medical school at Loma Linda. I really had a hard time leaving but my family is here."

I smiled back and said, "I am very glad you did. Thank you again for coming to my rescue today. How much do I owe you?"

He graciously replied as he headed for the door, “You are very welcome, there is no charge for the visit and don’t forget to follow up with a doctor in Orizaba.”

After we picked up the prescriptions, we went to retrieve Jose’s wife from school and they took me to their tiny three-room apartment, where they lived with their five children. The 400-unit apartment building was older and slightly run down. As we walked through the courtyard to the main entrance, the air was filled with the sounds and smells of families cooking, listening to music, children playing, dogs barking, and people arguing. As we climbed the four flights of stairs, I continued to marvel at how I could move about with ease. Jose insisted on lugging my suitcase upstairs, most likely because he feared for its safety if left in the taxi.

Jose’s children greeted us at the door and the look of shock and surprise was clearly on their faces. The children, two boys and three girls, ranged in age from three to ten years old. Once inside the tiny apartment, Jose introduced me to the children who were wide-eyed and curious to know who this strange woman was that spoke no Spanish. While Jose and Maria del Carmen spoke to the children, I studied the small, over-crowded apartment and wondered how they could stand living such a cramped existence with no real privacy. It was evident, even without any understanding of the language, that this was a close-knit family and the children treated their parents with much respect. They motioned for me to sit on the day bed near the door, and when I sat down, the littlest one came and sat down next to me, staring at me the whole time.

Maria del Carmen offered a plate of food which I politely had to decline, motioning to my stomach, and she smiled knowingly. Jose then offered me a glass of lemonade, which I accepted to be polite but knew I could not drink. How could this family that had absolutely nothing be so generous and giving? Jose pointed to his watch, and then held an imaginary phone to his ear, indicating it was time for him to take me to call the director of the language institute in Orizaba. I so wanted to be able to help this family but did not have enough cash to make a difference, so I opened my suitcase and took out the most valuable item I had, the handmade king size Hmong quilt that had been given to me before I left Ban Vinai. I gave it to Jose trying to express my gratitude and explaining he could probably sell it for several hundred dollars. He and Maria del Carmen humbly

and graciously accepted the quilt, thanking me for the gesture. I hugged them all and quickly left, as I felt close to tears and couldn't understand why.

True to his word, Jose took me to a public phone outlet and contacted the director of the language institute. She indicated to Jose that the best course of action was to take me to her brother's home in Mexico City, where I could spend the evening, and they would make sure I got to the bus station first thing in the morning. Jose handed me the phone and Gabriela Freeman, the executive director, explained.

"Carole, sounds like the best thing for you to do is get some rest, let the medication work a bit more before you travel, and we'll see you in a day or so." Then she gave me the address of the family in Orizaba where I was to go upon arrival.

In no time, Jose was pulling up in front of Mr. Freeman's home. After carrying my luggage to the front gate and ringing the door bell, Jose turned to shake my hand.

"Que le vaya con Dios," he said, "may you go with God."

Mr. Freeman came out to greet me, paid Jose, and helped me inside. I turned to watch Jose climb back into his run-down taxi. As he looked up and waved good-bye, I knew I would never forget his smiling face.

By this time the medication was beginning to wear off just as the doctor said it would, and I guess it was obvious as Mrs. Freeman gestured to the hallway.

"Welcome, Carole. The guest room is right this way if you would like to freshen up."

The room was tastefully decorated in an elegant French-style décor, almost picture perfect. It was in such contrast to Jose and Maria's tiny, cramped apartment. "I have called my neighbor, Raquel, who is a nurse. She will come by within the hour to inject your medicine."

A few minutes later, Mrs. Freeman returned with a cup of tea, which I later learned was chamomile. It was wonderful and just what I needed. As promised, Raquel came over to administer the medication and indicated she would come by in the morning. I decided to lie down just for a bit before joining the Freemans. I awoke to the sun pouring through the sheers that beautifully adorned the window. Outside, I could hear birds singing and the smell of

coffee was wafting through the air. Once I showered and dressed, I made my way to the kitchen to apologize for being so rude. I found Mr. and Mrs. Freeman out on the covered patio filled with tropical plants. They were reading the paper and looked up and smiled as I came through the door.

“Buenos Dias, Carole. Did you sleep well? How are you feeling?”

They acted as if they had known me all my life and that it was no big deal that this perfect stranger had spent the night in their home.

“Do you think you could tolerate a cup of coffee?” It had been so long since I had eaten or drank anything beyond chamomile tea from the night before.

“Thank you so much. I’m not too sure about coffee but another cup of tea would be wonderful.”

Smiling, Mrs. Freeman passed me a cup with a tea bag and the pitcher of hot water. “How about some toast?” as she passed me a spoon and the sugar bowl.

“I would love some toast!”

She turned towards the kitchen and asked, “Josefina, haga pan tostado para la senorita, por favor.” In a few minutes, the maid brought in a plate of golden toasted bread.

“Raquel will be here in a little bit and once you are packed and ready to go, my husband will take you to the bus station, Carole. The medication is only good for about four hours, so it’s best not to delay once Raquel leaves. My sister-in-law has made arrangements for a doctor to visit you when you arrive in Orizaba.”

Wow, doctors in Mexico still made house calls? All the questions I seemed to have were being answered before I could ask them.

“Many thanks to both of you, I am forever grateful.”

Mr. Freeman said good-bye after assisting me with the ticket purchase and checking my luggage. The ADO bus terminal was a huge circular building with a Plexiglas dome, which made it bright. The acoustics reverberated throughout the cavernous space every time the announcer came over the loud speaker. The station had doorways all around the circumference of the building with rows of people sitting and lines of people standing everywhere. This was a busy place with people traveling to all points south of Mexico City.

It would be another thirty minutes before the bus to Orizaba was due to leave which gave me enough time to grow accustomed to the announcements and to learn to distinguish the names of the various destinations.

“Todos pasajeros a Puebla, favor de abordar el autobus numero seis cientos con salida a las diez y media,” meant “All passengers going to Puebla, please board bus number 600 leaving at ten thirty.” Above each door was a sign with the final destination written on it.

When I heard the announcer say, “Todos pasajeros a Orizaba...” I looked toward the door that said Orizaba and the people began to line up and so I did too. I made my way onto the bus and by the time it was ready to leave, every seat was filled. As the bus made its way out of the city towards the highway, I began to settle in with a book for the four-hour trip. I felt unusually tired, and it was barely noon, so I closed my eyes for a bit and when I opened them, the bus was bouncing in and out of pot holes as it made its way into the parking lot of the bus station in Orizaba. As I sat up, the bus hit a huge pot hole and jostled me so hard that I lost a contact lens. The windows were tinted and it was hard to see where it had fallen. I searched long after everyone had disembarked but couldn't find it anywhere.

I got off the bus and went to retrieve my luggage and saw the luggage doors were closed. The driver pointed to the station so I went inside the terminal and saw two people behind the luggage counter. I handed them my ticket and when they slid my suitcase toward me, I placed the cassette player I was carrying on the ground next to my feet. I leaned over to get the suitcase and struggled in my weakened state. When I finally got it down off the counter and onto the floor, I turned to pick up the cassette player, and it was gone.

I looked at the row of passengers that were seated facing me, and expressionless faces stared back. “Did you see a radio?” I pointed to the floor and outlined the shape of the cassette player but the faces continued to stare blankly back at me. I turned to the people behind the luggage counter and repeated the same question and gestures, but they shrugged their shoulders, shook their heads, and lifted their palms in the universal gesture of “I don't know.”

A taxi driver who spoke a little English approached me, “You need help?” Gratefully, I explained what had happened, and he asked the people sitting there if they saw anything.



“They saw nothing, Miss. You need a taxi?” I pulled out the piece of paper with the contact information of the family where I was supposed to stay and gave it to the driver, as he looked at the address, picked up my suitcase and said, “This way, please.” We drove for about ten minutes and he pulled up in front of a vacant lot. “This is the place.”

Somehow I had the wrong address. “Do you know Gabriela Freeman?” How many Mexican nationals in a town the size of Orizaba would have a German surname? The driver shook his head.

Fortunately, I remembered that I had the address of the family my supervisor in Thailand had lived with, the Gonzalez family. I showed the driver the address and within a few minutes we were in front of the Gonzalez home. It was dark now as I climbed out of the taxi. The driver placed my suitcase on the sidewalk saying, “That will be 150 pesos.” In 1981, that was the equivalent of \$12.50 for a ride that should have cost no more than \$2.50. As I started to protest, the front door to the home opened and out came a good-looking young man, “May I help you?” he said in perfect English.

I introduced myself and explained all that had transpired since arriving in Orizaba ending with, “And now this man wants to overcharge me for a fifteen-minute ride from the bus station.”

The young man spoke quickly to the driver, then paid him the 150 pesos much to my dismay saying, “It’s better if we just let this one go. I am Gerardo Gonzalez, would you like to come in?”

As the taxi drove away, I peered through the beautiful wrought iron archway into the exquisite marble foyer of the Gonzalez home and followed Gerardo into the stately residence.

Once inside, two older women came from the kitchen into the foyer, one approached us and started asking Gerardo questions in Spanish. While Gerardo explained the situation, the woman, whom I would later learn was his mother, kept glancing at me from time to time with a kind expression on her face. The other woman stayed in the background just listening. Later I would learn it was Teresita, the maid.

Gerardo turned to me and said, “Carole, this is my mother, Gloria Gonzalez.”

“Mucho gusto, Carolina,” to which I replied, “Mucho gusto.”

Gerardo explained, “My Mother will call Gabriela Freeman to get the correct address of the family you are to stay with and then I

will take you there. Why don't you come and sit in the living room? Can I get you anything?"

Looking around, I said, "May I use your bathroom?"

To which he replied, "Of course, right this way."

By now the medication was really starting to wear off, and I was once again reminded that I was still in delicate shape. When I came out of the bathroom, I could hear everyone talking in the kitchen. I took a seat on the sofa waiting for them to come back. The house smelled wonderful, making it obvious that I had interrupted dinner preparation. Gerardo came back into the room with his mother, who came and sat next to me on the sofa.

"How are you feeling? Gabriela told us of your food poisoning." As Gerardo spoke, Mrs. Gonzalez took my hand and squeezed it.

"The medication is wearing off and it's been a long day." I said wearily.

Mrs. Gonzalez looked at me, "Quieres una taza de te? Te?" She gestured like she was sipping tea.

"Si, por favor," I answered, gratefully accepting her offer.

As she left the room, she said something to Gerardo and he looked at me. "My mother says you need to stay here. Gabriela told her you have medication that needs to be injected?"

I nodded to which he said, "My mother will get someone to give it to you. In the mean time, I will show you to the guest room." He picked up my bag and headed up the stairs as if all was settled, so I followed, not wishing to turn down a place to rest.

"You go ahead and settle in. If you need anything, just call me. Our home is your home."

Humbled by the genuine hospitality, I could feel my eyes well up as I said, "Thank you so much."

Once I settled in under the covers, Mrs. Gonzalez was knocking on the door with the tea and their neighbor from across the street was with her. Gerardo explained that she was going to administer the medication since she used to be a nurse before she got married, and then he left. All I could do was smile and repeatedly say, "Gracias."

I woke up around two a.m. and Mrs. Gonzalez was at my side, giving me the antibiotics, putting a cool cloth on my head and taking my temperature.

This went on for several days with trips to the bathroom being the only reason I got out of bed. I was in excruciating pain when the

medication wore off. The pain had extended to my joints and every muscle in my body. The doctor came twice during the week to examine me. He diagnosed a severe case of trichinosis caused from the bacon-burger I had eaten at the hotel. Recovery would be slow and it would be a few weeks before I could even start teaching. Throughout the whole process, Mrs. Gonzalez took care of me day and night. She was so sweet and so loving that the tears rolled down my cheeks one night as she hovered over me in the middle of the night, washing me with a cool cloth, giving me warm broth, antibiotics, and staying with me until I went back to sleep.

## Los Chayoteros

The recovery process was slow but after two weeks I was able to start teaching one class a day. By the end of the first two months, I was teaching three classes in the morning and five classes in the evening from four to nine p.m. In the early 1980s, Orizaba was a small city with a population of about 250,000 inhabitants. The streets were named north, south, east and west and the inner city streets were named numerically with Colon Oriente and Francisco Madero Street being dividing lines. This made getting around on my own easy. However the Gonzalez family insisted that someone accompany me at all times. It wasn't acceptable for me to be alone on the street, so the family and my students took turns walking me to and from school each day, twice a day.

Orizaba is located at the base of the snow-capped Pico de Orizaba, an inactive volcano and the highest mountain in Mexico, the third highest in North America. The climate was fairly moderate with temperatures in the low sixties in January, mid nineties in July, and a higher-than-average rainfall of about sixty inches per year. This made for lush vegetation in Orizaba and surrounding areas like Fortin de las Flores and Cordoba that were famous for their beautiful flowers and aromatic coffee.

Since English was taught in elementary and secondary schools, the majority of my students were adults. The morning classes were made up of professionals and their wives wishing to learn English for business or travel purposes. The afternoon classes were predominantly filled with college students and working adults. Occasionally, I had classes with younger students whose parents wanted them to learn English from a native speaker. I received room and board from the family in exchange for teaching their children English, and I received a small stipend of 3000 to 4000 pesos a month for eight classes a day, five days a week. Initially, this was equivalent to about \$250 to \$330 a month. My goal was to stay long enough to become fluent in Spanish, which I thought would take no more than six months. That would give me sufficient time to save up enough money for a ticket home with a little bit left over to live on for a few months until I found a job.

Life with the Gonzalez family was wonderful. They were a warm and gracious family with four boys who ranged in age from ten to twenty-six years old and one daughter, Gloriacita, who was fourteen and very smart. Gloriacita and Gerardo were the only members of the family who spoke English. The two oldest young men worked with Mr. Gonzalez in his cement business while Gerardo was away at college during the week. Gloriacita and her younger brother were in school during the day and busy with after-school activities. This really forced me to learn to communicate on my own since Mrs. Gonzalez and Teresita, the maid, spoke no English at all. Of course, the first words I learned revolved around meal times and food. Once I had recovered, the best part of each day was trying something totally new at each meal. All I can say is that ignorance is bliss when it comes to trying new things because in some cases, had I really known what I was about to eat, I never would have experienced the savory, delightful experience of true Southern Mexican cuisine.

My absolute favorite time of the day was mid-morning between classes when Mrs. Gonzalez and Teresita would make appetizers called *picaditas* and *memelitas* with refried black beans. They are made by hand just like corn tortillas, but *picaditas*, meaning “little pinched ones,” are pinched around the edge to form a ridge to keep in the salsa, diced onions, and cheese that are added after the maza is toasted on the comal. *Memelitas* are made just like tortillas but when the maza is rolled into a ball, refried beans are inserted into the maza ball, sealed, flattened, and cooked on the comal. Once cooked, they are topped with salsa, onions, whey, or cheese. These were served with fresh café, made just like the cowboys made it on the open range in a tin coffee pot over an open flame.

The Gonzalez family graciously remained my host family for the first two months, and I had really begun to get attached to them when Gabriela or “Gabi” as everyone called her, told me that it was time to stay with another family. It was customary for a family to host for no more than eight weeks. So it was with great reluctance and sadness that I moved to another host home. This time it was Gabi’s secretary and her family who generously opened their modest home to me. While they were kind, the house was tiny, and it was obvious someone had given up their room for me. After a month or so, I began to look for a room to rent.

In addition to having to pay for my own room and board, another major event occurred that further delayed my return to the United States. I was in class one day and one of my students, an engineer, asked me what I thought about the devaluation that had occurred earlier that morning. Having no idea what that meant, he went on to explain, “The economy is so poor in Mexico that the peso has lost much value against the U.S. dollar. So instead of twelve pesos for every one U.S. dollar, it now costs twenty-four pesos to buy one U.S. dollar.” Being young and naïve, I thought surely this doesn’t apply to me? Reality set in when I went to the bank to pull out the four hundred U.S. dollars I had deposited over the last several months. I got back less than two hundred after the bank deducted its fees.

On the bright side, teaching in Mexico was so much fun as teachers are highly respected. For the most part, English-language students attend a private institute because they want to learn. The courses were eight weeks long and there were nine levels. Most of my students were at the intermediate to advanced level since the classes were taught entirely in English. I had now been teaching for almost six months and my Spanish was improving along with my teaching skills.

One day as the first class of students began to enter my classroom, they greeted me with “Felicidades, Maestra,” which confused me because it wasn’t my birthday, and it wasn’t a holiday so I just smiled and said

“Gracias!”

I figured it would soon be revealed as is everything when you are not familiar with a culture or the customs. Then a few more students entered, greeting me in the same way, bearing colorfully wrapped gifts. Now I knew that they surely were under the impression that it was my birthday. I wondered who could have told them that, but as sweet as it was, I needed to set the record straight so I politely explained that I could not accept the gifts because it was not my birthday. They all smiled as one student explained, “Es el Dia de su Santo,” while another translated, “It’s St. Caroline’s Day. Felicidades!” Amazingly, I was showered with greetings and gifts for the entire day. What an amazing place.

A week or so later, the same routine began all over again and this time I immediately addressed the situation, smiling at my

students sheepishly. “I thank you, once again, for your kindness but I am sure it is not my saint’s day or my birthday so I am embarrassed to say I do not understand why we are celebrating.”

With this, they all chuckled politely and said, “Es el Dia de la Maestra. Felicidades, Maestra!” “It’s Teacher’s Day. Congratulations, Teacher!”

And once again, I was treated like a queen all day long with a party in each class, lots of gifts, hugs, and well wishes. I was truly touched by the generosity and goodwill I continued to experience in this wonderful colonial place from days gone by.

While most of the families I met were not extremely well to do, life in Orizaba was rich with good food, friends, and time with family. One of my best friends was a former student from the institute, an industrial engineer named Gustavo, who had recently returned from a summer spent in the United States on an exchange program. We met at the institute because Gabi had invited him to share his travel experiences with the students enrolled in the advanced classes. Gabi asked Gustavo to walk me home that first night and it was nice to be able to speak English with someone my age who understood everything I was saying. While Gabi was fluent, she was in her sixties and insisted I speak to her in my haltingly limited Spanish.

Gustavo must have enjoyed practicing his English because every night after my last class, I would find him waiting for me with the offer to walk me home. We would stop for a light supper on the way, sometimes talking late into the night. Then he’d safely escort me back to the Gonzalez home. Our favorite thing to do on weekends was travel to Cordoba, Veracruz, which was only thirty minutes away where we would enjoy the folk dancers on the church plaza and sit across the street on the terrace of Los Portales de Cordoba. We would begin by drinking *un lechero* served in a tall fountain glass. There were waiters who came by and poured the dark coffee first, and then we’d tap our glasses with a spoon to let another waiter know we were ready for the hot milk to be poured. The milk was followed by a little sprinkle of cinnamon and a basket of sweet bread. We would sit and lazily read the paper and visit with friends as they would come and go all day long. After coffee and sweet bread, we’d have brunch, visit some more, watch the folk dancers

across the street on the plaza in front of the cathedral, and then we'd head home for an afternoon siesta.

After a few years of working for Gabi for about one hundred fifty U.S. dollars per month, Gustavo asked me to marry him and I accepted. Gustavo was an intelligent and kind man who was very close to his family. We had high hopes of starting a family of our own once Gustavo advanced a little further in his career. Just before the wedding, I decided to take a little time off. I had been teaching full time, year round, for two solid years. After the honeymoon, I planned to move on to other more lucrative opportunities so that I could eventually go home. I had earned a solid and respected reputation in the community and was offered a teaching job at the local university that I was seriously considering.

One day, the door bell rang and it was one of my former students wanting to know if I would consider giving her private lessons. I told her I would think about it and would get back with her. Then another student called that week asking if I would teach him and his friend, also a former student. By the second week, I had twelve students and was earning more in one week than I had in a month when I taught for Gabi. It eventually evolved into a private school, and I recruited recent college grads from the United States to come and help me teach. I truly enjoyed teaching and my students became an extended family for me. I learned so much more from them than they did from me.

From time to time, I would hear that Gabi was extremely unhappy with me because I became the competition. Verbal threats would come my way via mutual friends, and it was always upsetting. Gabi's discontent with me became well known. This went on for years until the day before I left Orizaba. It was teacher's day, and I stopped by the market to purchase a bouquet of flowers. I went to Gabi's house, rang the bell, and when she opened the door, she could not hide the look of surprise.

I handed her the flowers, "Gabi, please accept these as a token of my deep appreciation for bringing me to Orizaba and for all that you have done for me."

She opened the door wider as she accepted the peace offering. "Would you like to come in for a cup of coffee?"

We chatted a bit over coffee, mostly small talk and then I handed her a card, "Once again, thank you for everything. Here's my



address in Ciudad Juarez and please know that my house is always your house.”

Several months later, a former American teacher who had taught in Orizaba called from New York. I was surprised to hear her voice. “How did you find me?” I asked.

With a sense of surprise in her voice, she said, “I recently visited Orizaba and ran into Gabi. She had nothing but good things to say about you and offered your contact info. What did you do to make that happen?”