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FIND OUR WAY HOME

BY LINDA GONZÁLEZ

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Editor's Note: Ms. González provided a glossary of Spanish phrases that she uses throughout her work. They appear at the end in alphabetical order.

Serendipity and a wounded ego propelled me to Baja California days after my 35th birthday. I had been sea kayaking for a year and loved the peaceful yet vigorous experience of floating close to the water while protected inside the kayak from wind, splashes and the sun's heat. Day paddles to Tomales Bay and Estero Americano had prepared me for this week-long trip to Bahia Magdalena, the southernmost nursery of gray whales. Although I was tight on money, I had to make the effort.

I needed to flee my home in Berkeley and the sodden ashes of my career as a social worker. January's bleak skies mirrored my insides and I needed a break from the self-pity and desolation that caused me to put off looking through the San Francisco Chronicle want ads. I was done crying, done analyzing my actions, and done denying that the words termination and insubordination were a part of my permanent life record.

"He's going to fire me. I don't know what to do."

My former supervisor Lisa listened sympathetically to the desperation in my voice on a phone call in early November. She sent me a card a few days later with the picture of a buckskin shield in front to help me "find a way through the war without getting too bruised or scarred in the process." She herself had left a few months earlier after two years of frustration. I had not voted for the new director, but I took no action to save myself porque no podia soportar another job search.

I refused to fill out forms he demanded of me because they were not required by the grant that funded my counseling work with Native Americans. When he called me into his dark office just before Thanksgiving and handed me the black words on white paper, the blinders fell from my tired swollen eyes.

Supposedly in the prime of my career, I was looking at starting over - again. The holidays had been hard. I didn't have the money to spend nor did anyone give me the gift I most craved - the purpose, dignity, and worth I had felt five short years earlier when I accepted my graduate degree as the President of my MSW class.

With Tijuana in my rearview mirror, México distracted me in earnest, warming me with its sultry heat. The memories of rain and chilly mornings faded as I drove by the craggy, multi-colored

Sierra La Gigante mountains and was lulled to sleep along the long, flowing coastline. That I was traveling to my father's homeland did not enter my consciousness. I considered Baja as separate from the mainland, a tourist destination only. But as I stopped at pueblos to buy fish tacos y agua fresca, my abuela's weather-beaten face and nimble fingers was reflected in the señoras expertly packing the tortillas for me. I ate them slowly under the palapas on the nearest beach, watching large dark seabirds rise gracefully from the sands into the downy blue of the sky. My Field Guide identified them as Magnificent Frigatebirds.

After the two-day journey, I arrived in the fishing town of Puerto San Carlos. Bits of magic awakened in my corazón as the gentle breeze welcomed me, along with the dust and barefooted niños begging for unos centavos. I shook my head gently, knowing one act of giving would mean a dozen more requests. The children made me recall the families I had been serving, their brown skin and straight dark hair reminding me that borders are geographically delusions.

My career had appeared to be a fit of heart and logic, but maybe that too was merely imagined. Parking my Jetta, I closed the sunroof and sat still. I had bottomed out, like a drunk who wakes up in an alley, bruised and covered in vomit and sees her life in danger.

I picked up my pace toward the leader and ten other travelers gathered where land and bay joined. On the far side of the kayaks were the Americanos, dressed in shorts and baseball caps of assorted colors. On the near side la gente del pueblo stood in dark skirts or pants, their eyes squinting, their wrinkles a sign of innumerable hatless years. My body swayed back and forth.

"¡Bienvenidos!" Several villagers greeted me with smiles showing gaps of lost teeth.

"Gracias." I responded. They asked me where I had learned Spanish. "Mi papá nació en la capital."

They smiled their delight at me -- una mujercita on this trip spoke Spanish, y aún mejor, her father was Mexicano.

I had forgotten the pleasure of warm greetings, something I did not count on in the colder emotional climate of Alta California. I looked out along the smooth sand dunes that lined the passageway to the whales and my vacation. Walking to the other side of the kayaks, I introduced myself.

"Hi, I'm Linda." I waited imperceptibly.

"Leenda?" The leader Kate caught it.

"Yes. That's right."

We packed up the lean fleet of double kayaks and climbed inside the hatches, anxious to head for our base camp. We dipped the paddles into the water and they pulsed with excitement, for below us lay a secret we surely wanted. The inlet breathed stillness, immune to the whales that displaced water with their massive tonnage. These amazing creatures traveled from the icy waters of Alaska to birth their almost two thousand pound babies in the temperate bays of Baja California. They waited, oblivious to our enthusiasm.

The paddling centered me in the cool dark blues that buoyed our kayaks up. Each time I wandered into the emptiness of my work life, I dug the right paddle down into the water and pushed the left away from my body, then swept it down and lifted my right paddle out.

I did not wait long for this trip to deliver what it promised, something my jobs never had. Five minutes into our paddle Kate shouted: "Look up ahead!" I raised my eyes and saw a dark gray

form a few hundred feet beyond the tip of my kayak. As it dipped below the surface, another materialized. An expectant rhythm entered my bones and played inside my soul. There was nothing like whales for bringing out a sense of the divine. They were at once grandiose and peaceful, Buddhas del mar.

We oo-ed and ah-ed until we landed on the dunes near the mouth of the bay that served as our base camp. I set up my two-person tent at the periphery, feeling a need for solitude, far from the gregarious person I usually played in groups. I carried countless questions tucked within the folds of my t-shirts and nylon shorts. How was I going to earn a living if I abandoned the career that had been percolating inside me since I was a child? The girl who stood up for smaller kids had become a mujer standing up for herself and other workers against institutions that paid me. I had loans from a degree that had promised me the chance to challenge injustice, letters behind my name that meant grief and engaño.

On our afternoon paddle I ended up in a double kayak with Kevin, a tall, curly headed New Yorker brimming with smiles and jokes.

"What do you do in Beserkeley?" His question prodded my anxiety.

"I was a social worker. And that comment about Berkeley is oh so tired. You rarely see a naked person anymore." Pushing down on my right foot pedal, I turned our boat toward the mama whale and baby I saw in my peripheral vision. I liked sitting in the back. I got to steer the boat and see my companion seated three feet ahead in their own hatch.

"Was?"

"I need a new career. My social work jobs feel like a series of abusive lovers I keep leaving. This time I got left." That difference ached and I squeezed the shaft of the paddle, glad my face was invisible.

"You mean fired or laid off?" He said it so casually, as if asking me whether I liked my steak medium or well done. I straightened my back.

"Fired. Something I never imagined could happen."

"I'm sorry. Maybe this trip can give you time to think." He turned his head sideways toward me.

"I don't think my passion for the work can recover. It's as flat as the snake I passed on the road here." I paused. "Please don't say anything about this."

"Of course."

We stopped paddling and watched the baby come up for air, both taking pictures we hoped captured the sweetness of the moment.

A shroud of darkness settled over us and I left my tent to join the group around the campfire. The conversations were peppered with inept attempts to describe the whales, large and extra large, that had graced us with their breathtaking presence. Back home I needed binoculars, good luck or a stomach turning boat ride to the Farallon Islands to see these creatures.

Back home. It felt tiny, a dot on the map of tonight. I had had the same feeling when I journeyed two years before to Africa. My supervisor had informed me I was being involuntarily transferred three hours before leaving for that vacation. Going away helped shrink the power of my disappointment in that job catastrophe.

"So where did you get your hair?" Kevin startled me with his question.

"My hair? It's like my dad's." I had never been asked this, never doubted that my tight curls were from my Mexican genes.

"It's not the kind of hair most Mexicans have." I considered his point, closing my eyes and picturing the townspeople. He was right. The more I thought about it the more it dawned on me that my hair, my father's hair, was not the norm. I had made a simple formula of Mexican dad plus his hair equals Mexican hair.

"I guess you're right. I never thought about it." I ran my fingers self-consciously through my dark brown hair. Even though I wore it only a few inches long, it curled in direct opposition to the mostly straight, sometimes wavy hair of most Mexicans. My mother called my dad "Indio" when she was angry. He actually reminded me of Bill Cosby at times, the eyes, cheek and jaw line very similar, so too the role of bemused, knowledgeable elder.

He had been calm when I had told him at Thanksgiving about the firing.

"Fight it." His conclusiveness had spurred me to action. I had presented my case to the board and filed an EEOC complaint. The board upheld the decision and the EEOC investigator said I didn't fit within the narrow boundaries of the law. He was willing to investigate and chastise them, but in the end would have to close the case. I told him to let it go. Personnel policies were not made to protect me.

I had been on autopilot for three months. I breathed, I held my food down, and I floated through my house, looking for an answer to my work debacle. I did not know what to do with myself any more than my past supervisors did. Mas bien, nothing took away the sour taste of my termination when it was I being harassed. I had been suspended and demoted at earlier jobs, but I kept each incident separate, explained each as an anomaly.

I leaned back in my chair and eyed the estrellas that peppered the night sky. They stared down kindly at me, offering me the same shelter they gave the whales. I slept fitfully, my connection to the Mexicanos feeling as thin as the Thermarest that did little to cushion my body on the unforgiving sand packed down into a solid mass. My shoulders and hips were dull daggers poking at my sleep.

The morning came too soon and I stumbled out to find the coffee pot and warm up my brain. After a breakfast of oatmeal filled my stomach, the soft whirl of the white pangas approached our camp. The men from the village took turns escorting our kayaks inside the calm waters of the bay. I greeted them, feeling less smug as I remembered the discussion about hair.

"¿A las olas?" Jose signaled to me and I smiled.

"Vamonos." As the whales flicked their tails to change direction at will, I switched from English to Spanish, navigating both as I had since birth. I alone swam in both idiomas. I found comfort in the soft curves of Jose's Spanish, even though English was far more accessible to me. The words to save me from losing my work battles had not yet been forged.

I climbed in with three others and held on as the panga bounced us out of the bahia. The waves beckoned beyond the mouth of the bay, cresting and crashing. The windy waterscape exposed even more of the whales' potent presence. Thirty-five-ton leviathans rose straight up like the periscope of a submarine, then slowly sank down amid the whitecaps. Another flurry of whales rose high and crashed sideways into the waves, raising great sprays of splendid playfulness.

I wanted the whales' energy to engulf my complicated human angst and carry it with them to

the frigid waters of the arctic. Inhaling their simple majesty, I wondered how to honor my own. I carried an unease in my bones that had been multiplying for years. My desperation and the spaciousness of the ocean offered a door if I dared walked through it.

The third morning, in the pre-dawn darkness, we paddled in the lagoon with only our head flashlights to guide us. I was in a single kayak. The blow sounds penetrated the silence - WHOOSH - WHOOSH - WHOOSH. I scanned the charcoal futilely, looking for a sign of their location.

As dawn spread its glow upon the smooth pane of water, a different vibration echoed in the bahia. A huge bubble on my right widened to perhaps twenty feet. Then another bubble broke the surface ten feet from my plastic kayak. I froze, my hands gripping the hard shaft of my paddle, waiting to be flipped. My boat rose ever so slightly and then another bubble broke the surface to my left. A tiny breath peeped out of my throat, incomparable to that of the 45-foot creature who had given me a taste of my smallness.

"Magnífico." The word slipped out in the language of México, of my childhood. I shivered and slowly paddled back to camp, relieved to hear my neoprene booties crunch on the damp sand. I sat by the shoreline with my cup of café con leche and my whale book. The gray whales had begun their journey south three months before, about the time I was fired. I smiled at the irony. Their instincts led them here for shelter and breeding. They needed this journey to keep them from extinction.

The whales swam into Baja's brazos fuertes without the thorny questions that pulled me here. Paddling out that afternoon, an inkling of orgullo peeked out from under my protective armor. I had made it south despite my current despair. Unemployment meant my path was as untracked as those of the newborn whales. They, like me, knew enough to survive, but the details of finding our way home were murky.

In the warm lagoons of México, the babies put on blubber to keep them warm and provide energy for their 12,000-mile migration north. My trip was not as long nor was it fraught with orcas, large vessels, or entanglement in commercial fishing gear. My dangers were hidden inside me.

As I sat before the campfire that night, the phrase 'Big things hurt me' clashed in my mind with 'Big things protect me'. Being a US born child of a Mexicano meant seeing the US as big and México as unimportant and forgettable. My history lessons taught me the cry: "Remember the Alamo!" Never mind that the US was taking land from México. I had believed my teachers as they unwittingly fed me a mangled history of my family's origins. The fragile safety growing inside me among the whales and townspeople contrasted with my earliest memories of México.

As a child, México had been a place of travel that was familiar and completely foreign. I tried to pretend it was just a vacation. With the sponge-like absorbency of a perceptive child, I watched from the backseat of our station wagon as my father relaxed his shoulders. The twisted tongue action of English disappeared from his and my mother's mouth for days and even weeks. He spoke with a stronger cadence and laughed more than he did all year in Los Angeles.

He played with me in the pool of his friend Leon's home in Guadalajara, diving off the edge and popping up unexpectedly, spraying water in my face as he let out his breath with a smile. His dark hair, usually combed back as straight as possible, sprang into its naturally curly state. He loved the water and always encouraged us to dive into pools, oceans and la vida con gusto.

I enjoyed this side of my father. Why was it only this way here, away from home? I did not understand that my home was not his. As my sense of comfort slipped below the surface, his

rose. In México, he was like the whales in the waves, his muscle memory ignited by the warmth of his homeland, which he had left in the mid-1950s, ten years after the gray whales had been declared an endangered species.

En cambio, for me the yearly trips created more and more of a homelessness. Unlike the whales, I did not understand how such a disparate north and south could nurture me. Spanish was slipping away and each sojourn past the border station at Tijuana amplified the invasion of English upon my tongue.

Instead of seeing the tortillas, frijoles, pollo, and huevos rancheros in both places, I noted how different my father and I were in each setting, how we shared one mute button handed over to the other one when crossing the Rio Grande. By my teens, my father's job in a Westin Hotel meant free stays in posh lodging during the off seasons. México and I had become estranged. While the trips no longer meant stays in unknown pueblos when our station wagon broke down, I hated the luxuries that set me apart from the Mexicanos who served us.

My father was always kind to his paisanos, over tipping and asking them for suggestions on meal options. On a trip to Cancún we stayed at the Camino Real, surrounded on three sides by the turquoise waters of the Caribbean. My parents were resting on one bed and my sister and I on the other. My brother was reading near the window with a view of the calm ocean. Consuelo was sweeping the room and my father told her not to clean our room every day, that it was not necessary. His words were an opening to see how to let the breeze flow between cultures.

In my late twenties, I worked as an MSW intern in an East Los Angeles mental health clinic. Providing therapy in Spanish had challenged my lazy lengua and my facile assertion of being bilingual.

In a supervisory session halfway through my internship, a psychologist asked me: "What is your first language?"

I paused. Like the question about my curls, I burned.

"Spanish." It felt like a lie. So much had been lost since I was a toddler and I didn't know the way back to my first lengua. The waters around my family's cultura se habia puesto frio, freezing me in my comfortable relationship with English.

I traveled that summer to a language school in Cuernavaca to improve my Spanish for my budding social work career. I came for the US promise of a quick fix to a life-defining problem. I learned very little in the Spanish classes, as they were not set up for people whose needs were not grammatical. My load of anger and blame had no target so I kept it stewing inside.

No obstante, I had one conversation with a Mexicano near the end of my two-week stay that shifted my equilibrium. We sat in a cafe and I bemoaned the subjunctive, a tense not found in English.

"That tense es el corazón de español," he responded sharply, "It is about deep emotion and imperatives and desire."

"Oh," I said. Even though I swam a few laps in embarrassment, his words clicked internally, like he had chipped away some ice and I had a peephole into a different possibility. I lived a life full of the subjunctive. In English my verbal passion was described as opinionated, exaggerated and illogical.

Desde aquel tiempo en adelante, I laughed at how much mis instintos lent themselves

naturally toward the subjunctive.

"¡Dejen de pelear!" I yelled at my nephews as they exchanged insults and shoves.

"Ojala que vengas a escribir." I urged my best friend who was on the fence about attending a writing retreat in the Sierras.

That trip, eight years ago, opened up more air in my lungs to speak the idioma that was a staple, like the tortillas at dinner, in my childhood home. I returned up north committed to speaking more Spanish, but the lesson didn't stick. I did not cross the border as if moving from one room in my home to another. My notion of bicultural remained 80% US with a sprinkling of comida, música y unas joyas. Speaking Spanish to gente other than my clients or relatives meant making hard decisions about my pod of friends.

Walking along the shoreline to my tent, I realized I hadn't been among Latinos since I had left my parents' home for college. I had gotten used to be the "only one". There was no illusion that I belonged. This ecotourist group was no different than my community up north and my past work places. I had no one in my pod who spoke Spanish and who had moved around cultural hazards such as isolation and the comments made by the psychologist and Kevin. The time had come for a reckoning.

The first decision facing me was where to interview for my next job. I had never sought a position working with Latino peers where I could speak Spanish with others in a two-tongued environment. It stirred my apprehension, causing me to awake sweating and out of breath that night. Being la única meant I was not judged. I was the most Latina. No one listened to my Spanish and corrected me when I said "el sal." Firmly entrenched in viewing México y mi primer cultura from the safe distance of social worker, the whales called me back to the lessons I had ignored on my last trip south. Rather than running away, I inched closer to a home of my own making.

Floating amid the large creatures shadowed by newborns, I delighted in their "subjunctively" grand body language. I took pictures of their flukes, many with nicks and scars. Gray Whales were previously named Devil Fish because of their fighting behavior when hunted. I wondered how to manage my own firecracker emotions in sterile work settings. Taking stock of lost battles, I did not want to be the front guard in a war I did not believe in.

Like the baby whales born prematurely before reaching the warm, protective waters of the Magdalena Bay, my survival was precarious, my community's capacity to shield me from danger far more difficult in the land of my birth. Even my soccer team had dumped me after I tried dumping them first. As the captain, the women were always telling me their problems with other members of the team and the fun factor had shrunk to the size of a pinhead. But I changed my mind soon after, missing the camaraderie and the game. They then told me it wasn't so easy - they would have to have a meeting and decide. I told them to tear up my check a few days before I was fired at work.

I embarked onto the water on day four wondering how to gather my bits of self-confidence. The borders in my mind were disappearing, but that only scared me. My life not as a social worker felt devoid of meaning. My investment had been enormous. I had passed the licensing exams six months earlier, although I had no intention of ending up as a therapist. It was a game of credentials and I sought as many advantages as possible on my way to an administrative position. But that was a delusion. I did not have the genes to kiss up in order to get to the top.

I absorbed the vigor of the whales who had been born here, like my father, and whose yearly journey to their first home nourished them in ways the icy north did not. I envied the newborns'

treacherous but certain lives.

Maybe I could save the pieces of my work I loved -finding community and personal resources for people to improve their lives. I needed my own good help. My muscles twitched, arrancando mi motor, guiding my internal compass to the home within my heart. I strengthened my determination to create a thin layer of blubber to sustain me in the cold of el norte.

I flushed out bits of porqueria stored inside my body, rotting my gut like old wine that didn't even taste good when freshly corked. *Competent workers do not get fired, suspended or demoted. They stay in one place and rise through the ranks. Their supervisors reward them with raises and praise them.* My shoulders relaxed as I accepted that was not my story. It created space for one that matched my reality without making me a victim.

I broke camp on Friday, breaking down the plastic poles and stuffing it with the folded tent into a narrow, nylon bag. I was the last kayak to leave the shore. Paddling rhythmically toward my uncertain next steps, I turned to look for one more fluke, one more baby raising its head above the fray. The adult females often leave México pregnant, a new creature having been conceived, only to be born a year later. I did not feel suficiente fuerte to avoid my customary hazards and habits. The babies got to stay two months to gain the strength needed to move from one territory to the other. They accepted the need for two distinct habitats to thrive. To keep my lessons, I had to know both of my habitats intimately and find a place to rest my head in each.

My goodbyes were brief and gracious in English and Spanish. I eyed the excited faces of my kayak companions and was sure the stories I told upon my return would be different than theirs. They always were, but I usually never spoke them out loud. My recent vacations had terrible timing, often following a job trauma. I slid into my Jetta and drove down the dusty main street, watching the boys chasing playfully after me, disappointed I had not given them the coins they wanted.

I scribbled a few notes in my journal in a hotel room in Loreto: "The whales rekindled my relationship to México as a place I claimed as part of my inheritance from my father." Nice sentiment, but my more present inheritance was his silence. We didn't speak of the hardships he endured. We never said my firing had anything to do with who I was, or better yet, who I was not.

As I retraced my steps past El Consuelo and saw the frigate birds circling offshore, I fell in love with México, y la llevé escondida en mi corazón when I crossed the border. It was un gran pais, not an unimportant footnote to my life, anymore than the whales' brief visit to Baja was to their life in the arctic.

There appeared to be more than one surprise waiting for me beneath the dark blue waters. Just as the whales' presence vibrated throughout the bay, my cultural roots resonated more fiercely inside my soul, struggling to escape my stranglehold. I didn't yet know how to use them to anchor my decision-making. Some things were clearer. I was not willing to be a tourist in my father's rich and diverse patria. The difficult work of regenerating myself awaited me on my return to the bahia of San Francisco.

Era un esfuerzo I needed to make year after year, often minute by minute. As I paid for my gas in San Diego, I noticed the attendant was Latino.

"Gracias."

He smiled. "De nada. Que le vaya bien."

Yes, I did want it to go well for me. And for the whales when they left their fluid nest and

journeyed past my home in March. Would I have a new story to tell them or would I avoid the rocky shoreline, *toda avergonzada* because I had let myself get entangled in a net of my old habits?

A day later I turned the corner and saw my gray house ahead to my right. I smiled. Gray was a color I had not appreciated until this trip. I sat in my car. Change was never easy, and the odds were not on my side. But the gray whales were no longer an endangered species and I did not mean to be one either.

Spanish Glossary (In Alphabetical Order)

arrancando mi motor starting my motor
comida, música y unas joyas Food, music and some jewelry
cultura se habia puesto frio culture had become cold
Desde aquel tiempo en adelante from that time forward
¡Dejen de pelear! stop fighting!
es el corazón de español is the heart of Spanish
Era un esfuerzo it was an effort
la vida con gusto life with pleasure
Ojala que vengas a escribir I hope you come and write
porque no podía soportar because I couldn't bear
toda avergonzada totally embarrassed
y la llevé escondida en mi corazón and I brought it concealed in my heart

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