

Drop out. Sell everything. Move to Mexico.
Sounded like a good plan.



Nobody Knows the Spanish I Speak

Mark Saunders

Applause for Nobody Knows the Spanish I Speak

“Mark Saunders is the classic American innocent abroad, part clueless tourist, part critic, and always a lover. Humor crackles on every page.”
Foster Church, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, author of “Discovering Main Street”

“Thank you, Mark Saunders, for being the one to break out of the rat race, soar off the cliff into the unknown, and live to tell us this heart-warming and hilarious true story. This is one smart, funny, real-life adventure.” *Cynthia Whitcomb, TV Writer and Playwright*

“Humorist Mark Saunders has invigorated the memoir form by delivering clever, tightly written comic episodes with hilarity and heart. You’ll laugh out loud at these lovable mid-life expats and their eccentric pets.” *Kathleen Gerard, award-winning author of “In Transit”*

“If you treasure great American humorists—be they Thurber or Perelman, Barry or Sedaris—you’ll love Mark Saunders. His story is a full-course feast for head, heart and funny bone.” *Rich Rubin, Playwright*

“Saunders leaves you wanting a sequel. This is one of those books you will laugh along with days after you’ve finished.” *Karen Wallace Bartelt, former newspaper columnist*

“Reading this book is like sitting across from your best friend as he makes you laugh so hard your ribs hurt. Brilliant.” *Laurie Halter, President, Charisma Communications*

“Slice the lime, chill the Corona and curl up with Saunders’ latest. Every chapter was fresh and LOL.” *G.H. Smith, retired business owner and frequent flyer*

“Nobody may know the Spanish Mark Saunders speaks, but *Dios mio*, does he know how to crack wise with the best of them. Take the title. Can’t read it without smiling.” *Jodi Lustig, Book End Babes Reviewer*



Nobody Knows the Spanish I Speak

Laced with rib-tickling cartoons by the author



Nobody Knows the Spanish I Speak

*Regarding the perils and pleasures of dropping out,
selling everything, and moving to Mexico when
you're old enough to know better.*



Mark Saunders

FUZE
PUBLISHING LLC.
McLean, Virginia

Fuze Publishing LLC
1350 Beverly Road, Suite 115-162
McLean, Virginia 22101
fuzepublishing.com

Nobody Knows the Spanish I Speak Copyright © 2011 by Mark Saunders.
All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned,
or distributed in printed or electronic form without permission. Please
do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in
violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

Book design by Ray Rhamey

ISBN 978-0-9841412-8-9
ISBN 0-9841412-8-6
Library of Congress Control Number: 2011938819

“Yes, We Have No Chihuahuas” originally appeared in *Solamente en San Miguel, Vol. I, Writings from the Authors' Sala of San Miguel de Allende*. An early version of “How Are Things in Doctor Mora?” appeared as “Say, How's the Foot?” in *Solamente en San Miguel, Vol. II*. Cartoons in this book originally appeared in the panel “Más o Menos” in the weekly bilingual newspaper *Atención San Miguel* and were created by the book's author. Cartoon ideas were contributed by Cliff and Julie DuRand, Vicki Gundrum, Murray and Cleo Kamlehar, and Arlene Lawrence.

for Arlene

Contents

Prologue	2
Salted Omens	12
On the Quota	26
Starting is Such Sweet Sorrow	38
Scorpions Ascendant	46
Christmas with Bad Santa	56
Yes, We Have No Chihuahuas	68
You Can Call Me Dusty	80
How are Things in Doctor Mora?	90
This Lard is My Lard	100
Mr. Toad's Other Wild Ride	110
How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Firecracker	122
My Body is a Temple That's been Sacked	134
Nobody Knows the Spanish I Speak	144
Waiting for Audi	156
We'll Always Have Parasites	170
I Sing the House Electric	184
Frida's Just Another Word for Nothing Left to Paint	194
Temptation, Thy Name is DVD	204
I Like St. Mike	212
Sometimes Life Really is a Cabaret	222
Love Among the Expats	236
Memoir of an Armoire	250
Epilogue Cassidy Rides Again	266
Postscript	272
About the Author	276
Discussion Guide	278

Muchas Gracias



Wherein I express immense appreciation for my amazing companions on this journey

I want to thank the many wonderful old and new friends who shared in our adventure. The number is too great to list individually by name, but you know who you are. And if you don't know who you are, maybe it's time to consider wearing a name tag, in case you ever get lost or arrested.

I also want to thank the talented, dedicated, hard-working people at FUZE Publishing for allowing me this opportunity: Karetta Hubbard for her wise business counsel and leadership; Meg Tinsley for her astute marketing skills; Molly Best Tinsley and Addie Greene, my editors, for taking the rough clay of my manuscript and molding it into something readable, and, I hope, memorable. And, of course, a big attaboy goes to my book designer, Ray Rhamey, whose imaginative and lighthearted design aptly captures my story.

My sincere appreciation goes to Mexico and the gracious people of magical San Miguel de Allende for tolerating my uninformed ways, silly mistakes, and extremely poor language skills. In spite

of everything, you have always made me feel welcome. A tip of my ball cap goes to *La Biblioteca* and Suzanne Ludekens for publishing an amazing and indispensable weekly newspaper, *Atención San Miguel*, and for allowing my cartoons to soak up valuable ad space each week for a year. I offer a special note of appreciation to the talented members of the Literary Sala of San Miguel for their support in publishing two of my chapters while I was working on this book. And *gracias* to former neighbor Bart Briefstein for taking the time to proofread and correct my creative use of Spanish.

I especially want to thank my family. My father, Charles, aka Chuck, who introduced me to humor at an early age, from the funny stories he told to the film comedians we watched together. My mother, Allene, and my sister, Linda, both no longer with us and so dearly missed; each had the kind of warm laugh that could not just fill a room, but also a heart. And I want also to thank my brother, Michael, a guy who knows and loves funny stories. I could not have called God—or Central Casting—and asked for and received a better brother.

Finally, I want to thank Arlene Krasner, my wife, lover, mentor, supporter, boon companion, private chef, and soul mate. Arlene once told me she wanted to be the kind of person she'd like to be best friends with. I'm enormously proud to call her my best friend, as well as my wife. And as a footnote, perhaps most inconceivable of all, she still puts up with my corny jokes and wretched puns, and even occasionally laughs at them. Now *that's* a best friend.

*Nobody knows the trouble I've seen
Nobody knows but Jesus*

Traditional Spiritual

*Nobody knows the trouble with my Audi
Nobody knows but Jesús my mechanic*

Mark's Corollary



Prologue



Concerning the matter of dropping out late in life, why I wrote this book, and what to expect from it, if anything

A Chinese proverb claims that a journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. Thus our beginnings do not always know our ends.

Put another way, which ragged thread in our lives did my wife, Arlene, and I tug sufficiently to compel us to quit our high-paying, high-tech jobs; to sell our downtown condo with the million-dollar view; to jettison most of our furniture and much of our art, say goodbye to family and friends, load our one remaining car, throw in the cat and dog, and drive south, trading the most livable city we've ever called home for an unknown fate on a dirt road in the middle of Mexico?

Put still a different way, what were we smoking?

The shortest, and perhaps most accurate, answer is to say we were bored with our lives, though comfortable those lives were, felt lost, and wanted to find ourselves again. Then, of course, there were the clichés to consider. Life is short. You only go around once. Seize the day. Do your own thing. Be all you can be. It's a small world after all. We were products of a well-rounded liberal arts

education during the rock and roll Sixties and the needles of our lives seemed stuck between the refrains of “What’s it all about, Alfie?” and “Is that all there is?”

If most men lead lives of quiet desperation, couples double the ante. We felt it was time, as Joseph Campbell urged, to “follow our bliss.”

For Arlene, bliss meant spending more time researching and writing about food, her true passion, and less time worrying about whether a new hardware board for Intel would function as designed. For me, bliss meant more time to write plays and screenplays, as well as drawing cartoons and painting. For both of us, accepting the Call to Adventure at this point in our lives meant dropping out and moving far away.

It’s not as if we possessed a greater sense of adventure than any of our Portland neighbors or had been smitten by wanderlust. And it’s not as if before moving we had spent any length of time in Mexico or even knew how to speak Spanish. As a college student I once spent a very strange and scary night in Tijuana, the memory of which still induces night sweats. And as a couple we took a cruise that stopped in Cozumel for four hours, where we parked ourselves at a bar and sucked down margaritas until the ship blew its whistle and it was time to re-board. Other than that, Mexico had never registered so much as a blip on our respective travel radar screens.

It would have been safer (and perhaps wiser) to have remained in Oregon and taken the occasional weekend excursion where I would walk out the door dressed like Robert Bly’s definition of a modern-day shaman, turn to Arlene, and simply say, “I’m off on a Vision Quest, dear.”

She would have replied just as simply, “That’s nice, dear. Don’t forget your reading glasses.” But somehow, not changing our environment when change is what we really craved seemed like going

to the Paris Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas when we really wanted to visit Paris, France.

Nobody Knows the Spanish I Speak is dedicated to those who are tired of doing the same thing every day and would like to drop out and try something new. We were. We did. And it changed our lives. We felt, to paraphrase the words of Henry James, “It was time to start living the life we imagined.”

Sure, we could have flown to Nepal for two weeks, donned white robes, sniffed incense, crossed our legs, and contemplated our own navels, or someone else’s navel. But for all Nepal’s natural wonders, we’d heard the restaurant scene there can be disappointing and, like any self-respecting army, Arlene and I travel on our stomachs.

Then a light bulb popped, flickered, and stayed on.

We didn’t have to be members of the super rich club or trust-funders or successful software gurus with unlimited shares of hot stock to change our situation. Nor did we have to be life-is-short thrill-seekers, who hang out on the canopy above the Amazon rain forest spotting howler monkeys and swatting bugs the size of King Kong. Or kayak through Glacier Bay blissfully knowing that if a whale breaches nearby and tips the kayak over, we have only ninety seconds before hypothermia sets in. We didn’t even have to speak the local language, as long as the local language accepted all major credit cards.

Thanks to a few investments we had a little cash, a nest egg, if you will. We were far from wealthy. But we were in relatively decent health, with the possible exception of higher-than-normal cholesterol counts and blood pressure readings that would be the envy of any bowling league.

In hindsight, it was an easy decision. We were, after all, DINKS—double income, no kids—and had always said if one of us were to raise a hand to say, “Check, please,” the other would

listen. In this case, after we had both survived multiple high-tech layoffs and downsizings and restructurings and rightsizings and outsourcings and offshorings, we raised our hands at the same time and said, “Enough.” Or to give our response the proper cultural spin, “*No más.*”

We were ready. It was time. With both our jobs going away and chances of getting rehired slim to none, we decided to drop out of the work force, leave the United States, move to Mexico, and live for a year or two, if not off the lard of the land, at least off part of our savings, since we would have no source of income. Between the two poles of finding one’s spiritual self or mistakenly getting one’s head blown off in a cross-fire, we felt Mexico had much to offer two inexperienced expats.

Four of us would make the adventure: Arlene, a native New Yorker whose definition of roughing it usually involved ordering the house wine; Cassie, our aging black standard poodle, a girlie-girl who ran side-saddle; Sadie, a part-Siamese cat who believed her reach should never exceed her claws; and yours truly, a neurotic suburbanite from Northern California trying to get by on one forgettable year of high school Spanish. Oddsmakers had the cat down as the one most likely to survive.

Before we knew it we were living in Mexico. The longer we remained there, the more rules we devised to help us define this new old world. We learned to classify our days according to two basic categories. It seemed a day was either a Good Mexico (GM) day or a Bad Mexico (BM) day. We found the vast majority of our days to be GM, but every now and again we’d have a BM. Such is life.

We discovered we were living in a cash-based society where nobody ever had change. In a culture where *mañana* did not always mean tomorrow but could mean anything from later to not now to fat chance you’ll ever see me again. In a country where the most

common unit of measurement was not the kilo or the kilometer, as guidebooks would have you believe, but something known as *más o menos*, simply translated as “more or less.” And no matter where we were in Mexico, it seemed we were always behind a truck.

This book is not about the how-to specifics of retiring in a foreign country, or how much an expatriate should pay for a reliable housekeeper, or where to find the best meals, cheapest rents, coolest night clubs. The publishing world already offers many informative books on those subjects. Nor is it a travel book on Mexico, even though it contains insights and experiences about living in that beautiful, spectacular country. And it’s not, as one might expect, a glorious poem to the good life in San Miguel de Allende, where we were to hang our respective sombreros. So many people have already praised San Miguel that even a few of my best adjectives would be either redundant or not up to the task.

Nobody Knows the Spanish I Speak is a story about second chances and personal reinventions, speed bumps and slippery streets, comfortable *casitas* and friendly *tiendas*. It’s about the sound of firecrackers going off at three in the morning, and as much about broken-down cars as it is about clear, blue skies as it is about eating corn fungus. Ultimately, though, it’s a simple tale about trying something new.

So, what was it like? We loved it. For starters, you can’t swing an artist in San Miguel without hitting a writer. And if the writer happens to duck, you’ll probably hit a jazz musician. Among its many endearing nicknames, the town could easily add the City of Eternal Memoirs, for there’s something about the place that brings out the storyteller in all of us. It could be the striking blue skies, the multitude of historic churches, the colorful houses that make you feel as if you’re living in a Mark Rothko painting. Or it could just be having something to say and the time in which to say it.

Truth be told, our lives are stories.

However, the chapters in this book tell our story only, woefully ill-prepared as we were. Other expats, more experienced or wiser, better prepared or financed, and with their own stories to tell, perhaps did not or would not suffer the same slings and arrows, so regularly play the fool, or stumble as often.

Think of any potential mistake an expat can make, and I've already been there and done that. I've said the wrong things, unintentionally, and always seemed to smile at the most inopportune moments. I've referred to women as men and men as women, narrowly escaping a black eye each time. I've over-tipped, under-tipped, and forgotten to tip. I've been given the male hug of friendship called the *abrazo*, as well as the universally recognized middle-finger salute. Along those lines, some of the names in this book have been changed to protect my rental house from a fire bombing. A few locations have been changed as well. San Miguel, however, is still 274 kilometers from Mexico City.

In hindsight, I guess the big takeaway from our story is a twist on that famous saying about New York City: if we can make it in Mexico, anyone can make it.

My goal in writing this book is to share with you our adventure. I hope whatever your primary interest, even if it's as large as an executive class bus or as small as a hairless Chihuahua, there are chapters here for you. And I hope you have as much fun reading the book as I had writing it.

One evening while we were still in our suburban house outside Portland, years before we even considered moving to Mexico, my wife and I were into our cups, drinking wine and listening to soft music, contemplating the pros and cons of downsizing, for we were selling a relatively big house and replacing it with a much smaller

condo in the heart of the city. Arlene reminded me that some of our best memories were when we lived in a tiny apartment in New York City.

"That must have been your first husband," I said. "I've never lived in New York."

"Oh, well," Arlene replied. "You know what I mean."
And I did.

Mark Saunders

September 1, 2011

San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, Mexico



San Miguel Essentials

Salted Omens



Which recounts the three omens I face during the first day of our six-day drive to Mexico and a revelation that results in a last-minute change to our travel plans

John Steinbeck would have been proud. At least that's what I thought, as I shut the trunk of our 21st century jalopy, a black, four-door, ten-year old Audi Quattro with a matching black luggage carrier on top that looked like a missile launcher. We were minutes away from departing the parking lot of a Starbucks on the corner of NW 23rd Street and Burnside, Portland, Oregon, USA, continent North America, planet Earth for the Promised Land of sunshine in San Miguel de Allende deep in the heart of Mexico. It was a card-carrying December day in the Pacific Northwest: gray, bleak, wet, cold, cruel to asthmatics, and damn hard on arthritics. And if that wasn't enough motivation to put the pedal to the metal and set our compass for warmer weather, it was shortly after six in the morning, as good a time as any to take on rush hour traffic and leave for parts unknown.

If we had gills, we would have been packed to them: two boxes of must-read books, which had been in our condo, unread, for several years but were now deemed, for some lofty reason, indispensable

for the journey; a beautiful hardcover copy of a new translation of *Don Quixote*, also, I thought, indispensable; three maps, one each of California, the Southwestern United States, and Mexico; assorted magazines purchased at the last minute; five reams of paper; two printers, one laser and one inkjet; two laptop computers; four pillows; bed linens and a bed comforter; summer and winter clothes, including three changes of shoes, countless pairs of underwear and socks; a survival kitchen set of silverware, pots, pans, cups, glasses, bottled water, even a coffee grinder, enough paraphernalia to outfit a small cabin or a mid-sized sailboat. And in the luggage rack above we stored the double-sized inflatable bed with its expandable metal frame and two inflatable Coleman chairs, our only furniture until the rest of our things, big screen television set and all, were to arrive some two weeks hence at the house we'd rented in Mexico.

In the front seat, we had CDs of favorite tunes to fill the air, books-on-tape to fill the time. But that's not why Mr. Steinbeck would have been proud.

He would have been proud because much like the famed author's tour of America with his poodle Charley, we would be making our trek with a similar dog of great discernment. In the back seat of our car stood—she never sat while riding—a black standard poodle named Cassie.

Beside her nested Sadie, a two-year-old, part-Siamese rescue cat and first-time car passenger in a travel crate, adding still another unknown element to our trip.

Arlene and our friend Mary were already inside the coffee shop, exchanging farewells and drinking a final non-fat cappuccino. I shut the trunk, checked one more time on both pets, took a full breath of tasty Portland air, and looked around at the neighborhood and city that had served us so well for the last twenty years.

Then it happened.

As I tried to make my way back inside the shop, I was accosted by a middle-aged man with a goatee, a stranger in baggy canvas-colored pants, black cowboy boots, wind-breaker, winter scarf, and wide-brimmed hat, the kind of hat one expects to find along the equator on the heads of those who dare to go out in the midday sun. He grabbed me by the arm, gently.

"Hey, Buddy. Can you spare some change?"

I was being panhandled in front of an upscale coffee shop in one of the most gentrified neighborhoods in the entire city, and this before sunrise with Bob Dylan songs piped inside and out.

"Change?" I snapped.

"Yeah, change. I could sure use a cup, man. And at these prices I'm gonna need a couple of bucks. Takes longer than you think to scrape up that kind of cash. Especially this time of day, know what I mean?"

"I think I—" but he beat me to it and finished my sentence.

"—I can tell what you're thinking," he said. "You look at me and you think, 'What's he doing begging for change, man.' Right? Looks healthy enough. No visible scars or wounds. Two arms, two legs. Still got most of his teeth. Sharp dresser."

I wasn't sure about that last point.

"Let me tell you, it wasn't always this way. I used to have a decent job. Got tired of the rat race and dropped out. That's all. Simple as that. Life's too short for that shit, know what I mean. Name's Monty."

Monty shoved his right hand toward me. I shook it as I asked, "You what?"

"Dropped out. You know. Quit the man," said Monty. "Sure, I'm older than most drop outs, so I guess you could say I retired early. Too young for Social Security, too old to get hired. Thought

I'd live off my savings, but that didn't last long. Now I'm out of savings and can't get it together to go back to work. Like I said, life's too short. They can keep that forty hours a week shit. How 'bout some spare change?"

My mouth was ajar; I was all agog and aghast—I'm sure you get the picture. Was I looking at myself in a couple of years when our savings ran out, like a depleted vein of ore, and whatever skills I had that were once marketable were as rusty as the memories of hula hoops and near beer? Would I, too, be hanging around high-end coffee shops begging for fives and tens?

"Yes, I do have change," I said and dug into my pocket, extracting a handful of coins. I dumped the change into his hand, a wad of quarters I was saving for Las Vegas, hoping to squeeze in one last night of gambling on our way south.

"Cool." He bobbed his wide-brimmed head. "Thanks, bro."

"No problem," I said, as he and his hat disappeared inside the coffee shop.

But there was a problem and it was staring me right in the face. The little wheels in my head began spinning out of control. My heart raced and legs wobbled. I felt dizzy and for seconds couldn't focus. It was either the start of a panic attack or that third slice of pizza from the night before. Then I realized what was happening. I had encountered an omen. And it wasn't your ordinary omen, either, considering the circumstances. It was what my friend Jim would have called a "salted omen," the kind that smacked of coincidence, reeked of immediate danger, and is ignored only at one's peril.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Arlene said.

"I think I did."

"What do you mean?"

"I think I just saw The Ghost of Christmas Future."

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"I got hit up for change by a man about our age who said he quit work and dropped out, just like we're doing."

I paused for dramatic effect. Both Arlene and Mary looked at me, puzzled.

"And your point is?" Arlene asked.

"I think it might be an omen," I said.

"You're not superstitious are you?" Mary asked.

Arlene looked at Mary, cocked her head in my direction and nodded. "He grew up Catholic, remember?" Arlene replied.

"He's over at the counter getting coffee right now," I said.

We all looked at the counter but he wasn't there. We scanned the room, but he was nowhere in sight. They shot me a suspicious look.

"Maybe he's in the bathroom," I suggested.

"Hmm," said Mary.

"I bought you a double mocha. We should be going," said Arlene.

We said goodbye to Mary, climbed in the Audi, and drove across the street to our neighborhood gas station. Oregon is one of only two states that do not permit customers to pump their own gasoline, so you end up dealing with actual gas station attendants instead of cashiers who just take your money. I thought I knew all the attendants at our local station, but when we pulled up to the pump, a stranger lumbered over. He was a hulk of a man who had been talking to a young woman in black but left her as soon as he saw us.

"Sumtin's wrong with your car," he declared.

"Just want to fill her up," I said.

"Weren't a question, man" he said. "I could hear you from across the street. Sumtin don't sound right."

"Oh, that. It always makes a funny sound in the morning until it warms up," I said.

I opened the car door and got out, handing him my credit card.

“Fill it up. Regular, please.”

He took the card, ran it through the charge card machine, put the hose in my gas tank, and walked over to the front of the car.

“Pop the hood. I’ll check ‘er out.”

I reached into the car and released the hood latch. He jerked it open roughly and peered in. He stayed under the hood so long I thought he might have fallen asleep or passed out from one too many Hefeweizens, resting his weary head on my engine block. But he popped out suddenly, walked to the side of my car, and finished filling up the gas tank. Within seconds, he was back under the hood, fiddling with something or other, a man on a mission.

He leaned out and shot me a glance. “Go ahead and turn her over. Rev her up a bit.”

I crawled in behind the wheel and revved up the engine as requested, which, I had to agree, made a funny noise. But since I’m missing the male car gene, all cars sound funny to me. Love pro football. Love playing poker. Don’t get cars.

“What’s going on?” Arlene asked.

“Nothing. He heard a funny noise and wanted to check it out.”

“It always makes a funny noise in the morning. It’s just not an early morning car,” she said.

“That’s what I told him.”

“So why is he looking at the engine? We just had it tuned up by people who actually know what they’re doing.”

“Better to be safe than sorry, I guess.” I knew my answer was lame, but I felt cornered and was only saved from further embarrassment by the attendant. He waved me back out.

“You got yourself a bad water hose, mister. You see this connector here?” He wiggled something, but in the early morning darkness, under the hood of my car, I couldn’t see a thing, even

under the bright gas station lights.

“Yes,” I lied.

“That’s gonna give on you first two hundred miles or so.”

“I find that hard to believe. We just had the car completely tuned up at the dealership. Put something like five thousand dollars into it.”

“Uh huh,” he said, unconvinced.

He shut the hood and then stared at me as if I had three horns and wings.

“Where ya heading?”

“Mexico.”

“How long a drive?”

“About six days.”

“When ya leaving?”

“In five minutes.”

This time he looked at me as if I not only had three horns and wings, but also sulfur pulsating from the pores of my skin and nasty big-eyed insects flying out of my mouth. After a pause, he peeked inside the car at my wife, studied the pets, shook his head and looked away, as if he needed to count to ten to control his temper. He was not chewing tobacco, but he spit anyway and turned back to look at me.

“Well, I don’t want to say anything bad about dealership mechanics so I won’t. Besides, you might make it out of Oregon. You just might.” He turned and left.

“We had it checked out at the Audi dealership two days ago,” I shouted to his back, as he shrugged and re-entered his cave. The young woman in black scurried behind him.

“We’re screwed,” I told Arlene.

“What do you mean?”

“The second omen.”

“What are you talking about?”

“First the panhandler reminds me of myself. Not a good sign.”

“Are you nuts?”

“And now a car mechanic tells us our water hose won’t make the trip. We’re two blocks from home and we’ve already had two cosmic nudges.”

“Nudges?”

“You know, elbows to the ribs. Wink, wink. How are we ever going to drive three thousand miles at this rate?”

“God, I don’t need more coffee. I need a martini.”

I knew a third omen must follow soon, for whether we like it or not things in life, both good and bad, come in threes. I don’t really consider myself superstitious, at least not in a black cat sort of way, but facts of life are, well, facts of life. There’s *The Three Musketeers*. My Three Sons. All Gaul is divided into three parts. Old Father William was allowed three questions. The third time is the charm. We’re granted three wishes and sing about three blind mice or three coins in a fountain. And, of course, three strikes and you’re out.

Omens were piling up like bodies in a *Freddy Krueger* movie. Nonetheless, with a full tank of gas and keeping an ever-watchful eye out for the next omen, I pulled away from the gas station, cruised along the wet streets of Portland, and eventually found Interstate 5 south. We were on our way. Sunshine here we come, we thought.

On long road trips we usually shared the driving. I would always take the early morning stretch, since all of Arlene’s precincts don’t report in until around eight or nine A.M. Fortunately, our driving skills complemented each other. I refused to ask for directions, and Arlene had absolutely no sense of direction at all. If Lewis and Clark had used Arlene as their guide instead of Sacajawea, they’d still be looking for the Pacific Ocean. But at least when she was behind the wheel, she paid attention.

On the other hand, I was and am a bored driver, prone to prolonged or even sudden distractions. Driving sixty miles an hour with only a painted line separating our car and a car coming from the opposite direction was not the best time for woolgathering. In fact, life rarely got more existential than that, which was why Arlene was not happy to catch me several times that morning tugging the whiskers on my chin. A true sign of distraction.

“Stop it,” she said. “Pay attention.”

“You know,” I said, changing the subject to show her I was thinking of something important to both of us. “Once we reach Sacramento, we’ll be able to give away these bulky winter coats for good.”

“I can’t wait. Watch the road.”

So I watched the road in silence, and it was long and shivering. Not only did Cassie never sit in the car, she had to have her window open the entire way and not a small crack, either. At least half-way down, far enough where she could stick her full head out and, like a vacuum cleaner, suck up all the air around her. We suspect she suffered from motion sickness and the fresh air was the only thing saving our car’s upholstery from a fate worse than cat hair. We, on the other hand, suffered from cold and damp weather blowing through the car like a West Coast version of a nor’easter. To compensate, we layered our clothing as if we were Mr. and Mrs. Nanook of the North. We couldn’t reach the sunny, dry climate of San Miguel soon enough. In anticipation, I could almost hear the sizzle to come, as years of Oregon rain would leave my body and evaporate into the dry, warm Mexican air. But we had miles to go before we dehumidified.

We drove through the lush Willamette Valley, as the early morning darkness gave way to a lighter darkness generously referred to in these parts as daylight. We passed Salem, Eugene, Roseburg,

Grants Pass, as well as the smaller towns of Drain and Curtin. We stopped for breakfast and for lunch, and along the way we crossed through Oregon into California, whizzed by Yreka, Weed, Shasta City, Redding, Red Bluff, and emerged at the northern end of the long Sacramento Valley. By nightfall we were in Williams, about thirty miles north of California's state capital, and elected to stop at a cheap, pet friendly motel for the night, just off Interstate 5.

Before long Arlene was asleep. The dog and the cat were each as snug as a bug in a rug, as snug, in fact, as the dead cockroach Sadie had discovered earlier in our room. But I couldn't sleep, for the third omen had not yet arrived. I reviewed the events of the day, hoping to find it in some chance encounter. Perhaps it was in the way the waitress in Roseburg continually ignored our request for a coffee refill or the hitchhiker who pulled down his sign the moment he saw us or the guy driving the U-Haul between Ashland and Weed who kept staring at our car and pointing. Before starting out that morning, two strangers had warned me separately about the course of action we were undertaking. Salted omens, no question about it. The warnings were timely. Relevant. Full of danger. All that was missing to make my paranoia complete was unsolicited advice from a blind Greek named Tiresias.

I turned on the television set and there it was, on the screen, before my very eyes, the third omen. It wasn't Tiresias, but it was close enough. It was Albert Brooks in the film *Lost in America*. The movie told the tale of what happened to a married couple after they quit their high-paying jobs, sold their house, said goodbye to family and friends, and drove off into the night in an RV, attempting to find themselves and bring new meaning into their lives.

I watched as Albert Brooks, the husband, learned that his wife, played by Julie Hagerty, had just lost their money in a Las Vegas casino during a frenzied all-night game of roulette, while he was

upstairs asleep in their room, visions of self-actualized bliss dancing in his head. She told him that at one point she'd been up three hundred thousand dollars then she'd lost everything, but knew she could win it all back. She just needed a little cash to start again. He struggled to understand. "You mean you lost only the cash we had with us?" "Everything," she replied. All of their cash, then she wrote a check for more money, which she also lost. He finally got it. She lost *everything*, even their all-important nest egg, the financial wherewithal that would enable them to travel the country without having to take minimum-wage jobs or turn into bums. He lectured his wife about the importance of the nest egg, but it was too late. Those eggs had already left the barn. So there they were: broke and jobless and on the road, strangers in a strange land, nesteggless, if you will, bums in the making.

I turned off the television set and sat in the dark for several minutes, chewing on the events of the day as if they were a cheesy plastic straw. Were we destined to become Albert and Julie, only for real and without their Hollywood paychecks or the RV? Then I realized what the universe was trying to tell me. It was suddenly crystal clear. What we were now in the process of doing had nothing to do with one of our ordinary Sunday through Thursday cheap stays in Las Vegas at The Luxor. This was serious stuff. We were not on a part-time vacation. We were on a full-time adventure, moving to another country where we did not know a soul and could barely speak the language.

I turned the light back on, pulled out the map of the American Southwest, and checked the next day's route. Tomorrow, I decided, we would drive through the middle of California, hang a left around Bakersfield, cross the Mojave Desert, and spend the night in Needles. We would bypass the neon allure of Las Vegas, a scant 100 miles to the north, which we had planned to sample

for old time's sake. Instead we would stay the course, due south, through Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. The omens worked. Unlike Albert Brooks, I would be able to sleep through the night and wake up a happy man, with our nest egg still intact. I turned the light off and went to sleep.

An hour later, I was awake again, sitting in the dark and wondering about my chances of finding an Audi water hose in the middle of Mexico.



Major Artifacts of Mexico