

Patty Somlo
BORDERS

We crossed the border on a warm sunny Sunday in February. Before signing up for the trip, I hadn't given this part much thought. Our guide explained that getting across the border might take time. Though travelling in a comfortable bus, we were required by Mexican authorities to carry our bags and walk across.

The emotional significance of this border between Mexico and the United States hit me unexpectedly, as soon as the bus pulled off the highway and stopped. At this spot, it looked like a toll plaza before one of the bridges near where I live in Northern California. Gleaming silver panels framed the dozen or so traffic lanes, marking the official dividing line, displaying an industrial efficiency the partisan pronouncements about the border usually leave out.

On this lovely morning, we were the only people in the bus-only area crossing into Mexico on foot. The young, uniformed immigration officials who checked our passports and directed us to place our bags on the conveyor belt looked sleepy and bored. Moments were all it took to leave one country and enter the next. Once outside, I noticed a sign hanging above my head. The sign read *Tijuana*.

This was the third group I had travelled with in the past year, my first living as a widow. I chose this journey for the same reason as the previous two, to spend time with people enjoying beautiful and interesting aspects of the natural world. In this case, we were scheduled to head out into two protected lagoons, in small boats known as *pangas*, to see California gray whales. There was a distinct probability that these massive marine mammals would swim right up to our boats.

Until I crossed the border, I hadn't thought much about spending time in Mexico. Waiting for my fellow travelers, I suddenly had these thoughts.

Nearly forty years had passed since I'd been in this country. Unlike now, I had entered Mexico from the south. A freelance journalist, I was returning from Nicaragua, a country the U.S. media has forgotten, but was front page news then. My flight had been booked for months but I wasn't sure I would leave as planned. A week before my scheduled departure, a massive earthquake shook Mexico City. The airport had been closed since the quake and it wasn't clear when it might reopen.

I had an eight-hour layover in Mexico before my flight to San Francisco. To pass the time and assuage my curiosity, I stepped out of the terminal into a waiting taxi, and asked the driver if he could show me around. Closing my eyes, I can still picture the piles of rubble we passed that day, all that was left of office buildings and people's homes.

During one short and two longer stays in Nicaragua, I had come to love the people and cultures south of the U.S. border – their warmth and kindness, their strength, their humor, and their generosity. The Spanish I studied and practiced with a Salvadoran friend had improved, and I was close to fluent.

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So, this was the first time in nearly four decades I had traveled across the southern border to visit a Latin American country. I was thinking this, as I stood not far from the metal gates that resembled toll plazas on the Mexican side. I was here following the death of my husband Richard a little over a year before, at a time when I'd been struggling to create a life without him. We had met and married years after I was last in Mexico, accustomed to speaking Spanish and writing about people who lived on this side of the controversial line between their country and mine.

A half-hour after our group arrived at the border, we climbed back on the bus. Because the crossing turned out to be quicker than anticipated, we had time to stop at an open-air market, in the heart of Tijuana.

The moment I stepped off the bus, I was hit with a mix of emotions. Open-air stalls surrounded a central plaza. Looking around as our group came together, what stood out were bright primary colors – reds and blues, yellows and greens. I was taken back to *El Mercado Oriental*, Managua's Eastern Market, said to be the largest in Latin America. In the midst of an embargo imposed by the U.S. government against Nicaragua, the only place you could find everyday goods, like toilet paper and dishwashing liquid, was at the Eastern Market. Early mornings, I was often woken up by the clatter of wooden carts rolling across the cobblestone streets outside, on their way to the market.

Our Mexican guide, Mariana, a former university professor, led us past stalls piled high with pointed brown cones of raw sugar, flat green ovals of Nopal cactus, flaming crimson chiles, and hanging overhead, colorful piñatas in the shapes of donkeys, bulls, and many-pointed stars. At each stall, Mariana shared the names of unfamiliar ingredients and the dishes they were used for, in between exchanges with the vendors, many of them young men. The rolling sounds of Spanish were music to my ears.

Especially since the appearance of Donald Trump on the political stage, Mexicans have been demonized in the United States, stereotyped as dangerous criminals. As we walked around the market, I thought about my days in Nicaragua. That country and its people were also portrayed as dangerous to the United States. Yet, most Nicaraguans I met were enamored by almost anything and anyone from the U.S. I frequently heard American music on the radio, especially Michael Jackson. Out on the street, I watched Nicaraguan youth breakdancing, just as their counterparts were doing at home. That inspired me to write an article I titled, "Breakdancing in the Land of Sandino," Sandino being an historical figure revered by the Sandinista revolution.

Following our visit to the Tijuana market, we slowly made our way down the Baja California Peninsula, to its lower half, Baja California Sur. The narrow highway had only one lane running each way, past fields crowded with rows of large white greenhouses, where tomatoes were being grown. This was just a small portion of the produce Mexico exports to the United States. Mostly a desert, the Baja Peninsula has little water. Greenhouses make it possible to grow fruits and vegetables with less.

Surprisingly in this arid place, several years of rain had already fallen this winter. After leaving the area dotted with greenhouses, we passed

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rolling hills, bright green from the rain. The scenery reminded me of the lush landscape of the frequently wet Island of Kauai.

South of these hills, the desert started. We stopped for a short walk, with Mariana describing the array of plants, including the tall, thin trees known as Cirio, which looked like cactus, but because of the recent rain, sported green leaves.

One plant, the pitaya, comprised of long, slender green swords, took me back to Nicaragua. At stands alongside the roads in Managua, women sold drinks made of fruit juice, plenty of sugar and water. You could enjoy the juice at the stand, drinking from a large colorful plastic cup, or take it with you in a clear plastic baggie. I'd needed to be taught how to drink out of that plastic bag, biting a small hole in one corner and slurping. My favorite drink, a dark purple color, nearly black, was the juice of the pitaya, the plant I had now seen for the first time.

Only after crossing the border into Mexico did I realize I had lived several lives besides the one my husband Richard and I shared. Back in Latin America, I began to reacquaint myself with the single woman I'd once been.

When we finally reached our destination and the central purpose of the trip, that life became more real to me. Until this point, I hadn't needed to drag out my rusty Spanish and attempt to remember many long-forgotten words.

The sky was gray, threatening rain. Wind lifted the darker gray water of the *Ojo de Liebre* (Eye of the Rabbit) Lagoon into small waves. It didn't look like a day to head out in a small boat, in hopes of spotting whales. But we had driven hundreds of miles for this, so no one wanted to pass up the opportunity.

When it was my turn to board the small *panga*, I climbed over several rows of padded seats, to sit in the back, directly in front of the captain. I greeted him with a cheerful, "*Buenos Dias,*" and asked his name. He responded, "Bonné."

As we raced out into the lagoon from shore, I was hit with occasional saltwater sprays the boat kicked up. The water from the lagoon was warm. At the same time, a cold misty drizzle had started. I was hoping my newly purchased, allegedly waterproof, hooded jacket would keep me dry.

Seconds after Bonné stopped the boat, the whales appeared. My fellow sailors and I began shouting, alerting one another to look left or right, at three o'clock or six, where these massive marine mammals were breaching and spouting, slapping their huge tails against the water, or bringing their heads up for moments at a time, in what we'd learned was called spyhopping.

We were supposed to be on the water for an hour and a half but the time lengthened because a group scheduled after us had cancelled. Though no whales swam up to our boat that morning, as I had hoped, I couldn't complain about the performance. Rain had soaked through my supposedly waterproof pants. I didn't mind.

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Occasionally, Bonné and I exchanged a few words in Spanish. In between, I listened to shouts through his radio from the captain of the boat holding the rest of our group, at one point joking that he was dancing, in hopes of enticing the whales closer. Each time I understood a handful of words, I was thrilled, feeling that connection to a life I'd once lived, giving me hope I might make a new life again.

The weather was perfect, sunny and mild with only light wind, for our second day on the water. We were in a smaller, more protected lagoon, San Ignacio, where scientists study the California gray whales. From our *panga*, we glimpsed these creatures breaching and spouting. Sadly, none swam close to where we floated.

The third and last day was equally lovely. This time, we returned to the larger lagoon, in the small town of Guerrero Negro. I climbed to the back of the boat and asked the captain's name. He responded, "Normán," then asked mine. I gave him my formal birth name, Patricia, which I'd used in Nicaragua, since for Spanish speakers, it's easier than my nickname, Patty, to pronounce.

Twenty minutes after racing away from shore, Normán stopped the boat. Hardly a moment passed before the first whale arrived.

"*Patricia, aqui, aqui,*" Normán shouted, pointing down at the water next to the boat.

I stared at the place Normán indicated and saw a wavy white substance not far below. Seconds later, an enormous light and dark gray creature emerged.

Normán leaned over the side of the boat and touched the whale's skin. Various shades of gray, the whale's body was also dotted with tan and yellow barnacles. Opening its huge jaws, the whale revealed the off-white baleen that resembled a broom. Normán reached his hand inside and stroked. The whale didn't seem to mind.

The moment the first whale appeared, several of my fellow travelers lurched to my side of the boat. Normán urged me to pet our large visitor, but there were too many other people in the way for me to get close.

One after another, whales appeared feet from the boat. Normán alerted me again and again, in Spanish. "*Patricia, en frente. Patricia, aqui.*" Eventually, I managed to get to the side of the *panga*, when a whale floated there, and I petted its smooth, somewhat slippery skin.

It was as if the whales understood why we had come, to interact with them, and that included physical touching. A whale would arrive at the boat's right side, hang out to be petted for a time, then glide under the boat and float there for pats from folks on the other side. These enormous, forty-foot creatures seemed to comprehend that we small humans and our vessel were fragile. They didn't upend the boat or rock it as they moved underneath.

To describe this day as magical would be an understatement. In the months since I lost my husband, I had experienced a profound sense of aloneness, unlike any time in my life. One way this solitariness moved

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from dark despair to a brighter sense of solitude was when I was enjoying a beautiful day outdoors.

This morning, the borders of my life that had kept me separate and imprisoned in a small cell of sorrow melted away. I felt connected to these giant creatures, to Captain Normán, who I'd only just met, to my fellow sailors who were as overcome with awe and delight as I, with the *panga* that no matter how many of us shifted to the same side never overturned or even let in water from the lagoon, and to this lagoon that held us as welcome visitors, its calm water reflecting the blue of a cloudless sky.

I hadn't told Normán a thing about my life. Yet, I sensed he somehow knew. Twelve of us *gringos* were on board, several who spoke Spanish, but Normán had chosen me as the guest he wanted to please. From the moment he stopped the boat, he seemed determined to make sure I had the best experience possible, as if I were his only client.

Six years before this marvelous morning, my husband received a call from his doctor. It was early in the evening, and we had been watching the news. I turned the sound down with the remote and listened. When I heard my husband say the word *lesions*, my stomach started to ache, having grasped that we were in trouble.

The doctor had phoned to let Richard know the results of an MRI he'd had on his back that morning. Before the month was out, we would learn that Richard had stage four cancer. Though we couldn't help but hope for a miracle, that this incurable cancer might be driven away, I knew I needed to prepare for when Richard would be gone.

In the year I'd spent grieving since his death, I had come to understand. There was no way I could have emotionally prepared for such a loss. I missed him every day, especially the way in which a great love and long marriage melt away the border between two people, connecting them, so their thoughts sometimes merge as one.

Though I'm, at most, a one-glass-of-wine girl, I downed a Margarita and then a straight shot of tequila in the remote Cataviña, Mexico hotel bar, the night following our unforgettable California gray whale encounters. We were celebrating one of our group's birthdays that evening, along with the marvelous day. Wearing large, tan cowboy hats while singing and strumming guitars, three young men who worked at the hotel entertained us, with the infectious rhythms of *Norteño* music, popular in various parts of Mexico and the United States.

Listening to that blend of south-of-the-border and polka sounds, I smiled, thinking of how on summer weekends, I often heard this music, drifting from an outdoor stage, at the nearby county fairgrounds. I couldn't help but silently acknowledge the permeability of borders in my Northern California town, surrounded by vineyards and farms, where thirty percent of the population is Latino, many of whom have immigrated from Mexico.

The wall begins miles south of the border, a bit north of Ensenada. From the highway, the metal appears rusted, brown in places and burnt orange in others. It has an accordion appearance, as if it had been tightly folded, before being stretched open and attached to the ground.

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The wall runs up and down hills. In some areas, there are two parallel fences. In those locations, if a person manages to climb over the first wall, he still has a second one to scale. Here and there, barbed wire appears on top, as if someone has kept trying to create a more and more harmful barrier.

Seeing the famous structure for the first time, what the Mexican guide taking us back across the border called *Trump's Wall*, I felt a profound sense of sorrow. It's one thing to hear the demonization of whole groups of people trying to get to the United States to make a better life. It's another to see the means employed to keep them out. Experiencing the kindness of the Mexicans we'd spent time with on this journey, the stark reminder of attitudes toward them in the United States made me angry, sad, and ashamed.

I've always believed that travel, and especially trips that include communing with the natural world, can be healing, and even transformative. The best journeys don't end on returning home. Rather, the woman I am when I set out is not the same one who comes home, unlocks the door, and steps back inside.

In the weeks and months after Richard's death, I felt my world shrink, the walls closing, to keep me safe in this new life as a widow. At the same time, I understood. If I was going to make a life worth living alone, I would need to open up those walls and step outside.

The Mexican fishermen who live in a neighborhood of modest homes close to the San Ignacio Lagoon used to fear the California gray whales that migrated from Alaska each year. In the days when the California gray whales were hunted nearly to extinction in the Baja lagoons, these marine mammals were known to viciously attack whalers' boats. It's not surprising that stories recounting this behavior came down through the years, making the local fishermen fear the whales. They called these winter visitors, Devilfish.

One day in 1972, after whaling had ceased in the Baja lagoons and protections were extended to the whales by the Mexican government, a local fisherman, Jose Francisco Mayoral, known as Pachico, was out in his boat on the lagoon. That day, he dared to reach his hand out and touch a female whale, after she swam up to his boat and floated there. The whale did nothing to harm Pachico but stayed close.

Following the incident, Pachico passed the news of this encounter on to other fishermen. They began touching the whales and having the same experience.

Pachico, who passed away in 2013, is honored and remembered by a large colorful mural, painted on the side of a building, in the neighborhood where he once lived. His courageous act, to move past the border erected by local fishermen to keep them safe, opened the door to a better understanding of these friendly creatures. That brave step made possible profound connections between humans and whales, like the one I'd just been fortunate enough to have.