

MIDLIFE MAVERICKS

**Women
reinventing
their lives
in
Mexico**

Karen Blue

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Midlife Mavericks: Women reinventing their lives in Mexico

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Dedication

*This book is dedicated to the memory of my loving sister,
Donna Lynn Handlos*

and

to the world's marvelous midlife mavericks

[Fifteen percent of all *Midlife Mavericks* profits
will go to local Lakeside charities.]

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Introduction

*Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it.
Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.*
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Like so many twists and turns in our lives, change and purpose are often inspired by a single comment, a single question.

I was fifty-two when I moved to Ajijic, a small village on the north shore of Lake Chapala, south of Guadalajara, Mexico. About a year later, I began to write. An elderly blonde lady, with a wide-brimmed red hat, stood up after I had read the first chapter of my first novel at the local writers' group. Her voice quavered. "My dear, have you considered interviewing other women and sharing their stories in your book?"

I hadn't.

At the next writers' meeting, I read a short book proposal for *Midlife Mavericks*. The enthusiasm of the group, both men and women, inspired me. "Based on the feedback you're receiving here," the facilitator said, "I would guess this is a book that needs to be written."

I thanked the audience and asked for names of women who had come to Mexico alone in the second half of their life. I wanted to learn their reasons for leaving home, what their fears and dreams were, how easy or difficult their transition had been, and what lessons they had learned along the way.

Hands shot up. I left the meeting with eight names to contact. Word spread. Other women heard about my book and

offered to contribute their stories.

Miracle of miracles, my book proposal interested a well-known agent in New York. She spent the better part of a year trying to find a major publisher. “They liked it,” she said. “The editors just don’t feel the market is big enough. It’s a good book, Blue, and one that deserves to be published.”

I’m not sure how big the market is, but I decided to publish this book myself so other women might be motivated to change an unsatisfactory life. Getting *Midlife Mavericks* into print has become one of my life’s missions.

In the year 2000, an entire generation of baby boomers arrived at midlife. Compared to prior generations, we will live longer, remain healthier, and redefine what it means to be middle-aged. We have survived the conformist fifties, the radical sixties, the feminist seventies, and the ambitious eighties.

Many of us rolled out of the nineties more empowered and self-sufficient than any generation before. Others found themselves alone and barely able to exist on dwindling Social Security stipends.

Moving to Mexico isn’t the answer for every woman, but the process we employ in evaluating where we’ve been and what we want for the remainder of our lives is the same. The underpinning of this book, the common denominator of the stories, is change.

I have divided this book into three sections, each focusing on the various reasons women choose to reinvent their lives in Mexico.

Part I: Is This All There Is?

Careers, corporate ladders, glass ceilings, stock options...heart attacks, ulcers, cancer, and divorce. As young as forty, women are taking a second look at their choices and asking, “Is this all there is?” Burned out, used up, or trapped in unfulfilling careers, an attorney swaps law for painting, a corporate executive gives up prestige to search for purpose, and a manager of a temporary employment agency sheds her trappings for simplicity.

Part II: It Ain't Over Till the Fat Lady Sings

A husband leaves his wife of twenty-nine years; a hospital casts aside a nurse with a silent stroke, penniless; a financial advisor swindles a woman out of her retirement savings late in life. These women pick themselves up, dust themselves off and find their heartaches transformed into blessings as they discover the joy of living solo in Mexico.

Part III: Indiana "Joans"

Born too late to ride westward in covered wagons, these midlife mavericks lust for adventure. They long to experience a new culture, to establish roots in foreign soil, to free themselves of society-imposed roles, and to test their own mettle. These intrepid women hark to the call of the unknown and heed the counsel of Yoda in *Star Wars*: "Try? Try? There is no try. Only do or not do."

As the women between these pages attest, life may begin at forty, but a second or third life can start at age fifty, sixty, or even eighty. I hope our stories, like those of generations of women before us, bring us closer together as we march to a common cadence into the twenty-first century.

During hundreds of conversations with ordinary women who have made extraordinary choices, I have discarded old beliefs and created new dreams. Maybe you will, too. I invite you to grab a cup of coffee, curl up on a cozy couch, and travel vicariously with these marvelous midlife mavericks through the altered landscape of middle age.

Special Notes:

- *The names of the women in these chapters have been changed. Their stories are true.*
- *For currency conversion purposes, 9.3 pesos equaled 1 U.S. dollar at the time of publication.*
- *The terms gringo and gringa are used extensively*

throughout this book. In Mexico, they are not considered derisive terms, but simply refer to a North American man or woman.

- *These interviews took place over a period of two years. Where I have obtained updated information, I have included that as a postscript at the end of each chapter.*

Part I:

Is This All There Is?

Careers, corporate ladders, glass ceilings, stock options—heart attacks, ulcers, cancer, and divorce. As young as forty, women are taking a second look at their choices and asking, “Is this all there is?” Burned out, used up, or trapped in unfulfilling careers, an attorney swaps law for painting, a corporate executive gives up prestige to search for purpose, and a manager of a temporary employment agency sheds her trappings for a simpler life.

1 | **Opting Out**

*The trouble with being in the rat race
is that even if you win, you're still a rat.*

Lily Tomlin

“Are you crazy?” Liz asked, her forkful of lemon meringue pie suspended in midair. Her icy green eyes glared at me—first with incredulity, then with accusation. “What will you do, Blue? Where will you live?”

We had cleared the dishes and were retreating to the deck for dessert when I announced to Liz, my best friend of thirty years, “I’ve sold my house and I’m moving to Mexico.”

Liz, in her late fifties, typifies the silent generation, a generation for whom security is a high priority. She has worked for the same company, lived in the same house, and had the same boyfriend for more than a quarter century. Only eight years younger than she, I was born just months before the first baby boomers, epitomizing that group of Americans who value doing, owning, and achieving. Change and challenge were my motivators.

This was one of those rare times the two of us needed to straddle our generation gap. Liz couldn’t comprehend my craving for change; and at that moment, I wasn’t so sure about it either. Maybe there should be a natural limit to impetuosity—

something like the law of gravity.

When my mother was forty with three kids and in the throes of a difficult divorce, she said more than once, “I’ve worked hard for a nervous breakdown, I deserve one and, damn it, I’m going to have one.” Until now, I hadn’t understood her cry for help, yet I hoped Liz and my kids would understand mine. As a marketing consultant, I worked eighty-hour weeks and spent a third of my life on an airplane. Burned out and dead-dog tired, I craved a change of pace.

Liz said, “I need a glass of wine.” I served us each one. She took a sip, put the glass down as though she were trying to grind out a cigarette with it, and said with a brisk, military voice, “You’ve got some talking to do, lady.”

I leaned back in my chair, watching the woodpecker store his winter food in one of the fifty-foot-tall redwoods beyond my deck. “Once upon a time,” I said, in my best fairy-tale voice. Then I continued my story, as I’ll tell it now to you.

A couple months before our barbecue, I’d been in a macho executive meeting where sound business decisions suffered at the hands of politics and power plays. While sitting there in disgust, an invisible force bonked me over the head and whispered, “Run!” It felt like a cold breeze had passed through my body. I shivered.

I shook my head to clear it. Run? Where? Why?

At that instant, I realized I didn’t *want* to be there anymore. Furthermore, I didn’t *have* to be there anymore. My children were grown and I had never remarried after my on-again, off-again five-year marriage. I was tired of climbing the corporate ladder and knocking my head against the glass ceiling.

Soon after that epiphany, I took a short vacation to visit my mother in Idaho. I needed revitalization. Mom called it “hyacinths for the soul.” My last night there, a dream started the wheels of my new life in motion. I woke up repeating the word *enclave* over and over in my mind. Words in dreams are significant, so I got up and found a dictionary. The definition of enclave was “a cultural unit enclosed within a foreign territory.” It meant nothing to me and I soon forgot about it.

When I returned home, a complimentary edition of *International Living* was buried in my stack of mail. My skin prickled as I read the front-page headline: “Lake Chapala—A Retirement Enclave in Mexico.” A sidebar described an upcoming “Retire in Mexico” conference in Guadalajara. I read the article three times before making flight and conference reservations.

As the taxi delivered me to the Quinta Real, the last five-star hotel I’d be staying in for a long while, adrenaline raced through my veins. Goose bumps covered my arms. A strange visceral sensation, like a weed, was choking out all reason.

At the reception, I noticed most of the attendees were couples in their sixties and seventies. I asked a hostess if there were any problems for single women living in Mexico. She looked at me wide-eyed and said in her fine Georgian drawl, “Honey, if you’re comin’ here lookin’ for a man, don’t. The ones here who aren’t already married are gay, ninety, or goin’ home on Sunday.”

No, I realized, laughing at her wisecrack, I’m not looking for a man. I’m looking for myself.

The next morning I listened with rapture to the speakers’ stories. In each of them, I recognized veiled parts of myself. I squirmed in my seat, uncomfortable that these strangers could know so much about me. I wrapped my arms around myself in response to a sudden chill.

In a three-bus convoy the following day, we toured Guadalajara, a majestic old city of 8 million people, complete with Price Club, WalMart, and Sam’s. On Sunday, we visited Ajijic, nestled between Mexico’s largest lake and the mountains. This quiet cobblestone village seeped into my pores like sunshine on a cold winter day. I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply as a gentle breeze caressed the back of my neck. I wondered if this was how Maria Von Trapp had felt escaping to freedom over her beloved Austrian Alps.

Contrasts assaulted me from every direction. A sombrero’d man, holding a cellular phone to his ear, delivered milk

on a donkey. Young Mexican boys with buckets of dirty water washed a Mercedes and a horse, side by side. Vivid magenta and tangerine bougainvillea cascaded over drab cement walls. Only the clamor of automobiles bouncing in and out of pot-holes interrupted the serenity of the village.

That night, as I dozed off, I imagined myself on a magic carpet, a world away from Silicon Valley—a world away from tension and stress. By morning, my sheets were twisted around my legs. I felt sucked into a vortex of confusion. I was enchanted and, at the same time, apprehensive. It was as if two parts of me were vying for center stage. My usual ways of resolving conflicts and making decisions weren't working, and I wondered if there might be a short circuit in my system.

When I returned home, finances were first on the agenda. My briefcase bulged with data we had received at the conference, including cost-of-living, visa, customs, insurance, economic, and political information. Within a few days, rows and columns peppered my office walls. I chuckled—Ms. Left-Brain Analyst making momentous decisions with a combination of spreadsheets, dreams, and intuition. If it was true, as the conference handouts indicated, that I could live comfortably on \$1,000 a month...I closed my eyes, crossed my fingers, and pressed “calculate” on the summary spreadsheet.

Yes! Assuming the stock market didn't crash and California didn't fall into the ocean, I could manage on investments until I was fifty-nine and a half. My home was heavily mortgaged, but there might be enough equity in it to afford an inexpensive adobe dwelling in Mexico.

My dream of working ten fewer years made a quantum leap from wishful thinking to reality. But at what sacrifice? My emotions screamed as though on a roller-coaster ride and my reason rode the merry-go-round, desperately trying to grab the brass ring. I couldn't focus on my job. I missed deadlines. I had headaches. I drank too much. After weeks of agonizing indecision, I turned my quandary over to the universe.

I put my house on the market. If it sold, I would go; if it

didn't, I would stay. Now the decision was out of my hands.

Because of the down market, my real estate agent prepared me for a long sale. But in two weeks she delivered a clean, unconditional offer. I felt like I'd been whacked on the side of my head with the answer. Run.

As the final rays of sun disappeared beyond the horizon, I sat on the deck, hugging my legs and rocking back and forth on the lounge. What was I doing? I feared this was one of the many times when my impulsiveness took hold of the reins and dragged my reason behind the wagon like a broken axle. Licking a salty tear from my lips, I focused on the deep blue spaces among the faint outlines of the towering redwood trees. "God, help me."

"That was two nights ago, Liz." I swirled the wine in my glass, waiting for her reaction. She just shook her head.

"It sounds like you'll *need* God's help with this one, Blue."

I tapped my wine glass against hers. "To friends, to family, and to the future."

Liz reached out and grabbed my hand. The tremor in her voice betrayed her emotion. "Why? You already have it all. You have it right here—family, friends, and career. You can't just leave."

She looked so vulnerable—my little redheaded friend. We'd been part of each other's lives for so long. We had met nearly three decades earlier at a time we were both going through divorces. Our kids think of each other as brothers and sisters. I knew Liz would miss me...perhaps more than my own children, who were in the early stages of their own careers and families.

The night before, I had told my son and daughter I was moving. Tory, a strapping young man of thirty, and his sister, Shoni, a year younger, were both upset with me. They took turns. "Why Mexico?" "It's dirty." "It's dangerous." "It's so far away." "You don't speak Spanish." "There are scorpions and snakes there." "What will you do there?" "Don't you love us anymore?"

It felt like they were slapping me in the face with skepticism and indictments. They were hurt because I hadn't confided in them earlier. Why hadn't I? Perhaps because I didn't want to be talked out of my decision. Perhaps the part of me wanting to run was stronger than the part of me wanting to stay. I had been in this house four years, longer than I'd ever stayed in one place throughout my adult life. They should've known me well enough by now.

"Who will I talk to when I need my mom?" asked Shoni. "And don't tell me we'll have e-mail, it's not the same."

"What can we do to make you stay?" my son asked.

"Grandkids?" I half kidded. Tory and Sandra had been living together for five years and were recently engaged.

"Sandra's just had a three-month contraceptive shot and it takes at least nine months after that."

"Okay, then," I said, trying to muss his short curly hair to no avail, "let's reopen this discussion in another year. Few decisions are final."

My heart hurt. But my kids had their own lives to live and so did I.

Liz ran her finger around the rim of her glass, avoiding my gaze. I softened my voice and placed my hand over hers. "I just know that doing more of what I'm doing and getting more of what I'm getting is not going to make me happy. This can't be all there is."

I walked behind her chair, put my arms around her shoulders, and rested my chin atop her long, curly hair. "We both work so many hours, we don't see each other more than once a month anyway." When I had moved from the Bay Area to the beachside town of Aptos, the extra hour's drive over the dangerous Santa Cruz Mountains had reduced the time we spent together.

"When you visit me in Mexico, we can spend a week or two of quality time together."

"If," she whispered, not responding to my hug.

"And I'll be back to visit."

I walked her to the door and waved goodbye as Liz backed out of the driveway. Maybe she was right. Maybe I was crazy. I'd only been in Ajijic one day. That wasn't enough time to decide I wanted to live there. I had no idea what I would do with my life. I wondered if I could give up my addiction to working. I felt like the blocks had been kicked from in front of the wheels and my wagon was heading out. Would I pick up the reins and lead, or lean back and enjoy the ride?

An old memory nudged its way into my consciousness. With her right foot behind her and her left toes touching a spot three feet ahead, a seminar leader of mine once said, "Most of us live our lives like this, with one foot planted firmly in the past and the other reaching tentatively ahead toward the future. What are we doing? Pissing on the present."

Leaning against the closed door, I took three deep breaths. With each, I pledged my intention to live every moment fully as I ventured into the second half of my life.

2 | In Search of Me

Woman's discontent increases in exact proportion to her development.
Elizabeth Cady Stanton

As the shadows of my avocado tree crept across the lawn, Liz scooped guacamole onto her taco chip and said solemnly, “It’s all so different since everything’s changed.” Her eyes were lowered, but the corners of her mouth curved up just enough to unveil her subtle humor. I leaned back and laughed. “Profound, Liz. Very profound.”

She was right, though. Life was as different for me here in Mexico as it remained the same for Liz, whose years marched on in a well-trodden groove, altered naturally by the seasons of time—one more grandchild here, another vacation there.

“I hate it that you’re gone. I miss you.” This was her first visit since I had left Silicon Valley two years ago. I suspected she’d been punishing me.

Her sea-green eyes danced like Australian opals. I reached across the table to cover her hand with mine. “I’m so glad you’re finally here. I’m sorry I’ve had to schedule interviews during your visit.”

“Not to worry. I’ve brought along some good books.” Liz leaned forward, elbows on the table. “Moving to another country would never be an option for me, but it’s fascinating to

learn why other women would and what makes them stay. Are they all like you? Corporate dropouts?"

"No. Most aren't like me. The women I've talked with have led very different lives and came to Mexico for different reasons. I'm anxious to finish the interviews so I can string together the similarities and differences." I rotated the hanging chair I was sitting in 180 degrees, then back again. Screech. Screech. "I'm learning more about myself through their stories. Perhaps writing this book will be a significant part of my own journey."

Liz stood up, inhaling deeply, "What is that luscious smell? Bougainvillea?"

"No. As gorgeous as the bougainvillea is, it has no fragrance. You're smelling night-blooming jasmine."

Liz turned to face me. "I still don't understand how you could move so far from your friends and family. I'll never understand."

Trying to formulate an answer to her half-question, half-accusation, I reflected on how our friendship had gone the distance. We were unlike in so many ways. I supposed we'd learned to accept our differences and enjoy the many things we had in common—families, friends, travel, crafts, wine, and, above all, half a lifetime of shared memories.

"I can't explain, Liz. I'm searching for me, for the part of me that was buried under all the corporate crap and is crying to get out." She shook her head. She couldn't comprehend. I wished sometimes my life could be as simple as hers—as black and white.

I pushed my foot against the table, swinging the canvas chair to and fro. "Besides, who left whom? Mom moved to Idaho after my step-dad passed away, Shoni moved to Seattle for a better job, and Tory and Sandra are already making plans to leave California."

"*I'm* still there." The twinkle in her eyes tempered a sulky pout.

The screech of metal against metal vied for my attention. My swinging patio chair was welded to a steel beam above the

deck, and I was forever checking to make sure it was secure.

“Has it been difficult adjusting to another culture? Starting over?”

“It’s always difficult starting over, but I’ve had lots of practice at that. Normally it takes me about six months to feel comfortable in a new place, to find my way around and develop a new circle of friends. But here, I felt like I belonged by the end of my first week.

“While I was looking at houses, my Realtor schmoozed me, introducing me to other single ladies. Then, at the bed and breakfast I stayed in for a month, I met other folks.”

“It’s easy for you to meet new people,” Liz said. “You’re so much more outgoing than I am.”

Was I an extrovert or an introvert? That was a hard distinction for me to make about myself. I like people. I laugh a lot. But I also require a lot of time alone. Meeting people here is easy for anyone who’s willing to step outside their house. The biggest difficulties for me were not speaking Spanish and feeling out of control. I expected things to work, to be able to fix them myself or at least to know who to call when something went wrong. I’d wait all day for a repairman to show up and work myself into a self-righteous snit because he didn’t. Maybe he’d come the next day, maybe the next week. I’d make myself miserable. It didn’t bother him, though. If I wasn’t home when he came, he’d just try another time. No problem.

“Patience has never been one of your virtues.” Liz crunched on a taco chip and checked my reaction out of the corner of her eye.

I chuckled. “Early on I adopted a life rule: If at first you don’t succeed, try two more times, then throw the damn thing out the window.” I chuckled at a fleeting vision. “I remember the time I adopted that rule. I was a teenager and it was a bad-hair day. I couldn’t make my French roll do what I wanted, and after two attempts, I threw the hairbrush into the bathtub. It broke. My hair still looked like crap, but somehow I felt better.”

Liz laughed. “I can just picture that. She walked to the

edge of the patio to get a better whiff of the nighttime jasmine.

“I’ve had to adopt a *qué sera* attitude to keep my sanity in Mexico. I would wait only an hour or two for people to show up, and if they didn’t, I just went on about my business. I quickly figured out I couldn’t be in charge here. I’ve been too controlling all my life anyway, so here I get lots of opportunity to practice being out of control. I think it’s good for me.”

“I guess waiting around matters a lot more when you’re working,” Liz said. “Now you’ve got all the time in the world to wait.”

“It’s funny—and I’m not the only one who says this—but my hours and days fill up. I wonder how I ever managed to fit a real job into my life.”

“What do you do, then, to fill up your hours—besides waiting for workers?”

“Everyone asks that question. At first, remodeling my house took all my time. I shopped for thirty-two hours just for living room furniture. Everything takes longer. We pay bills in person, with cash. Sometimes there are long lines. We may have to shop in four stores to complete a grocery list. It may take a week to get a car fixed, and because mechanics don’t have phones, it takes several trips to find out whether or not the car is ready.

“After the house was finished and furnished, I took a class on writing fiction and began a novel. I discovered online classes in writing and joined several Internet critique groups. Then I started writing a monthly Internet column, “Living in Mexico: From a Woman’s Perspective,” and kept busy responding to readers’ inquiries.

“I’m making soft-sculptured dolls now. I enjoy going out to restaurants with friends and trekking to nearby cities and villages. We’ve got a great little theater and lots of cultural events here and in Guadalajara.” I thought a minute and added, “Parties, volunteer teaching at the orphanage...and I’ve had lots of company.”

“You’re making me tired.” Liz shook her head and wandered off to inspect the rest of my garden.

I reflected on how different my choices were from Liz's and those of my mother and grandmother. They had lived during a war. My grandmother grew her own food and Mom worked in canneries to help make ends meet after Dad returned from World War II.

We baby boomers were raised in a land of plenty, quasi-equality, and opportunity. Women were boosted up the career ladder by anti-discrimination legislation and then kicked back down as we reached for the top rung.

"I am woman. I can do anything," Helen Reddy belted out, raising our battle cry. The feminist movement had created turmoil in traditional family relationships. Too many of us who bought into those promises ended up with bulging pocket-books and sobbing souls. Success often came at the sacrifice of time—time for ourselves and time for our families.

Liz returned to the deck with a bouquet of flowers she'd picked and asked, "So, have you found yourself in Mexico?"

Such a difficult question. I had no idea how to answer her. We sat quietly awhile, listening to the twitter of birds and crickets, lost in our individual thoughts. Liz smiled wistfully and I gazed at the evening clouds, framed by a cobalt sky.

"I think it's time for more wine," I said, dodging her question for the moment. "And you need a vase for those flowers."

I returned to the deck, juggling an orange glass vase and a tray laden with crackers, cheese, and a carafe of wine. Liz had claimed my canvas chair. I filled our glasses. Liz raised hers in a toast. "To best friends. Do you really like it here, Blue? Really?"

"Yes. It's a tropical paradise with few tourists. Life is simple and serene. The weather is perfect. Most gringos here don't work and they have time for new friendships. I've met such interesting people—from all over the world." Liz swayed back and forth in the hanging chair, not saying anything.

"Remember," I said, "when I told you I expected there to be a common denominator of folks here—people who embraced differences, had a high risk tolerance, were full of life, and didn't sit around waiting for death?"

Liz leaned her head against the canvas chair and closed her eyes, trying, I surmised, to understand me. I continued. “No one asks, ‘What did you do?’ or ‘Where did you go to college?’ They ask, ‘Where do you come from?’ ‘How did you find out about this place?’ and ‘Can you join us tonight for dinner?’ ”

I could tell Liz wasn’t on my wavelength, so I tried again. “I have all the time I need now—time for friends, time for family, and time for me. Each day is like a gift. I don’t know what it holds for me until I unwrap it. No schedules, no meetings, no employees, no...”

Liz swung around until her back was facing me and asked, “Did you buy the house to prove you were right about moving here or to make sure you stayed?” Zap. Invisible sparks flew at me.

Why had I? I had no intention of buying. My real estate friend offered to show me around the different neighborhoods, just to get the lay of the land. I guess she was smarter than she looked. This house had been deserted for six years and the reigning royalty were ants and termites. It was uninhabitable. New electricity, plumbing, tiles, cupboards, doors, fixtures, and windows would be needed. I purchased it my third day here. It was another impulsive decision.

“I think I needed to decompress. I considered the house a transitional project that would keep me busy, force me to learn the whos and wheres and hows of living in Ajijic, and keep me from hibernating behind closed doors. If I had rented a furnished place, I might have disappeared in front of my computer or into a bottle of wine.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Liz said, swinging around to face me, her glass raised. I smiled at the saying on her T-shirt, “Will Work for Wine,” and thought of the hundreds of California art and wine festivals we’d enjoyed over the years.

I reached for the carafe. “It was a scary time for me, Liz. I had to redefine myself as a single woman without a job, without goals or purpose, and without external expectations. I had no support system. I had more questions than answers. Who am I? What is my purpose in life? How do I find fulfillment

outside of a career?”

“What do you mean, who are you? You’re Blue. You’re mother of Shoni and Tory. You’re friend of Liz and daughter of Betty. It frustrates me when you talk like this.”

“I know.” I realized there was no point in continuing this conversation. I stood up, saying, “Let’s have a game of ping-pong and then go to dinner. What kind of food do you want? We have Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, German, Lebanese, and American restaurants.”

“Winner decides,” Liz said, reaching for a paddle. “But first, one more question.” She walked over to the far end of the ping-pong table. “Why are you always driven to do something different—climb new mountains, move to new countries?”

I bounced the ping-pong ball on the Mexican tile patio while I thought about her question. “I guess that has to do with my father. All my life, my goals were designed to win his approval. ‘Look, Dad, I can do it. Are you proud of me yet? Do you love me now?’ I realized I was still doing that, even ten years after he died.” I threw the ball onto her side of the table to begin the rally. “Not anymore. I’m living the rest of my life to make me happy, not him.”

“Atta girl, Blue.” Liz slammed the ball back at me. I missed. Her smile was warm and accepting. “And it’ll make me happy if you let me win this game.”

As we played, I began to think about my next morning’s interview with Anna. At age thirty-eight, she had chucked a lucrative legal career and moved to Mexico to challenge herself as an artist. I wondered how similar her story would be to mine.

3 | Reflections on a Canvas

If you always do what interests you, then at least one person is pleased.
Advice to Katherine Hepburn from her mother

I first met Anna at a Tuesday evening salon where local writers and artists gathered to share a potluck dinner and provide feedback on each other's work. This was her first showing at the salon and I was eager to view her art.

Janet, one of the original members of the salon and a friend of Anna's, introduced her to the group. "Anna and I met riding horses on the other side of the lake. She's lived in Jocotepec for two years, rides daily, and, as you can see, is much younger than the rest of us." Janet put her arm around Anna's waist, giving her a playful hug, and Anna blushed. I guessed her age at about forty. Janet continued. "Anna's past life included being a U.S. attorney, but she traded in that life to pursue her art here in Mexico."

Earlier Anna had placed three equal-sized canvases on the floor, facing the wall. "Thank you for inviting me," she said in a soft, reticent voice. "I don't want to influence your reactions, so I'm going to show you my last project without any prior discussion." She turned the first canvas toward us. On it appeared a pair of dark-skinned, high-heeled legs chopped off a few inches above the knee. I squirmed in my seat and sneaked a