



2013 First Place

Another Life *by Sally Zanjani*

Before the ship wending its way northward along the Mexican coast reached San Francisco, Asuncion knew she would need a protector. Already the purse of money her mother slipped to her as she fled had grown thin.

From time to time she paraded discreetly around the deck in her proper high-necked black dress, her long black hair carefully pinned atop her head, considering the men who lounged about and allowing herself to be seen. At other times she practiced English with any of the women who would talk to her. It gave her a strange sense of power when she discovered that the “devil’s own tongue,” as her people called it, was not so difficult after all. Could it be that she had not yet learned everything there was to know about herself? Well-born young ladies in Nicaragua had not been taught English. They learned how to embroider, dance, flutter their fans, tinkle the piano, direct the servants—nothing of any use at all. Except perhaps one thing.

Although many of the men on deck tipped their hats to her, the two leading candidates she settled upon were the banking gringo and the mining gringo. People said the banking gringo was very rich, but his soft, plump flesh, his close-set eyes, and his dissatisfied mouth did not much appeal to her. The mining gringo called J.T. looked more interesting, but he was older. She could not tell how old. Ageless, perhaps. A lean, hard body, a little gray mixed with the red of his short beard, pale golden freckles, a man unlike any she had ever had. She only wished she could be sure that he was rich enough to serve.

One day as they stood beside the deck railing, the wind whipping the dark sea into little waves tipped with foam, she said the sentence she had carefully rehearsed, “Tell me about these mines of yours.” She imagined a hive of activity—men swarming in and out of a large black tunnel, wagons piled high with glittering rocks rumbling steadily to railroad cars that waited behind an engine puffing clouds of steam, for in America, in 1880, a mining gringo would surely have his own railway.

He looked at her with narrowed pale blue eyes, his cigar tilted



jauntily between his teeth. After awhile he said, “My dear young friend, you could not possibly imagine.”

She went with the mining gringo all the same and called him J.T. as others did, or sometimes *mi corazon* and other Spanish endearments, for she saw that he enjoyed the foreignness of her, much as she liked his golden freckles and his crinkled reddish hair. If he answered no questions, at least he asked her none. Just once, when she half woke in his bed, in the night as the ship creaked and strained against a wave, she felt his fingers gently tracing the half-healed scars upon her back.

San Francisco passed in a whirl. He bought her rings, dangling golden earrings, necklaces, and a red silk dress. They stayed in a hotel so fine that she had to prevent herself from gaping like a peasant and pretend that she was used to such things. They dined on many strange and delicious foods she had never tasted before, in restaurants where glittering chandeliers hung overhead and white damask clothes covered the tables. But after a little while, she saw that he had lost interest in these pleasures. He lapsed into long silences, and sometimes when she spoke, he did not answer, and the words hung between them in an empty space. Often he stood staring out the window.

At first she feared that another woman might have caught his eye, yet it did not seem so. He left her only for a short time each day to go to a place called “stock exchange,” and he returned frowning and more displeased than before. Finally he said to her at dinner one evening, as he absently twisted a glass of dark red wine in his hand, “It’s time to go back to the

mountains.”

“Is that where you have your mines?”

“It’s where I mean to find more.”

“Will we go soon?” Asuncion was too excited to notice the distinction. Much as she liked the beautiful city built on steep hills by the sea, these mysterious mines of his tickled her curiosity, and she longed to see more of this strange new land, America.

They journeyed eastward on a train, through rounded hills, across a broad valley of fields and orchards, through mountains higher than any Asuncion had seen before, where snow still covered the peaks in late spring and the train snaked through a long wooden shed on the side of the mountain. They got off at a small town called Reno, on the other side of the Sierra, and rode smaller, more rickety trains southward. At last they squeezed with several other passengers into a stagecoach that rocked and jolted through a barren desert land where nothing grew except a low, gray bush called sagebrush.

Suddenly the stage stopped at the top of a hill. Asuncion peered out the dusty window, expecting to see a city, or perhaps a town, or at least an inn, but no light shone anywhere. The stage driver, a bent old man with long white curled mustaches, had gotten down from his box and stood a little distance away. J.T. walked over to join him and offered the old man a cigar. The passengers began to curse and complain, grumbling about schedules disrupted and senseless delays. After awhile, Asuncion stepped out and walked over to see what the two men saw as they stood smoking and looking into the distance. “Is something wrong?” she asked, a little proud of the way she made the American English words come out so well. “Everyone wonders why we stop here.”

The stage driver grunted and walked away toward his horses. J.T. looked down at her with a smile. “He stops here because he likes the view.”

“Does he not know his place?” she asked. “He is only a driver. He looks at the mountains and he makes everybody late.”

J.T. looked amused. “On his own stage, he’s the master.”

Of course, thought Asuncion. She had grasped the American English much faster than she learned these strange ways of theirs. She must remember that even a driver was master on his own stage. A startling thought flew through her mind. Could it be that a woman might also be a master, no longer obliged to intrigue, charm, and cajole a torturous path through a man’s world? She would have to see if such a thing could happen in America.

At length the stage resumed its journey. Asuncion dozed a little, with her head resting on J.T.’s shoulder. She woke to a new sound,

soft at first, then rising to drown the rumble and creak of the stage. A rhythmic pounding like waves breaking against a rocky shore, raised to a roar. “What is that?” she asked, startled.

“It’s the Northern Belle mill,” said a fat man with a gold pocket watch sitting across from her in the enforced intimacy of the stage. “If it don’t drive you crazy, you’ll get used to it.”

They alighted upon a dusty, treeless street of miserable shacks. Laughter and loud voices spilled out from a saloon. Asuncion could see little in the darkness, but she supposed that this must be the poorer section of Belleville. She waited to be taken to the mining gringo’s fine hacienda.

They passed a miserable assortment of stone huts, more shacks and what appeared to be a Chinese laundry, and stopped in front of a small cabin. As she stared in shock and disbelief, J.T. swept her up in his arms, carried her over the threshold, and set her down upon an iron bedstead. Indeed the bedstead was the principal furnishing. It was a one-room cabin, with rough unpainted board walls, a stove, and a crude table with chairs. Scarcely space enough for the hostler from the livery stable to set down the bags he was bringing inside. Even the servants on Asuncion’s father’s estate had lived

in better quarters. She sat rigidly on the edge of the bed, dry-eyed only because a descendant of the conquistadores does not weep. “You did not tell me it would be like this,” she said.

“If I had, would you have come?” She said nothing. They both knew the answer. He gestured vaguely at their crude surroundings.

Could it be that a woman might also be a master, no longer obliged to intrigue, charm, and cajole a torturous path through a man’s world? She would have to see if such a thing could happen in America.

"This doesn't matter, you know. In Belleville your cabin's just a place to pull off your boots and lie down when you come in from the mountains."

"What is in these mountains?"

"Maybe another mine. Maybe nothing at all."

After a tense silence she asked, "And your mines? What of them?"

He sat beside her, tipping her unyielding chin upward with a freckled hand and looking into her eyes. "They're gone, sweetheart," he said. "Sold. What's left of them is dangling from your ears and jingling on your arms. The rest went up in smoke at the stock market."

At this she softened for a moment. It had been a grand gesture, she thought, to spend the last of his fortune in buying her golden earrings and fine times in San Francisco. *Muy hombre*. He had written her no poems, sung her no songs, whispered no romantic words in her ears in the way of her Nicaraguan lovers, but perhaps this was an American declaration of love. "Are you then, what they say, die break—dead broke?" Her English crumbled in the extremity of her distress.

"Poor as a church mouse—until I hit another bonanza. It's easy come, easy go, sweetheart."

FURY AND DESPAIR SURGED THROUGH HER at the casual foolishness of him. Easy come, easy go indeed! Once a fool, always a fool, and she herself had been the worst fool of all. Just because she fancied his narrowed blue eyes and the tilt of his cigar, she had turned away from a life of luxury with the banker and brought herself to this miserable shack in the remote desert. Not for long though. She would catch the next stage out of this place in the morning. She would sell the bracelets and earrings for a good price. She would find the banker, or someone very like him. And never, never again would she behave like such a fool. Just now she must rest, to be ready for another long journey tomorrow.

Carefully brushing away a thick coating of red dust, she hung her dress over the back of a chair and lay down. In spite of the distant pounding of the mill and the greater throb of her own anger, a heavy fog of weariness closed over her and she slept.

Asuncion awoke to find the gringo's arms wrapped around her. It had been so every morning since she came to his bed. She moved to get up, to hurry to the stage station, to begin, but he held her so tightly that she could not wriggle free.

"Give it a week," he said softly, his beard tickling her shoulder. "You've never been to an American mining camp, have you? Look around and see how you like it. Then if you still want to go, I'll buy you a ticket to San Francisco." He lifted her long black hair aside and kissed the back of her neck in the way she liked.

Presently she ceased trying to escape. After all, she thought to herself, what did a week matter? So little time. She sighed and

turned toward him, telling herself that she was only being practical for the sake of a ticket. No more a fool. Absolutely not.

"What do you think of it?" he asked her when he took her walking on the dusty streets, past shacks and huts and saloons more wretched by daylight than they had appeared in the darkness.

"I think this place is hell." For a moment the mad thought flickered through her mind that this might truly be so, that she had died after all, back there on the bloody floor with Rodrigo, and arrived by a strange passage at the place to which her sins condemned her. She clung tightly to the rough reality of J.T.'s coat sleeve, resolved to put remembrance and mad thoughts behind her. "If it isn't hell, where is the church?"

"Over there." He smiled crookedly and pointed at the Northern Belle mill, towering above the huts scattered so haphazardly over the bare gray slope.

Asuncion smiled grimly at this American kind of joke. So Belleville had no plaza, no church where even she might slip inside and kneel in the incense-scented gloom. No bells would ring, only the steady pounding pulse beat from the mill as though the diggings of these men had bared the monstrous heart of the mountains. Truly this Belleville was beyond the reach of God.

What amazed her most on that day, and the ones that followed, was not the dreadful squalor of the place, but the people. Chinese teamsters, their long queues flying, screamed strange shrill curses and whipped their teams down the slope and through the dusty streets. Indians selling wood from mules so heavy-laden that they

looked like walking wood piles. Many Spanish-speaking people, mostly Mexican. Their soft-voiced invitations she understood as she passed, but most she could not decipher in this babble of tongues from countries she had scarcely known existed. When Asuncion went walking, a big barrel-chested French Canadian man, with hair the color of bronze, softly murmured to her in a patois she could not understand—at least, not yet.

Few women lived in Belleville, because most women were good. They went to mass several times a week, prayed with piously folded hands, waited faithfully upon their faithless husbands, watched the parade of life pass them by without complaint, and patiently grew old, stitching their embroidery in quiet courtyards. Except for her. And here she was.

But not for long. “It’s been a week now,” she announced to J.T., “and I still think this place is hell. Now I would like to go.”

“That’s too bad,” he said. “Then you’ll miss the big Indian powwow next week, and all the dancing, and the chanting.”

And so she stayed a little longer.

That night they went to a restaurant where they ate fresh strawberries and drank champagne while hogs snuffled around their feet for scraps. The strange mixture of elegance and crudity made her laugh. Awful as it was, the raw life that surged through Belleville’s ugly streets caught her in its irresistible tide. She meant to leave after the powwow, but the next week was the Mexican fandango. Then the horse races delayed her departure. She soon realized that J.T. dangled the odd pleasures of this other life before her as in the beginning he had slipped golden bracelets on her arm. Still, she really meant to leave. She was packing her bag when he said to her, “Day after tomorrow we’re going into the mountains.”

“You are mistaken, *mi corazon*. Not into that cold snow. The only place I go is on the stage to San Francisco.”

“No snow. We’ll go the other way, east into the Pilot Range. Haven’t you ever wondered what it’s like out there?”

Out there. Perhaps she had wondered a little what you would see if you went inside those winding secret canyons in the mysterious purple mountains in the east that rose abruptly from the white expanse of the Soda Spring Valley. “But what would I wear?” she murmured, frowning as she carefully brushed her red silk dress before folding it in the bag.



“Pants, just like me.”

“Pants! Women never wear pants. What would people say!”

“The coyotes won’t care, and the jackrabbits won’t even notice.”

Asuncion laughed. After the initial surprise, she rather liked the idea. Men wore pants and had the power, did they not? Perhaps putting on pants would be a kind of passage, as when a young girl in Nicaragua put on her first long dress and learned to pin her hair upon her head. Pants would mean that she too was becoming master on her own stage.

A teamster gave them a ride across the hills to Candelaria, where they ate their last big meal before starting across the Soda Spring Valley in the waning light of late afternoon when J.T. said the sun would not be so hot. Far from the pounding roar of the Belleville mill, the silence seemed a delicious luxury. The mountains ahead turned rose in the waning light. Asuncion saw an eerie beauty in the bare emptiness of his “out there.” It was a land of grays, lavenders, and whites, so different from the moist greens of Nicaragua. “Does anyone live here?” she asked.

“No one. Very few ever come this way, so the ground isn’t all staked up and picked over. There’s a fair chance to find something good.”

So they were alone in their own world, far from the pull and tug of the rest of humanity, where the past did not exist and the petty worries of daily life lost all meaning. It felt wonderfully free. When they lay down very late on the sand, still a little short of the mountains, the stars swirled across the heavens like a bridal veil, and Asuncion thought she had never seen them so bright.

Early in the morning they reached

the mountains and began to climb through a narrow canyon with perpendicular walls higher than the highest cathedral. As the climb grew steeper and the path that a creek gone dry had carved at the base of the canyon turned rockier, Asuncion often needed to rest. At last, when the canyon seemed to end against a steep ridge toothed with rock, they turned to the side and came out on a slope overlooking a high mountain valley of adobe-colored sand.

During the days that followed, he prospected along the desert peaks that fringed the valley with Asuncion beside him, watching and learning. You looked for changes, notches in the regular march of the mountains, places where rocks of a different sort suddenly intruded. You looked for colors. Tiny blue-green shards sprinkled in the sand meant copper. Gray quartz rock that showed a dull sheen when you split off a piece with your pick might have gold. You searched through canyons, carefully examining rocks and ledges exposed by the storms of winter. And if you found a chunk that looked promising, then you tried to find the place where it had broken off. "Tracing the float," J.T. called this process of laboriously working your way up a slope, back bent, eyes to the ground, hacking at rocks with your pick.

"Why did it have to get dark so soon?" she said to J.T. as they sat by a small fire of sage coals, eating their meager supper. "I'm sure I saw gold in that rock we found by the bent tree. Let's go back there as soon as the sun comes tomorrow. We trace the float and then we find a—what you call it—a mother lode."

"You're already a prospector, sweetheart. We always think we're going to

find the mother lode tomorrow." He put his arm around her, and they watched the rising moon silver the sands of the high valley.

They found no mother lode the next day, nor the one after that. Perhaps they had hoped too much and hunted too long, for the last of their food and water was gone when they made their way down the canyon. The summer sun seemed to burn hotter as they descended from the cooler heights. This time they must cross the white shimmering expanse of the valley without waiting for nightfall.

They had covered a little more than half the distance when Asuncion began to feel dizzy. Her tongue seemed stuck to the roof of her dry mouth. Stopping to rest several times did not ease the pounding of her heart. Her steps dragged and slowed, and she sank to the white sand, unable to try any longer. J.T., a few steps ahead, turned back and knelt beside her. He tilted her chin upward, and the narrow blue eyes burned urgently into hers. "Sweetheart, you're going to get up and walk," he said. "You don't know the half of what you can do." Somehow she did as he said, got up, walked, and remembered.

They went back again and again, and Asuncion felt herself grow stronger each time. As far as he could walk, so could she. And she insisted that if she carried a heavier pack they could stay out longer. She saw now that what he said that first night in Belleville had been true: their real home was in the mountains. When winter came, she realized that she had not thought about leaving in a long time. Perhaps love was different than she had always imagined. Not the song and the rippling guitar music beneath her balcony, nor the flowery, impassioned words of the poem smuggled to her hand, nor even the fire in the blood. It was really much simpler. You stayed.

He showed her how to stake a claim with small rock towers marking the corners, how to set the dynamite charges in order to work the claim each year as American laws required. Without this work, you lost your right to keep it. She went with J.T. to the mining district recorder to see how all the information must be written down in a heavy book so no one could steal the claim away. As soon as she had been in America long enough, J.T. made her take out citizenship papers because a woman, even a child, could stake a mining claim herself if she was an American citizen. The next time Asuncion thought she had found the mother lode, he made her do these things all by herself. "Don't know a single blanket jackass prospector who could do it better," he said, and she recognized this as high praise.

HER CLAIM DID NOT TURN OUT TO BE THE MOTHER LODE. Indeed they usually found just enough to keep themselves "in bacon and beans," as J.T. put it, and for winters in Virginia City. In any case, no farmers came to sell strawberries anymore. Over the years Belleville had changed from the raw surge of life and the babble of all nations that shocked and excited her in those early days into a ghost of a town where the red dust lay undisturbed in the silent

streets. The Northern Belle mill had closed in 1884, shut down by lawyers, according to J.T., and he warned her about lawyers and banks. Instead of spending your money on lawyers or trusting it to banks, you should collect it in gold and bury it in the ground—or spend it.

Once they found a nice little pocket of gold and squandered everything they made on a grand spree in San Francisco. Most of the time they had no money to bury—or squander—but every day brought another chance to strike the mother lode, and the mountains clung with a thousand hands. When Asuncion left them, she soon caught herself wishing for the cathedral hush of the tall purple canyons, the hot blue sage-scented afternoons, and moonrise over the sand.

On Asuncion's insistence, they had shifted their prospecting journeys from the Pilot Mountains to the lower gentler Garfield Hills to the northwest because J.T. was not well. His freckled ruddy skin turned ashen, he lost weight until the lean ageless body seemed suddenly frail and old. He could walk only a short way without resting, and pains in his chest forced him to lie in the shade of a pinion tree while Asuncion traced the float up the canyons. That winter a sickness sent many in the Candelaria Hills to their beds coughing, weak, and feverish. J.T. was one of them.

In spite of her tenderest ministrations, he sank swiftly. At last he brushed the teacup she held to his lips aside, traced the outline of her face with wavering fingertips, and whispered, "Now, sweetheart, tell me who you really are."

So she sat beside him and told of a past now so far away that it seemed to have happened in another life. Everything. How it felt to be a woman in

Nicaragua, pampered yet confined within the courtyard of a great house. The marriage arranged by her family to a man who saw her as a prized possession to be displayed on certain occasions and spent his time with his mistresses. How she broke away from the walls of the courtyard, riding out on a black horse to meet her lovers. How her husband caught her at last and shot Rodrigo there on the floor of the old herdsman's hut in the forest. He ought to kill her too, he had said, his dark face twisted with fury, but he couldn't do it. Instead he lashed her naked back with his whip. Having nothing left but a will to survive in any way she could, she had fled for the ship to America, helpless, stripped of the life she understood, feeling forever stained with Rodrigo's blood. They had only meant to enjoy each other for a little while, but he had died for their pleasures. Here, in this other world where J.T. brought her, she had learned to become an American, a master on her own stage. Somewhere in the stillness of his mountains—she could not say exactly when—the burden of the past had fallen from her. "And with you, *mi corazon*, I find the love that stays." At last her story ended and she realized that sometime while she was speaking he had died.

After Asuncion and the last remnant of the old mining crowd buried J.T. in the Belleville cemetery, she knew what she must do. She would go to the mountains, even though a winter storm was blowing in. She decided she would hunt copper, for she had long thought this canyon showed more signs of copper than gold. Had J.T. not said himself that she could stake a claim as well as any single blanket jackass prospector? She realized suddenly how different she had become from the woman who had known no other way to live than by the favors of men, and realized also that this was what J.T. had meant for her. To know what she could do.

She did find copper. Not that day, not that winter, nor even the next year, but finally the moment came when the knife blade she rubbed on a blue-green streak sprinkled with vinegar showed copper coloring and she struck the ledge that could be developed into a mine. In time, she took the French-Canadian who had waited so long into her bed, and he served her well for many years, protecting her mines with his gun. After the turn of the century, a mining boom in central Nevada brought investors clustering hungrily around her mines, hoping for the next Tonopah, the next Goldfield. J.T. had always said such a day would come. She made the investors count out their payments in gold on the kitchen table in the old cabin. J.T. had taught her that. When someone mocked her as a "dumb greaser" or tried to take advantage of her in a mining deal, she smiled sweetly, said, "Me Spanish woman. Me no understand," and took advantage of him. J.T. had taught her that also.

People started calling her the copper queen. With each new mining sale, she put on her gold earrings and went for a royal spree in San Francisco, as was worthy of a queen. After the French Cana-

dian died in a gunfight at the Amant, the claim she had named for him, and those before him, and those still to come, but most of all for J.T., she usually bought young men in San Francisco to pleasure her for a time. One night she sat with one of these sleek youths in a restaurant beneath the glittering chandeliers that had dazzled her so long ago. "Tell me about these mines of yours," he said.

Asuncion knew he was imagining the bustle of men and machinery at the rich mines belonging to the copper queen. As for her, she was thinking of the mountains. Soon she would strap on her pack and head into the purple canyons to find another mine. Already the image of the snowy wall of the Sierra—against the deep blue of twilight as she had first seen it when she stepped out of the stage—had started sliding into her dreams. She thought of a young woman in black on the deck of a ship and a red-haired man with narrow blue eyes and a jaunty tilt to his cigar.

"My friend," she said softly, patting his smooth young wrist with a hand roughened by years of work in the mountains. "You could never imagine."



Descendent of a pioneer Nevada family, **SALLY ZANJANI** has written 75 articles and 10 nonfiction books on Nevada history, including award winners *Goldfield* and *Sarah Winnemucca*. She was elected first woman president of the Mining History Association.

