An Interview with
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about *González & Daughter Trucking Co.*

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Q. Where does the story of *González & Daughter Trucking Co.* come from?

A. Why I wrote *González & Daughter Trucking Co.* was not clear to me until after the book was finished, which is usually the case with everything I write. My approach at the time of writing was entirely intuitive, emotional, and subconscious. Asking the whys before I write only paralyzes me. I've noticed—*ex post*—that many of my stories respond to deep-rooted personal needs, fears, pain, doubts, and unresolved issues. Addressing them head-on, at a conscious level, is very frightening and counterintuitive. You don't decide to put your hand on the stove burner. It happens by accident. All you have to do is snoop around in the kitchen and suddenly... Ouch! The lesson, the why I did this, comes after the fact. So, if my answers sound too structured, it's because I've had to reconstruct the development process after the fact from an analytical perspective… Back to the question: you asked me where this story had come from. Well, I hurried to finish the manuscript a couple of days before my family and I went to Mexico City for the Christmas holidays in 2003. My intention was to give it to my father to read while we were visiting him and my mother. But in a tragic turn of events, he passed away unexpectedly of a heart attack on Christmas Eve. He never read a word of the novel.

Two months later, in Los Angeles, I was getting ready to submit the manuscript to publishers and thought that it would be a nice touch to send the package with air fresheners, the kind you hang from rearview mirrors, and a little toy truck. I knew exactly where to go. Whenever my father visited me in L.A., he'd visit a model train shop in Culver City and spend hours looking at the little trains in the tiny villages filled with people, cars, and trucks to scale. He had that kind of child in him. So, I bought several toy trucks and as I was standing in the parking lot, fishing in my purse for the keys and holding the bag of trucks, I burst into tears. It was only then that I realized I had written this book for my father. This was yet one more attempt to win him over, to prove to him I could be successful in spite of being a woman. Although I had already gained his respect when *Esperanza's Box of Saints* came out—he and my mother surprised me by showing up at the Sundance Festival, where the film, *Santitos*, based on my novel, won the Latin Cinema Award—I was still trying. It was like that was my default setting. I had written a novel that dealt

with a complex father-daughter relationship filled with gender double standards, profound filial love, and forgiveness. The story is about trucking and heavy-duty construction equipment, both themes my father loved. During my young years, he had owned a small fleet of trucks that hauled cranes and bulldozers he rented out to contractors. So, I found out that through this novel, I was speaking to my father.

Q. Why do you think that a novel about the relationship of a professor-turned-trucker with his daughter has been so successful?

A. As I hear people's comments about this novel, I find that father-daughter relationships are almost always very intricate, involving many kinds of contradictory feelings. Male readers have shared with me some of their stories about their daughters and they all seem to have many complicated levels. Women readers tell me in their emails that most of the issues I deal with in this book are common in their relationships with their fathers. My own relationship with my father was (and still is, even after his death) sometimes wonderful, sometimes difficult, sometimes plain confusing. Writing about it has helped me understand many of its complexities. I don't decide what to write about something based on popular topics or editorial trends. I prefer to write from an honest place, to see myself in the story and to feel every one of the feelings evoked by all the characters. By doing this, I suspect I've inadvertently placed a mirror somewhere in the pages of this novel in which readers have been able to see their own reflections. It's so hard to know why a novel is successful: you could write a masterpiece, but if it doesn't resonate with readers, it will end up catching dust on bookstore shelves. And who knows what's in readers' hearts? Most times I don't even know what's in my own heart.

Q. How did you come up with a character so multifaceted and so full of contradictions as Joaquín?

A. The fact that Joaquín, my lead male character, is a professor-turned-trucker probably originates in a deep wish of mine. My dad was a practical man. He had very few intellectual interests. He was an engineer. He didn't read, aside from *Scientific American* and *National Geographic*. We never talked about books. He was interested in my writing in the way a father is interested in his daughter's knitting. So, when I created a professor who becomes a trucker, I blended into a single character an array of conflicting real and desired traits in my father, or the father I longed him to be. That's why, I believe, contradiction is the essence of Joaquín: on one hand, he is a radical, a student activist fighting for democracy and equality, while later he becomes a possessive father who overprotects his daughter to the point of suffocation and who develops a relationship with her and with other women in his life based on gender double

standards. His impulsive personality adds to the conflicting way he relates to Libertad: how can he be such a loving father and suddenly turn to violence without warning? But that's not the only contradiction. In many instances he shows an outstanding courage, raising his girl on his own in the truck, while on other occasions he is a hopeless coward, allowing his fears and insecurities to take over his entire life, locking himself and his daughter up in a very unsafe, imaginary world where everyone else is out to get him. How complicated can the life of a paranoid trucker be, always having to look over his shoulder, keeping a constant eye on the rearview mirror?

Q. How about Libertad? Is she based on your own personality?

A. I've realized that for my characters to come alive, there needs to be a little (or a lot) of myself in them. Each of them is a composite of people I know, including myself. I spill into them many of my fears and desires, my hang-ups and my heartaches and then I set them in motion within the realm of a fictional story. I watch their lives unfold on my computer screen and sometimes, if I'm lucky, my own truth emerges. I get to answer some of my questions and deal with my issues by just letting them live. In this coming-of-age story, Libertad has quite a few of my own features, like my passion for telling stories, for reading books, and for traveling. But deeper down, she also struggles with gender expectations in her relationship with Joaquín, her father, and she feels comfortable with men and awkward with other women. That's why I wanted her to live in a world of men for the first part of her life, and then later, as a young adult, to be locked in a place where she would be forced to deal with other women, either a convent or a prison. I chose a prison as the setting for her to learn the value of friendship among women. Libertad is a prisoner of her father's paranoia and values, and does not emerge as the free woman she is meant to be until she gets incarcerated. For her, her family is a prison, and in prison she finds a family. This all leads me to another point: getting excessively forensic about what's true and what's fiction in this novel (or one might say any novel) is a bit self-defeating. The strands of autobiography and fiction are there, no doubt, but attempting to unravel them doesn't add much to the understanding of the characters and the story, in my view: one has to take the story at face value, as it were, and take it in as a whole, as a composite entity. Of course, I wouldn't dare to preempt the critics' right to do their job as they see fit.

Q. Let's get into the story, or actually the two stories: the one of Libertad and Joaquín González on the road, and the one of Libertad in the women's prison, which happens later in her life. Why did you choose to tell both stories in parallel, rather than chronologically?

A. Memory and the here and now intertwine all the time. The past is very much in the present, and the present quickly becomes the past. As we live, we remember and we create two realities: one outside and one inside of us. The one inside, our memory, becomes subjective when it goes through the sieve of our experience, so it only lives in each one of us until we share it. It is our own truth, whether the event actually happened in the same way we remember it or not. There is The Truth, and then there is The Other Truth, our own, the one that we believe when we tell stories, anecdotes, and memoirs. It is our autobiographical experience. Libertad's memory supplies the matter for the stories she tells in her Library Club. Are they true? Are they fictional? Does it matter? This is when the truth becomes slightly blurred: you have the prison story, which is told by an omnipresent third-person narrator who gives the illusion of telling a factual, objective story, and the road story, told in first person from Libertad's point of view, creating a sense of subjectivity and intimacy. The structure of two stories braided into one and at the end a rubber band that ties them together in a single conclusion gave me the opportunity of merging the truth and the other truth in a fleeting little space between reality, fiction and memory.

Q. Libertad makes sense of what led to her incarceration by narrating her story to other inmates in a weekly book club. Why did you use that device?

A. When I talk about past events, my memory morphs, transforms itself. The moment I put an image, a feeling, or a sensation from my past into words, it becomes a narration and I automatically turn into a storyteller. Random, jumbled memories become sequential, structured: first this, then that. I answer the what, the who, the why, the when and the how. Language shapes my memory in a way I can understand it, and by retelling it I notice that I experience it differently. Telling my story is—deliberately or not—an act of self-presentation and self-understanding. Libertad herself is desperately trying to re-create a vivid rendition of her past, to bring light to her life, to come to terms with the events that brought her to prison and ultimately to tell (and believe) her own story in a way that will allow her to forgive and to feel forgiven. She does this by narrating her memories in a stream-of-consciousness way because she's a natural storyteller. She tweaks, she exaggerates, she omits, and she reconfigures the truth as she remembers it because she can't help herself: storytelling is her way of dealing with the painful or joyful events that have shaped her life. She is seeking understanding rather than factual truth.

Q. Why did you start the story during the 1968 Mexico City National University siege?

A. At that time, you had Paris, Berkeley, Rome, and Prague. Nineteen sixty-eight was a pretty momentous year with students rebelling mostly against the establishment and demanding freedom. University campuses were the meeting places where demonstrations took place. Back then if you wanted social change, you had to be there physically. No Twitter, Facebook, or blogging. What happened in Mexico was different. I wanted to pay a tribute to the victims of the most shameful event of Mexico's contemporary history. I think all Mexicans have been hurt by it and have mourned as a nation in many ways. These events marked a turning point. Because the government destroyed all evidence, twisted the facts of what really happened, and covered up whoever was behind the famous October 2 Student Massacre and all related events that took place in 1968—among which is the UNAM Siege—they have become part myths, part dark mysteries in the history of my country of birth. Everyone seems to have their own interpretation. I was a girl when it happened and I have only vague personal memories of the events. What I know about the UNAM Siege is only hearsay and whatever a few brave Mexican intellectuals, like Elena Poniatowska and Octavio Paz, have addressed in their essays. I did hear that someone had stayed behind, trapped in a restroom for twelve days, while the soldiers occupied the university. I don't know if this is true, but in the novel I wanted this man to be Joaquín, a victim from the start.

Q. Libertad pretends to read from books to her fellow inmates in a weekly book club, and leaves them with an unresolved plot point, as in Scheherazade, to keep them coming back for more. Did you use that device deliberately?

A. Rather than the Scheherazade comparison, I'd like to think of Libertad's narrative structure as the one used in soap operas. Libertad grew up with books, she knew how to tell a story, but she also watched TV at truck stops and picked up different storytelling techniques. Cliff-hangers and page-turners are as old as humankind. Remember that Dickens and Balzac published in installments that people subscribed to. We as readers, as the audience, want to be left wondering what's going to happen next because we like to speculate. It's a win-win game we enjoy playing with the author and our friends: if we guess right and the story goes where we thought it would, we feel very smart; if we guess wrong, we feel surprised—mostly pleasantly surprised—and think that the author is really smart. In any case, leaving your reader in a key plot point until the next chapter or episode is like giving him or her a gift, an opportunity to exercise her or his imagination, a chance to participate in the story.

Q. You use many different voices: the straight third-person narration, Libertad's voice when she is pretending to read, the truckers' CB dialogue, the prisoners' jargon, Joaquín's monologue, and Libertad's journal entries. Why did you choose to tell the story in all those voices?

A. I've heard creative writing teachers tell their students that if they choose third-person narration, or first-person narration, they should stay with it throughout the story, that they're not supposed to switch around. I find this practice very limiting. You may want to have a disembodied third-person narrator for a certain part of the story, or a detached, almost God-like, distant observer narrator, or even a body-snatching narrator who gets inside your characters and knows everything about them. Or you may want to hear the internal voice of one or another character and make him or her speak in monologue, confession, prayer, or whatever works. You may even want to use different language palettes and lingos, have your characters advance the story through their dreams, letters, diary entries, songs, and poems. In doing so, you reveal their secrets, their wants, their needs, their fears. *González & Daughter Trucking Co.* had to be told this way: how else could I have accomplished the different layers of consciousness in each character, the exploration into subcultures like the prisons or the trucking world, or the two-strand narration of Libertad's past and present. I needed a third-person narrator to tell the here and now in prison, but I wanted Libertad to tell her story in her own voice, through the Library Club readings, because ultimately it is her memory of the past events that I'm interested in, not the actual facts of what happened. I also wanted her inner self to come through, so I made her write a journal. In between chapters I have bits of conversations between anonymous truckers talking on their CB radio. They're talking about Libertad and Joaquín, mostly gossip. I always wonder what people say about you once you leave the room. These tidbits of conversations are just that. It's an added dimension to my characters: what other people think about them. I also included bits of conversations among inmates for the same effect. And I use trucker lingo and prison lingo in a very precise way. Every word counts. I did extensive research in order to write this dialogue accurately. I want to give the readers the feeling that they are actually eavesdropping on the conversation, catching the CB signal in the airwaves, but always being very careful not to alienate them, so I use the lingo in context to help them figure out on their own what the truckers are saying.

Q. You write about truckers and prisons. What kind of research did you conduct in order to write *González & Daughter Trucking Co.*?

A. I really started researching for this book many years ago, as a little girl, when I wasn't allowed to ride on my father's trucks. Of course, the very thing that is denied to you becomes the object of your obsession. So, I began noticing trucks, mesmerized by those giants hauling stuff back and forth on the highways. I knew I had to explore this fascinating theme in my writing at some point. As an adult, after I decided to write a father-daughter trucking story, I traveled around the United States with truckers, sharing their day-to-day experiences, learning their CB lingo, delivering cargo, dealing with mechanical problems, teamster politics, bad weather, and learning to enjoy truck-stop chow. I purposely did not bring a voice recorder, a camera, or a notepad. I didn't interview anyone. Whatever I forgot wasn't interesting enough to remember. It's very easy to fall into the investigative reporting tone. I've read novels where the research seeps through and gets in the way of the story. The book is not Trucking 101. It's a fictional story and as such I must assume that all my characters live in that world day in and day out and don't need to analyze their life or even acknowledge it. The magic happens when the topic is well researched, but you as a reader don't notice it. It's like a well-done garment: the last thing you want to see is the stitching that holds it together. The year I spent on the roads of America, on and off, was an intense and gratifying part of my work. Researching for both of my novels had made me realize that I'm not a writer only when I'm typing away. I'm a writer 24/7, in ways that are not always apparent to me.

Q. What about the prison research?

A. I always want my characters to take my readers to exciting places, to discover worlds that are unfamiliar and alluring in some mysterious way. In my first novel, *Esperanza's Box of Saints,* I went into the world of prostitutes and wrestlers. In *González & Daughter Trucking Co.*, I got into the world of truckers and prison inmates. Since a good part of the story happens in a Mexican prison, I spent time in different women's institutions, both in Mexico and California. I've had the chance to meet inmates from all walks of life, from petty criminals to CEOs of defrauded corporations, to Leslie Van Houten, one of the Manson girls. To get into the California Institution for Women, I volunteered with the nuns at the Archdiocese of Los Angeles Detention Ministry in their program "Get On the Bus" and helped get more than two hundred children to visit their incarcerated moms on Mother's Day. It's a yearly program and now I'm a regular volunteer. I also visited the Central California Women's Facility and the Valley State Prison for Women, both in Chowchilla. To get into an infamous Tijuana co-ed prison that has since been razed by the new

Mexican authorities—"El Pueblito"—I contacted their school principal (there was a school for children and adults) and brought my film *Santitos* along with sacks of popcorn to screen to the inmates. I discovered that it's very difficult to get into a prison, but once I found a way and was able to visit these corrections institutions, I was deeply affected by what I saw. If everyone had to spend a few days inside a prison before voting in favor or against initiatives and laws, the criminal justice system would be very different.

Q. Did you notice a difference between the American and the Mexican prisons?

A. The differences are dramatic. In the U.S. the facilities are clean, modern, adequate. In Mexico they are inhumane, overcrowded and deplorable. In the U.S. there are control systems in place that ensure order and safety. In Mexico you can buy almost anything if you have the money or the means to barter, even privileges like private quarters and services and, in certain cases, freedom. If you are rich you could afford a maid or a bodyguard. If you are poor you become the maid or the bodyguard. High levels of corruption cause this anomaly. In the end, Mexican prisons are a mini-cosmos that mirrors Mexican society with all its hierarchies, customs, structures, and inequities. The Tijuana prison allowed children to live with their incarcerated parents until age seven, when they had to leave and stay with family members. It had a day-care center. You could buy drugs for less money than the going rate outside; it had well-lit tennis courts so white-collar inmates could play at night; you could have small appliances in your room, like microwave ovens, TVs, and coffee makers; and you could even own a pet. The Mexican prison system is slowly changing, but wardens are still being murdered by drug cartels and corruption is a hard-to-cure malady. I wanted to portray a surreal Mexican prison where all oddities and eccentricities were taken in a matter-of-fact way by the characters. They seek a sense of normality that will allow them to live out their lives within those walls. Libertad enjoys her life in prison almost more than the life she led before she landed behind bars because she has what she couldn't have on the road: stability, friends, a home, three square meals, safety, and the freedom to imagine and to be herself.

Q. Why did you choose to call the heroine Libertad?

A. Given names are blessings or curses. My own name is heavily loaded: Amparo means shelter, and that's how many perceive me, with good and bad connotations. I enjoy giving my characters names filled with meaning, just to mess with them. It's simple irony. Libertad means freedom. Esperanza (from my first novel *Esperanza's Box of Saints*) means hope. Other characters have no names, just handles. This is common in the trucking world and in the prison life. I also had fun with that.

Q. This book presents a very passionate look into the lives of two displaced characters, Libertad and her father, Joaquín, who have made their home on the road. What is the role of literature and education in their lives?

A. Libertad did not go to school. Ever. But she was not home-schooled, either. She was truck-schooled by her father, an ex-professor-turned-trucker on the run. I wanted to create an intensive little lab in that truck cab where these two characters coexist, learn from each other, and spend hours on end together, side by side, sharing anxieties and paranoia, putting up with one another's fears and desires, reading books, making up stories, and becoming more and more dependent on each other, until something gives.

Q. Something definitely gives. There is a lot of love and resentment between Libertad and Joaquín, so there is a lot of forgiveness needed as well. Can you elaborate on the theme of forgiveness?

A. There are no villains in this story, only people dealing poorly with their own weaknesses, fears, personal prisons, and the effect this has on them and the people around them. Who are they supposed to forgive, the one being forgiven or the one forgiving? What is forgiveness for? These are questions that come to mind when you read *González & Daughter Trucking Co.* Libertad must forgive herself for the crime she committed. She must forgive her father for making her life a prison, for mistreating her, for inflicting on her his own paranoia. Joaquín must forgive himself and find forgiveness from Libertad. But the act of redemption is not an on-off switch. It's a long process through which the offender and the offended must slowly come to terms with the fact that no matter how much they twist and bend their memory, the events that led them toward guilt or resentment are not going to change. This is true here and everywhere. It's part of the human condition. It's universal. By forgiving, the forgiver frees himself from the other person's demons. It's an act of liberation. It's the way to move on, out of the past and into the future carrying a lighter load. When you forgive you let go of the impossible wish for a better past.

Q. Libertad starts a book club at the Mexicali prison where she is incarcerated. You started a book club at the California Institution for Women in Corona, California. Was this truth imitating fiction?

A. "Wings for the Soul" was a gift of imagination for the inmates who volunteered their stories with me while I was researching the novel. There I was, in the spotlight, getting attention from the press, traveling on book tour, and these women who inspired me so much were locked up. I wondered how was I going to thank them. So, I contacted Sister Suzanne Jabro, founder of Women and Criminal Justice Network, and proposed the idea of a book club in which

I would donate two hundred copies of my books in English and Spanish to the prison. Two months later I would come to the prison for a two-hour session to discuss specific topics from the novel, among which was forgiveness, family ties, friendship among women, and so on. The authorities at the California Institution for Women welcomed the idea and we all implemented it together. "Wings for the Soul" was the first author-attended prison book club and we did it twice with much success, first with *González & Daughter Trucking Co.* and then with *Esperanza's Box of Saints*.

Q. Would you consider *González & Daughter Trucking Co.* a border story, an immigration story?

A. Not in the sense of the typical immigrant experience. Joaquín does not migrate to the United States in search of a better life. He had a better life in Mexico, where he had a teaching career, a family, an identity, but he leaves because he commits a crime. He is a man on the run and ends up in the States by chance. He does fall into the illegal alien category because technically he is one, but his is not the "typical" case of searching for a better life. In fact, there are as many immigration stories as there are migrants, and each one is better than the next. The border is vast and unique, and the stories that spawn from it are incredible. Everyone who risks everything to come here has their own personal reasons. There is so much out there written about it that it could well qualify as a genre in its own right. I didn't want to focus on Joaquín's immigration experience as much as on his personal transformation as a character who loses everything and only hangs on to his daughter to explain and justify his existence. It's extreme, but illustrative. I wanted to portray a Mexican man and an American, Caucasian woman having a daughter together in the United States, and then have the mother disappear from the girl's life. How does the father deal with the girl's education, how does he solve the cultural gaps and holes and misinterpretations? This is a reality in America. Mexican parents are raising their American children and most of the time they don't know how to deal with the situation because they were raised under different ethics and values, different standards and principles. They are not fluent in their children's language, can't supervise homework, they are at a loss when their teenage children reject them and make them feel ignorant; they don't understand why the elderly are not respected by the young, or why children leave home for college, or why they have sex so freely and casually. The gap is not only generational, it's cultural and its effects are devastating for immigrant families. On the other hand, it's entirely normal for the children of immigrants to want to blend in, to acquire their new culture, to lose their parents' accent. Yes, border-crossing stories are frightening, but what comes afterward, raising your children in a culture that's not the one you grew up in and that you barely understand, that is harrowing. I write about this topic in my third novel, *LA Weather*.

Q. Speaking about border culture, how do you approach the language issue in your novels?

A. As a linguist, I feel very fortunate to live in a time and place where I can witness one of the most significant waves of external influence in the history of the Spanish language. You have the eight-hundred-year Arab invasion of Spain that gave Spanish many wonderful words like *almohada*. Then came the Conquest, bringing Spanish to the New World and inundating it with Nahuatl words like *chocolate*. And now, with the unprecedented influx of Mexican culture into the United States, you have *Spanglish*. But the presence of the Spanish language in the United States, more so in California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Florida, and Texas, is older than English. Spanish was spoken in the United States before English was. Just see the names of the states I just mentioned. They all have Spanish and Nahuatl roots. But the astonishing phenomenon has happened just lately, in the past thirty years, with the boom of the Spanish language media—over three hundred radio stations and several TV networks that have helped spread this hybrid language that has created words like *carpeta* (for carpet), or *draigualero* (for drywall installer). Because language is dynamic and no law can stop it, we just need to sit back and enjoy this wild ride, language purists be damned. As for myself, I want to portray it in my books, in my films, because I am fascinated by it. In the Spanish edition of *González & Daughter Trucking Co.* the use of *Spanglish* is more evident than in the English edition, and in the film version I am producing, I really go overboard with the use of *Spanglish*.

Q. Why write a screenplay, why make a movie of *González & Daughter Trucking Co.*?

A. I want my stories to continue changing. Once the book is published, you can't rewrite it, add, delete, retell. By writing the English version of the novel, then the Spanish translation, then the screenplay and then the film, I get several chances to tell this story in different ways. The relationship between the author and the reader of a novel is intimate and personal. Only the two are involved. The reader rewrites the story as he reads, imagining characters and situations based on the "memory bank" inside his head. But the relationship between the audience and the storyteller in the film is broader because so many more people are involved in supplying their own versions of the story, like the director, actors, wardrobe designers, makeup artists, set designers, musicians, and so on. You deliver your script to the director and sit back to watch magic happen. That is the beauty of this collective art. I learned this when my film *Santitos* was made and found the process so intriguing and fascinating that I wanted to do it again. I have a parallel project in development, also based on *González & Daughter Trucking Co*. It's an eight-part limited television series titled *Mudflap Girl*, Libertad's handle. Another one of my projects in development is the television series based on my upcoming novel, *LA. Weather.* In this town you must have a pipeline of projects in order to get only one made.

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