

Elsa

*With little money, and feeling disconnected from her friends and family in Mendoza, Argentina, Elsa pleaded with her husband to leave North Charleston and return home. Eventually, she came around to the idea of living in the United States: “It’s like when the horse neighs and gets surly, and they tame him. It is strong up until he walks, until he adapts.” At the time of this interview, Elsa was thirty-five years old.*

E: Anita had rented a trailer for us.

ML: The little place was all yours?

E: Yes, she had rented a trailer for us and we had no idea what a trailer was. And I think I remember when I saw it I said, “But this is a bus (laughs) Oh my God Alberto.” Anita had made it all beautiful; she bought little Alberto a bed and she had done everything to make it real.

ML: What were the first things, the first signs that made you realize you were in a different place? Beyond the language spoken by the people, but things that gave you the impression, “Wow, this is different.”

E: It may seem dumb, but the enormity of things. Everything was so big in size and everything; a sachet of milk was a gallon of milk.

ML: A sachet of milk, what else? Tell me, what other things?

E: A packet of butter—I don’t know, a packet was now a kilogram of butter, everything was in larger sizes. The distances seemed enormous and we didn’t have a car, so we had to walk, and I said, “My God, this is...” In Argentina we didn’t have a car either, but I got around easily on the bus.

ML: Who was the one that started working? Because you had to take care of yourselves once you arrived.

E: Actually my mom was the one who... Well, I’ll say it was my mom who gave me the money to get here. My family made the enormous effort to send me; she brought me—. At the time she gave me five hundred dollars and it was gone in two weeks, three weeks. I spent the money and Alberto didn’t have a job, so we didn’t know what to do. But always, well, I always say that God—I am a very faithful person—he puts the right people in your life at the right moment. There was a pair of Americans who greatly welcomed us. Glenda, June, and Den were the first American people who extended their hands to us.

ML: How did you meet them?

E: They approached, well, in the United States, as in Mendoza, I had the habit of going outside and sitting by the door, and they passed by. They greeted me and so I greeted them and the children, and they approached little Alberto and brought us toys. They were kind. I’ve got to say the first people I met here were very nice; they brought us groceries I believe. Their names were

Glenda and June and they came up and started to—they brought dictionaries to try to communicate with me and with Alberto. Alberto is very sociable so we then became friends and they helped us a ton.

With no knowledge of English, I explained to her that my husband needed work. How did I do it? I don't know, I guess with the dictionary in hand. And the next-door neighbor—I remember he had a slot in his blinds, and I told my husband, “Alberto, this guy seems crazy because he is always looking out the window.” He is the one who gave a job to my husband; Glenda and June were friends of Den.

ML: Den the one who spied through his window.

E: Den who spied through his window. When we met him we met another person sent from God, and I say this because he, without knowing us and without being our friend, found a job for Alberto.

ML: What type of work was it?

E: Alberto didn't know how to do much more than silk screening, so when he took him to do carpentry he told him, Alberto told him he didn't know how to do much, but he was ready to learn, so they left in the truck. I remember this day very clearly. So he worked with him and we became great friends. He didn't have any family here so we became his family and he became a part of ours too, an excellent person. I cleaned his trailer and he allowed me to use his washing machine, I cooked at night and he would come and eat with us, I washed his clothes. It was like we helped each other mutually. We all ate together outside and it was good.

ML: And you communicated as well as you could?

E: Yes, he bought a translator, one of those electronic translators that speak and such, and if not we used signs, and we laughed a lot. I should also say these times were tough. I packed my husband's bags every week to leave; I waited on him with bags packed.

ML: Because you had to stay—

E: Yes, I stayed—

ML: You stayed by yourself during the day, right?

E: Yes completely, without cable, only one channel or two. With those few channels I could pick up, I didn't understand anything and I had to go to the store with the little stroller. Little Alberto had, I remember he had a little canopy, and half of his legs were good and brown and the other half white. He would burn on the walk to the supermarket.

ML: And you had to do this alone with—

E: Yes.

ML: How did Alberto respond to you?

E: I told Alberto “Let’s go please,” and he told me, “No, we can’t go, we have to stick with it. Come on, we are already here, I’m already working.” But not me, I didn’t want to stay. I guess, I don’t know, sometimes we are similar to animals.

ML: What do you mean?

E: Like the horse—it’s like when the horse neighs and gets surly, and they tame him. It is strong up until he walks, until he adapts.

ML: And you feel like you were tamed? You wanted to jump like a horse, but you were tamed?

E: I think necessity did it.

ML: You say necessity, what were the things that you started to see that affected your family? What did you start putting on the other side of the balance, as you said, to tame you? What were the other things you started to see?

E: Well it was that little Alberto didn’t lack anything. The diapers were affordable, the milk and everything he needed, he had.

Elsa, Interview by Marina López. June 6, 2012