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HOW MY LIFE CHANGES (AS USUAL) WHEN GENE HACKMAN COMES TO TOWN TO SHOOT A MOVIE AND SIMULTANEOUSLY WE GET TO SHOOT MY BOSS DOWN

By

Mary McHale Wood

Basically I like my job. It's my supervisor I find unbearable, although he is often hilarious.

Today, for example. I come into the office at 8:25 a.m. as usual, and he says, "Oh, good, Ms. O'Malley. I'm glad you're here on time."

"Was I supposed to come in late today?" I ask.

He bows his head low on his chicken-like chest and I go into my cubicle with him following closely.

"I need you to write a message for the governor immediately; it has to get signed and go out in the mail by noon -- do you know how to get our *Correo* (Mail) to do Federal Express?"

"Yes, Donald. Did you have a good trip?" He is just back from a vacation in Tennessee with his wife and kids; he seems to get three weeks off every two months or so.

He bows his head again, even more deeply. "Sort of. The plane trip was good, except for the food. But don't get me started."

The phone rings and he jumps.

"If that's my stockbroker, I'll take it in my office." He scurries off.

I am laden with my lunchbox, purse, a sack of 12 packs of microwave popcorn and a cup of coffee from La Cocina Criolla, but no, he can't answer the phone. That's women's work and Donald O'Donnell is a misogynist of the first order. I haven't met her, but I'm sure his wife must be a MRogynist in self-defense.

It's Maritza calling in sick. I pass the call to Donald and hear him scream, "Oh, no! Sick again!?"

As I was saying, I like my job, but I can't stay because I know I'm going to walk off on Donald's next blow-up and this time, he'll accept my resignation.

The job might seem like a lot of important bullshit: letters for the governor's signature to lesser White House functionaries (including Hillary) -- Donald writes the missives that go to the president; to prime ministers of unimportant countries (again, Donald does the ones that go to important countries); to Boy Scouts; speeches for ditzy agency chiefs; translations of Tourism brochures and so on. And I do all the research and first drafts for the governor's speeches in English, but Donald O'Donnell changes just enough to make them his own, adding a "deeply" here and a "magnificent" there, and leaves enough of my stuff in them to make him -- and, of course, the governor -- look inspired.

I look at the headlines of *The Morning Glory* as I drink my coffee, and

then smirk at the cutline under a front-page photo: "Secretary of State harassed during public appearance at university." Typical. The newspaper is going down the tubes fast, especially since it expanded into 10 other editions twice a day (on an island that measures 115 by 50 miles); it's not even adequate for use as toilet paper because the newsprint is so irregularly applied.

Donald bursts out of his office and squeaks to a halt in front of my desk. "You don't have time to read the paper, Maggie! Please!" He whines and tears fill his eyes. He is a cartoon of himself. "That Knights of Columbus message has to go out now! And it has to be perfect! Oh, why does this always have to happen to meeee," he cries, doubled over and squeezing his hands between his knees.

This is a man in his 50s, who plays hours of Solitaire on taxpayers' time, and if it weren't for all his dire faults, he'd even be attractive.

"Nothing is happening to you, Donald," I say quietly. "You will have the message a half-hour after I finish skimming the headlines. If the Grand Knight died in his sleep or got caught with Monica's little sister, we want to be aware of that when we write the message, no?"

"Oh, god," says Donald. "A smart-ass. Do you really expect that kind of news to be in *The Morning Glory*?" The fax machine telephone rings and he jumps. "Why is the facsimile machine making that noise?"

The secretary of the Health advisor, with whom we share office space, springs to the rescue. "It's out of paper."

I give him the KofC message at 9:30 and he comes scurrying out of his office 25 minutes later with the page all marked up as usual.

"I changed this 'deeply' to 'profoundly' and moved the 'deeply' down

here because it alliterates nicely with 'distinguished' -- you understand my reasoning, don't you? Why did you put 'fellow' knights when he clearly asks for a message for his 'brother' knights?"

"If I had put 'brother' you would have complained that I used the same word the Grand Knight employed in his letter asking for the message, Donald," I say calmly. We go through this every day, but today I don't feel like laughing. All of my computer files were wiped out yesterday and --

"Did you get your files back?"

"No, Donald. Percy is checking the backups, but I suspect the backups are a thing of the past."

"What did you DO to erase all of your files? They don't just disappear on their own, you know."

"Donald," I say in a low voice. "I would be delighted to exchange computers, software, the whole system with you; I would be more than happy to have my every key-stroke monitored to prove that it was not 'operator error.' I have been using computers for 15 years and not once had such a disaster ever happened to me before yesterday."

"But it MUST be your fault. Anyway, we don't have time for this. I liked this term in the KofC message, 'your illustrious standard-bearer' -- did you think of that yourself?"

I stare at him until he meets my eyes. He looks fearful and stammers. "It's something I would come up with, that's all. I thought you found it in my files."

So the whole day goes like that, no different from any other day, really, but I am getting fed up. I have been interviewing for other jobs; however, I screwed up during the last interview I had with Banco Peninsular when I said

I'd saved the Smithsonian Institution's ass in the preface of a freelance editing job.

I should have said "keester," not "ass." Or nothing at all. And why did I speak in English, anyway? The whole interview was in Spanish but that one line, which gave me away.

The interviewer, unfortunately, happened to be a former employee I used to supervise at *The Morning Glory* and whose deadlines I always set days earlier because her prose was so tortured it took copy editors ages to decipher it.

Later, Donald asks me to get him the chief of staff on the phone to tell him he should write a response to the Washington Post editorial about the Culture Institute scandal. I say, "Did you think of that yourself?" He says, "No comments from the peanut gallery, thank you. Just get him on the phone and pass him to me." I say, "Did you break your fingers?" He screams and I quickly get the chief of staff and pass the call.

By the end of the day, I have quite recovered my sense of well-being, especially when I hear about Donald's car troubles; he leaves early so he can have two flat tires fixed. Also, I found an error in a letter he was about to send to the governor -- a "that" instead of a "than" -- and, though I blush to admit it, I gloated big-time. Donald O'Donnell brings out the worst in me, and that is another reason I wish to find employment elsewhere.

On my way home, my *deambulante* homeless schizo friend Denny greets me, "Hiya, Maggie, anybody you want me to beat up for you today?" He looks like a Canadian lumberjack, quite a bit younger than I and a lot stronger. Denny is waiting for Father Johnnie's shelter to open so he can start over, but we're still a million or so short.

I say, "Yeah, Denny, I wish you'd punch my boss's lights out." We laugh and I buy him an ice from a *piragua* wagon in the plaza.

After trudging up the 56 steps to my apartment on the third floor of 169 Calle Santa Olaya -- two blocks away from La Fortaleza, the governor's mansion where I work in Old San Gría, the colonial capital city -- I snag a Corona from the fridge, squeeze a wedge of lime into it just because I planted the lime tree myself (I know no one in Mexico drinks Corona that way but it makes any beer taste better), and trudge up another 18 steps to the rooftop.

I'm sitting on the edge watching the sun go down just east of the cathedral (built 500 years ago) when I hear that chopper again. My binoculars are trained on a frigate bird soaring over the bay when the white helicopter crosses my line of vision. I wave at it out of habit -- I wave to tugboats, cruise and cargo ships, and small aircraft alike, but I never see anyone waving back.

This chopper has been whirling around at the same time every day for the past week and all it has to identify it are numbers: N336621CW. I think it can't have anything to do with the movie they're filming at Casa Cruzada, Ponce de León's residence way back when, because it never quite gets that far, as far as I can tell. And it's not the gov's whirligig; she only goes out on the island to rub shoulders with the people on Fridays, and then she stays out, going directly to the chief executive's hideaway in Fajardo.

The sunset is spectacular, as usual. (I may say "as usual" a lot, but nothing usual is, truly.) Another haiku pops up:

The bright sun goes down,
a nipple flaming on the
tip of a white cloud.

"Maggie! *¿Está bello el sol?* Is the sun beautiful?" shouts a voice from the street. Sara H. Smith, another of my homeless friends. I'm certain it's an alias, but I am letting her lead. I just hope she doesn't ask to come up. She's okay if you're upwind of her -- she has a curious kind of dignity and is more coherent than Donald -- but I am rather lax about house hygiene in general, and I would have to do a major cleaning if she only walked by the door. (Not for nothing is my kitchen art cobwebby: a poster blaring that a clean house is the sign of a disturbed mind.)

The chopper is still buzzing around when my cartoonist friend yells up from the street in his Elmer Fudd voice. I throw down the keys and he dashes up all 74 steps. "You forgot to stop for a beer!" I say in Spanish. Alejandro, who looks like a handsome version of Stan Laurel, scratches his head just like him.

"No, no, I can't stay. I have to pick up some groceries and take them over to my mother's."

Alejandro sits on the ledge and bumps my feet, causing me to cry out when one of my knee injuries opens.

"*Gringuita*, what happened to your knees? Both of them! It looks like you have a knee on top of each knee, they're so swollen!"

"That was last week. I was looking up at the sky and walking at the same time, and fell over a non-parking obstacle -- you know, those low posts they stick in the oddest places."

"Both knees?"

"No, the week before, I fell over a planter in the sidewalk -- another no-parking obstacle --"

"What were you looking at then?" says Alejandro.

"The bay."

"*Dios mío, Gringuita*, you don't learn, do you." He tweaks my nose.

"I'm flunking out of the School of Hard Knocks," I say and immediately regret it because he's not familiar with that term and I have to explain it.

We marvel over the colors and the clouds. "How would you rate this sunset?" asks Alejandro.

"I'd give it a 9-and-a-half. The cathedral hides part of it now."

"Do you want me to blow the cathedral to kingdom come?" Alejandro's eyes twinkle and so do mine as I answer, "Happy Easter!"

The chopper circles close and Alejandro shouts at me, "Do you have a new lover?"

I look at him askance and he points at the helicopter.

"Hah, I wish! You know I've been celibate since we called it quits two years ago," I say. "I'm screwed and celibate and it's not a happy combination."

I invite him for a supper of leftovers, rice stewed with octopus, garbanzos, olives, red and green pepper, garlic, mushrooms and a few other goodies plus avocado; he licks his lips wistfully but says his mother is waiting and continues his way down the stairs to the street with my keys. I lower the basket on a rope and he tosses them in after locking the door; then I haul the basket up.

After supping, I go down to the Plaza de Armas for a T at the Q, ginger tea at the *quiosquito*, and greet the regulars and irregulars, who include the assistant secretary of state, a Puerto Rican jazz pianist who played keyboards with the Beach Boys in the '70s, a couple of architects playing Spades -- one

looks like somebody famous, and sometimes the resemblance is not intentional), a street-cleaner who looks like a black version of Arnold Schwarzenegger, and a painter known for reviving Manuela Sáenz, Simón Bolívar's liberator and longest-lasting lover.

Sitting on the lip of the fountain is a pair of men in clothes that are too perfectly casual for the persons in them to be tourists. They seem to be staring at my knees. I turn around and go home.

Before bed, I do my usual nine minutes or so -- that's all I can stand -- of scales on the guitar, just to keep my finger-callouses up, and I sing a song or two. "*Boricua en la luna*" is heartbreakingly sweet but it only breaks my voice, so, fuming, I light up a Pall Mall unrepentant.

I dredge my memory for one of my own songs, but I have to sing it an octave lower, and until I find my footing, as it were, I am jumping from one octave to the other, with a few lovely clear notes:

All the news that's fit to print
would fill perhaps a page;
the rest is murder, rape and theft
and other stories of people's rage.

News of the past in the future will be,
witness the plebiscite.
Si no es Cordero it's another you see
who takes the heat when there is no light.

The lights go out for days on end
and that includes their nights.
Not a drop of water for anyone;
infrastructure lows have reached new heights.

And so on.

As I put my guitar away, a Guild acoustic I sweet-talked all the shipping charges off a few years ago, I notice a pause in the noise from the street. Then the usual blather from the bar on the other side of the home of the second most powerful person (I work for the most powerful) on this

Caribbean island flows forth, obliterating the silence.

The next day, Donald O'Donnell announces to Maritza and me that he is in "speech mode" and is not to be disturbed for any reason whatsoever -- nothing, nothing, NOTHING! do we understand?

"What if it's the White House?" asks Ms. Ritz, a/k/a La RRRReetz. Actually, the White House does call from time to time.

"Get the name and number and take a message and be sure you get the name spelled right and the correct number." Donald's voice has the tempo of an AK-47.

"What if there's a fire?" I say, and Maritza's eyes light up.

"No -- ohhhh," he whines, "don't be riDICKulous...." His voice fades out tearfully as he retreats into his office.

"Oh, please, God, let there be a fire, an earthquake or a terrorist, so we can evacuate and leave Donald to his fate," says Maritza, her elfin face mischievous over chubby hands shackled in rings ^{and} folded in prayer.

"But Maritza," I admonish her, "such disasters aren't selective -- they would destroy us, too, not just Donald."

"Oh, Margaret, don't be so persnickety!" she wails, reaching for the phone just as it rings.

She asks who's calling and buzzes Donald automatically, then cringes. Suddenly his door slams open and he bursts out. "How many times do I have to tell you to get it through your stupid heads that I DON'T WANT TO BE INTERRUPTED!"

"Whoops," says La Reetz, watching him coolly as he stumbles back into his smoke-laden lair. "Looks like he's on the sauce early today."

I, ever the naïf, ask, "He drinks?"

"Like the proverbial dog," says Ms. Ritz.

" 'Dog'?" I am an echo but I don't mind playing fall guy for Maritza because she's often hilarious -- on purpose.

"Yeah, as a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool returns to his folly. Proverbs Chapter Something Verse Something Else. Da Bible!"

Her buzzer sounds. "Yes, Donald."

I hear her end of the conversation. "Gene Hackman? No, Donald."

"An extra? Not in this life, Donald," says La Reetz, hanging up on a scream. "He's a big fan of Gene Hackman who's in town to film 'Under Suspicion.' I am not going to go to the set and ask for his autograph to give to Donald. If I embarrass myself that way, it's gonna be for me. And not with Gene Hackman, even if he can dance! Only Richard Gere. Or Antonio Banderas."

She thunks a pile of papers on the desk to straighten them out. "I think Donnie's not getting any, poor old thing. You know how his wife reacts when they make love? I mean fuck."

I shake my head and keep typing what will soon be a Donald O'Donnell mishmash -- hollow-sounding language on Monarch letterhead with the official seal -- in response to some innocent fifth-grader in Guam asking for the governor's opinion on colonydom. The excessive use of adjectives causes the nouns to fade and the sincerity to dissipate.

La Reetz stands up and looks at her nails, gasping and sighing half-heartedly. "Are you done yet? Ahhh, ooh, ah, did you finish?" She brings one hand closer to her face for closer inspection, then glances down at her crotch. "Oh, finally. Yeah, it was good for me, too."

"Does his wife have a Brooklyn accent?" I say between shrieks of laughter.

Donald pops his head out. "Did I miss something?"

"Only the boat, Donald," we say in unison.

That day after work, I am snarfing down a plate of pasta salad that has about 25 different ingredients -- just about everything but the birds of paradise in the vase on the patio table in my living room. I moved into this apartment three years ago but never quite got unpacked, and my about-to-leave décor combines well with the rubble on the landings in the stairwell and the violent cracks in the ceilings of same. Anyway: green olives, black olives stuffed with salmon, capers, mushrooms, red pepper, green pepper, onion, chunks of cheddar cheese, hearts of palm, tomatoes, zucchini, hard-boiled eggs, chickpeas, pasta of course, and what-have-you with my *mojito* dressing with the fake secret ingredient.

This concoction is going down good (I'd do penance for my syntax but alliteration is paramount) with a Corona as I stand at the counter, looking out the back *ventanal* up at the sky, when I hear a chopper buzz-sawing overhead and I wonder if it is the same one. It is hovering right over my building, so I take my plate upstairs to the roof but trip over a dead door on the floor of the last landing and my plate goes sailing out the door, the food flying from it in a gaily colored cascade; fortunately, I catch myself on the wrought iron gate and do not fall, amazingly enough.

The chopper is hacking away over the adjunct Glory Island State Department building on the other side of the street, where there is no spaghetti sauce of cables overhead, and, this close, I can see the pilot and --

no, it's not a copilot, it's Gene Hackman!

I wave, and they wave back, to my acute delight. Gene and the pilot confer, gesticulating rapidly, and then they turn to me again and point down toward the Plaza de Armas around the corner from my place. I nod and point at the plaza from my standpoint in agreement, at a different angle (I can barely see the fountain), and Gene holds up both hands showing eight fingers -- 8 o'clock? Of course! I echo the gesture.

And try not to jump up and down for joy but, even at my age (45, and I look every minute of it, at least from the neck up, front view), it is extremely difficult to contain myself. Also, I look like an aging Avon lady without the makeup, so my exuberance doesn't quite fit, and I am constantly trying to improve, to act my age and coordinate with my image. However, I can't refrain from jumping up twice, and then I sit on the ledge in my customary place and position to watch the sun fall behind the cathedral.

On the street, one of my neighbor's bodyguards, Oscar, is looking up at me and I think he can see the sunset reflected in my shades. "*¡Chévere!*" he shouts up. He's only guessing but I agree with his assessment of "Great!"

Sara H is shuffling past and Oscar makes an exaggerated gesture -- for my benefit -- of holding his nose away from the stench.

When I come down at exactly 8p, he nears and asks, joking, if I saw Gene Hackman. I tell him yes, as a matter of fact. "Come on over to the plaza and you can see him, too," I say, pretty confident that the star will indeed be there. "What movies has he been in?" I ask. I'm fairly certain I've seen at least one, or I wouldn't know who he is, right? But I can't think of any titles or remember any particulars; I should have asked Donald.

Oscar rattles off a few titles and says his boss, the second most

powerful person on Glory Island, Ramón Roque, is a big fan of Hackman's also. A good thing the job at Banco Peninsular fell through then, I think, speculating that Roque is more like Donald than appearances let on and God Forbid!

Fondling his nightstick, Oscar accompanies me to the plaza and we look around. I see Veneno's finely chiseled head in line at the *quiosquito* and ignore his wave; fortunately the spate of poems that came on during my obsession with him has abated (if you can call something so short-lived an obsession, or do we define it by age of the sufferer, not duration of the suffering?), and so have the wild highs and lows, ever since he crucified me on Good Friday. But again, I look like a demure madonna, the Clairol lady without the hair dye, and the perception of the tongue-waggers is that I do the dumping, not vice versa.

This is a little island that has a BIG mouth, make no mistake.

Suddenly the concentration of everyone in the plaza is focused on the gazebo end of the square; you feel it in the air; I swear, you can touch the attention condensed from every pore on every human being there, and even the pigeons, when it is so streamlinedly riveted on the same object. In this case, Gene Hackman.

He is accompanied by the chopper pilot only and he smiles vaguely at the people starting to surround him, closing in on him; some have their hands outstretched with napkins, notebooks, paper coffee cups even, whatever they could get their hands on for him to sign his name, and he simply walks by them. Then he sees me and hesitates, not sure if I'm the person on the roof until he looks down at my nastily skinned knees, and he strides toward me.

Suddenly everyone is looking at me and I can't stand it. I stand still,

frozen, telling myself not to run away, but I can't help it and I flee around the corner past my apartment and down Calle Luna -- which is abandoned and illuminated, aptly enough, by the moon.

I slow down and berate myself half-heartedly for another opportunity missed, and sit with Sara H on her doorstep on Calle Sol in a companionable silence; she forgives me my good fortune; even my problems would be enviable to her if she were an envious person.

I trudge to work the next day; that is, I walk in a stately manner, at least I hope it's stately; but when a beggar limps up to me with his hand out, and he a young healthy-looking man though dirty, I lift my long skirt to show him my knees, one of which is, yecch, suppurating again. He says I could make a lot of money from that sitting around in the plaza.

I say, "*No, gracias, estoy ocupada* (I'm busy)."

At the office, Donald is beside himself with rage because he forgot to pick up coffee filters and because Maritza is eating popcorn. "Popcorn for breakfast?! How unseemly! You'd better not dare touch anything with your greasy hands, Ms. Mellifluous." (One of her last names is Melíflua and he only uses the translation when he's angry.) He bows his head deeply as if penitent, but it is a ruse; his head comes up and he looks as if he thinks he has been maligned and, tears in his eyes, despairs of ever being understood. His voice is a few thousand decibels closer to normal, though.

"Please, please, pwetty pwease would you go to the store and buy coffee filters?" He looks at us, from one to the other. I am engaged with my computer, whose battery unit has just buzzed and caused my screen to black out.

"Donald, I want you to witness this," I say. He is always accusing me of causing my computer disasters when the machine is obviously a fossil.

"I don't have time for this!" he screams, hysterical. "Stop interrupting me!! Why is life so difficult?!!" And he hurls himself into his office.

Maritza and I look at each other and she says, "Over my dead body am I gonna go out and get his EFFing coffee filters."

"I wish we had a Donald filter," I say.

"He's lookin' for a lawsuit, Maggie, the way he treats women, the way he treats us, and I might just --"

The phone rings and she grabs the receiver and shrills, "*Redacción en inglés.*" Then in a low well-modulated voice, she says, "It's Señor Roque of Banco Peninsular -- for you."

"Good day, Maggie, how's my favorite neighbor?" says Roque, the epitome of chick, swayve and deboner as my brothers and I used to say when we were kids and had just been bested by some rich, and bigger, kid.

¡No me fockin digas! We quickly get down to the grain. He asks when I can get over to the Golden Mile for the final interview -- with him. I say I thought the process was closed, that they'd changed corporate strategy at the last minute and no longer needed me because I'd said to the woman who was, I thought, my last interviewer, that I'd saved the Smithsonian Institution's ass. He says that last interviewer is no longer with the Banco and that wasn't the only mistake she made.

I am fixing a time, looking at my calendar to see just when I can fit the second most powerful person on Glory Island into my schedule, when suddenly I sense that breathless narrowing of focus, everyone in the room concentrating on the same point, and wow! it's the guv herself walking in --

in the three years I've been her "deputy assistant," she has never once crossed the threshold of our building as far as I know. And with her is none other than Gene Hackman!

Just then Donald erupts from his office, head bent over the papers in his hands, aiming for Maritza, crying and mewling like a spoiled little boy, "How could you, Ms. Mellifluous? You got popcorn grease all over this transmittal sheet! You'll just have to do it over. Immediately! Like yesterday!!"

La Reetz glares at me because I put her up to photocopying the top sheet and greasing it up, purely in good fun. She patiently lifts off said sheet so he can see the pristine purity of the pages beneath, and then the guv clears her throat and suddenly the silence is deafening.

Donald -- an ex-Marine, believe it or not, for all his crybaby ways -- stands at attention and stutters, "Good morning, your honor, I mean --"

Maritza stage-whispers, "That's for judges, Mr. Numbcakes. In the protocol book it's Governor Villanueva, or MADAM, to you!"

The guv says, "I had breakfast with Mr. Hackman in the Quijote Salon and he wanted to meet Maggie O'Malley, so I figured if he wants to meet someone on my staff, why then I should probably meet her, too." (He discovered my name, I found out later, by asking at the kiosk.)

We shake hands all around and Donald grovels for an autograph, ostensibly for his son, but we all know better. On the phone, Roque asks me what's going on and I tell him Gene Hackman and the guv stopped by for a visit, and Roque asks me if I would please get the actor's autograph for his son who, by the way, is one of my best friends and, at 8 years old, a lot smarter than the autograph-seekers of my acquaintance. I think of asking

what it's worth to him but then restrain myself -- his job offer is already more than generous and I can hardly wait to thrust it in Donald's face.

Donald asks in his sneering manner, "Why would Gene Hackman, my favorite Hollywood star, want to meet Maggie O'Malley, of all people?"

Maritza frowns at him and ventures, "Because he saw her from afar and liked the cut of her jib? He's no spring chicken himself, you know." She casts an appraising eye on the actor, taking in his sagging jawline, his thinning physique, his tired hair.

Thanks a lot, Ms. Ritz, I think, so only a tired old Hollywood has-been would want me? I think this but am ultra-diplomatic today and do not speak.

Governor Victoria Villanueva steps in and says, "Something like that. Gene told me he was going to take her for a helicopter ride last night, but the lovely tangle of cables that graces our capital got in the way, and then later she fled from him in the plaza!"

Donald looks at me, biting his lower lip to hold the jealousy in, and it is hard not to gloat.

Turning to the guv and Gene, I say, "Not from him! From the staring, the people's misperceptions of everything!" I think it is a hopeless concept to explain in under a half-hour, so I desist, but Gene's eyes light up -- he understands it because he lives it every day -- an affliction he has to suffer, the price of fame, yadayada, and he's surprised and delighted that I know.

Before we lift off from the governor's launchpad at La Fortaleza, I ask Gene if he would give Maritza and Donald a ride, too, and he says of course for Maritza, but, glancing at the guv, he tells me, "Your supervisor better stay here to man the English division office while you're gone, right, Vicky?"

So here I am up in a Hollywood-rented helicopter with Gene Hackman

and I am sure I must be the happiest most delirious middle-aged woman on earth, but I have to ask.

"What? Why?"

Gene, reading my mind, says, "Because all my life I have wanted to meet a woman like you, or the woman I think you are. Do you like Chopin's mazurkas in addition to the conventionally adored classics? Do you bake banana bread with bananas and lime from trees you planted yourself? Are you in the middle of reading two or three books? Do you strike up conversations with strangers in trains in South America? Do you play the guitar and sing songs you composed yourself? Did you skin your knees because you fell while looking up at the sky?"

"Twice!" says Maritza.

"And I've seen you hold your beer bottle to hear the wind blow a tune on it up on your roof."

This man has true balls, I think, so I agree to be an extra in his film, and we lay the foundation for a beautiful friendship. Which includes setting up beggar-handout bank accounts for Sara H and Denny because, stench aside, they seem to be the least hopeless of the homeless in Old San Gría -- they are not on drugs or drink; they are just in the dregs, at the bottom of the barrel with no hope of climbing out on their own.

Gene also donates the missing million to Father Johnnie's homeless shelter and we all live idiosyncratically ever after.

In addition, "Under Suspicion" is such a success that Gene's wildest dream of being able to winter on a coffee plantation of his own in the mountains of Glory Island comes true.