



LEFT: Paolo after the Blizzard of '77- after 3 years in Buffalo, happy to be snowbound. ABOVE: Christmas 1974. Randy, Mitos and Paolo. First Christmas in America at Jun and Nonon's home in Illinois.

## WELCOME TO SIBERIA

by Mitos Villaseñor

Paolo was 9 months old and cried all the way to the States. What a contrast to my memory of Gumby, drooling on Dan's shoulder, sleeping through the din of airport good-byes and hugs and tearful kisses when their family migrated to Washington. It was all so unnatural. Now here was Paolo with his incessant crying, the stewardess was ready to throw us off the plane. What a turbulent start.

Still, I was excited to start our new life in America. We were to spend Christmas with Nonon and family in Chicago and then move on to our new home, Buffalo, New York. I had written Nonon and told her the first thing I would do when I got to the States was buy a Nestle's Crunch bar.

Nonon was at the airport on time, all smiles, and welcomed me with a giant bar of Nestle's Crunch!!!

I forgot all about the horrible plane ride. Christmas was cold but we had *lechon* (roast suckling pig) and the warmth of family togetherness. I bought my first set of bedsheets which I thought were a bargain until Nonon saw them and was so shocked at how ridiculously expensive they were. Lesson No. 1 - always shop for a better deal.

Lesson No. 2 - everything is returnable.

Then we were off to Buffalo. Randy had gone to Buffalo two months before, to be interviewed by the hospital, rent the apartment, buy the car. Then he had gone back to Manila to get Paolo and me. He was so proud and pleased that he had prepared everything for us. He was ready to start as his family's provider.

Soon we were flying over this mass of white land. It was snow, snow and more snow. Oh God, we're landing in Siberia !! But it was Buffalo, all right. Suddenly I missed Papa and Mama, my sisters, living with Mama, shopping with my sisters, and most of all I missed Lita, Paolo's *yaya*. This was it. No more turning back. No running home to Mama if Randy and I had a fight. The end of my glamorous airline career and the beginning of my life in exile. I had to start cooking and cleaning. I wanted to jump off the plane.

It was almost midnight by the time we got to the empty apartment and realized we would need more milk. So we wrote a note for the milkman. After all, didn't the milkman come by at the crack of dawn, in his white uniform and cap, to deliver fresh milk just like on TV and the movies? We asked that he start delivery for us, too. The next morning the note was still there. Lesson No. 3 - Hello! The days of the milkman are over. Go to the grocery.

I was so homesick I called Nonon at noon. She asked what I was doing. I said I was ironing towels and the bedsheets. She kept laughing and laughing. Are you insane? First of all, never call at noon when phone rates are at their peak. Second of all, nobody irons towels and sheets. Just fold them right straight from the dryer. Boy, did I have a lot to learn.

I called Nini at the right time of day and told her about Paolo's interminable crying. Then she said I should have given Paolo Benadryl like she did with Gumby. He would have slept through it all. Too late to learn that.

Paolo coughed and wheezed, and I cried through that first miserable winter. Our neighbors, a sweet, elderly couple, noticed our weekly trek through the snow lugging the basket of cloth diapers to the laundromat. They felt sorry for us and gave us their old washing machine.

Thank God spring finally came, summer, and then Thanksgiving. Peewee, Edwin and Rory were coming to visit and I was so excited to prepare my first Thanksgiving turkey. I followed Julia Child's recipe to the letter. Then I got to the part where I was supposed to start the gravy broth with the gizzards and neck. I couldn't find them!!! I realized they were still inside the turkey and were roasting in the oven. Overall, our first Thanksgiving was edible.

That was 26 years ago and I can safely say I've learned my lessons well. Though life has been tough and challenging, our sacrifices have been rewarded. But without the love and support of family and help of friends, we would never have made it this far.