Today Me, Tomorrow You

By Mel Lavine

Special to the Times

I read a piece Sunday in the New York Times magazine by an Oregon driver who broke down three times this past year, but each time no one stopped to help. The break-downs occurred when he was driving other people's cars. Otherwise, he said, if he'd been in his own car, he would have "carried things like a jack and extra fuses, and know enough not to park on a steep incline with less than a gallon of fuel."

 The people at the gas station where he'd asked for a gas can told him that they couldn't loan them out "for safety reasons" but that "I could buy a really crappy one-gallon can, with no cap, for $15."

 “It was enough,” said Justin Horner, a graphic designer who lives in Portland, “to make me say stuff like ‘this country is going to hell in a hand basket,’ which I actually said.”

 In the end, some people did stop. In all three instances they were Mexican immigrants. One family lived in Mexico but was in Oregon picking cherries for a few weeks, and then peaches, before returning home. The driver got out of his van. He did not speak any English but his daughter did. The man had a jack but it was too small for Horner’s jeep. So they braced it with a part of a big log they’d cut with the Mexican’s saw. As he was taking the wheel off, Horner said he broke his tire iron. It was one of those collapsible ones and I wasn’t careful...” The wife took the tire iron from her husband and was off to buy a new one. She returned in 15 minutes.

 Horner tried to pay them but “the guy just smiled and, with what looked like great concentration, said in English, ‘Today you, tomorrow me.’”

 The piece reminded the Lady Friend of a story I’d told her when my late wife and I were looking for a place to live in Mexico. The year was 1958. We had been staying in Chapala on a lake with the same name. But we found Chapala, a magnet for Americans, especially retired military officers, too rich for our means. Friends told us about Sayula over the mountains, not many miles away. Tourists were rare.

 When our venerable Dodge came to rest in the plaza in Sayula we discovered that we had a flat rear tire. I was about to reach for the spare and begin cranking but a cheerful crowd of young men waved me off. They would change the tire. But a lug nut was missing from our wheel. What to do? After examining the attachments closely, one of the boys sprinted across the street to examine the wheel of a government jeep. He returned in triumph with a lug nut that was a perfect fit for our Dodge.

 “But,” I said. “You might get yourself in trouble. You stole that nut from the government.”

 “The government?” replied the youth. “We are the government!”

 My wife and I often wondered if a car with people from Mexico had wound up in our own small Northern California town with a break down, would they have been as warmly helped? We thought not. But, as I say, this was 1958.

Mel Lavine was a television producer for many years with NBC News and CBS News in New York. Contact him at his e-mail address: mellavine@aol.com.