

Really

— JOSEFINA LÓPEZ —

WHEN I WAS FIVE years old, I left San Luis Potosí, Mexico, with my mother and little sister and headed to Los Angeles. I remember waiting in a Tijuana bus station for my father to pick us up. I walked around the bus station playing with my little sister. We approached two women in jeans, sitting down and smoking cigarettes. They were speaking in a language I didn't understand. I kept staring at them wanting to know what they were saying. Where were they going? Where were they coming from? I wanted to be like these women who didn't have children and didn't have husbands, they were on their own with an air of confidence and an indescribable quality that made them special. I wondered if it was the language that gave them that confidence or this thing I later learned about: entitlement. I wanted what they had and I wanted to learn English.

The first word I learned was "sorry." I learned it because I thought it sounded like *zorillo*, which means "skunk" in Spanish. So I associated that word with skunks. I remembered it quickly because I figured that if you smelled like a skunk, you should say you are sorry.

I needed to use this word when I was ten years old in second grade. I had told my English as a Second Language teacher that I needed to go to the bathroom, but she didn't think I was serious. She said I would have to wait until recess, two hours away. I lowered my head and sat there wondering what words I could use to convince her to let me go, but they just wouldn't come to me. I fidgeted in my seat trying to hold in my urine. I stared at the clock hoping I could wait the two hours. I held it in as long as I could, but even my prayers to God did not help because I peed all over my pants. I tried to keep it

a secret, but when Ms. Garcia, the teacher's assistant, saw me with several paper towels, she discovered my shameful secret.

"I'm sorry," I said to her. Ms. Garcia discreetly went and told the teacher what I did. "Why didn't she tell us she *really* had to go?" my teacher said, a little annoyed but feeling guilty. "I *really* have to go to the bathroom," were the words I wished I had known just an hour earlier. "Really" was the magic word. I realized later that people are accustomed to being lied to, so you have to say "really" to let them know you are telling the truth. I was sent to the nurse, given a new outfit, and sent home. On the way home I admired my new outfit, but I promised myself that I would learn English well enough so this would never happen to me again. Really.

JOSEFINA LÓPEZ (San Luis Potosí, Mexico; 1969-) is the author of the play *Real Women Have Curves* and cowriter of the same-named film, which won the Sundance Film Festival's Audience Award. More than 100 productions of López's plays have been staged in the United States, including *Confessions of a Woman from East L.A.*, *Queen of the Rumba*, and *Lola Goes to Roma*. López teaches screen and playwriting to youth in the Boyle Heights section of Los Angeles.