

COVID TIMES

A GRANDMOTHER LOOKS ON FROM AFAR

From a distance, I remember Lennoxville, Quebec, a university town, still mainly English in a sea of French. Many of the earlier homes and buildings are from the nineteenth century, some red brick, some clapboard. Although my son and his family of five now live in the neighboring city of Sherbrooke, where French Canadians are now in the majority, sometimes in Lennoxville he will bump into people who still remember him from college days there.

My son and his wife drive across the river to take the kids there for Cub Scouts and Girl Scouts. It's a place where people know one another, and community celebrations bring neighbors together for cheerful parades or more somber Veteran's Day memorial ceremonies. Many churches reflect the old architectural styles and steeples. The feel is very New Englandy, with the Vermont border only 40 minutes away. I love to go to Black Cat Books, perhaps the only bookshop in the area with mostly English materials, and a wonderful used-books section where I can find treasures like an old C.S. Lewis tome.

It's mid-April 2021, just over a year into the pandemic, and churches are beginning to open up, cautiously. Easter has come and gone, with the more "English" families having held egg hunts in yards and parks, where there were still patches of snow. Some years, a few of the eggs for my son's children have even been hidden in snow, as Facebook pics have shown me. Here in Mexico, I can hardly conceive of snow at Eastertime!

My youngest granddaughter Mahelia just turned three, and is tiny but full of energy, usually grinning and scampering about when she isn't required to stop for a moment. Some people will stare at her feeding tube, often decorated with cartoon stickers, wondering what's wrong with her when she looks fine. (She was born prematurely and has had weight issues ever since that fragile beginning and a month in the hospital.) I long to hold her, tickle her, laugh with her, and read to her, but COVID has kept us apart for all too long. She hasn't seen me since she was one, so to her I am basically a flat picture that she occasionally sees on the phone, and a voice that speaks to her in English, when she is more used to French and Spanish at home. My son, her dad, grew up in Mexico and is trilingual... at least. I still live in Mexico, and my trip to Canada, planned to be a year ago, has been postponed indefinitely due to the pandemic.

It's finally time for her dedication service, after the lockdown put it off for so long. Sadly, I am limited to watching via Facebook Live. Another flat screen, but at least it's a way to be partially present. The Green Ridge church in Lennoxville is more sparsely populated than usual, I am told, with many members still watching the service from home. At first, I can only see the masked pianist on the keyboard and unmasked guitarist/song leader, who are wearing green T-shirts emblazoned with the church name as they lead a couple of choruses. Then they leave their instruments to clap and do the

motions for a rousing version of the children's song *Jesus Loves Me*, which gets everyone warmed up. There's an additional, modern part that's new to me: "Na na na na na na...oooh!"

After the opening prayer, the pastor invites the family of five to come forward for Mahelia's dedication, which is also announced in the bulletin. "Once you're up here, you're okay to take off your masks." Only my son removes his. His wife is more cautious, and the two older kids follow her example, so they remain with mouths covered in light blue. The backdrop of rough vertical boards in different tones, sizes, and textures speaks of the simplicity of the Baptist church, in a region where the native Francophones favor Catholic churches with stained-glass windows, ornate altars, and the traditional metal spires. Neither is there much else to adorn the sanctuary, but of course my view is limited to the front area alone. I want to see how many people are there, what the windows are like, and whether trees can be seen blossoming outside, but can't.

Mahelia is wearing the dress she chose for her March birthday, celebrated at home with Peppa Pig balloons and cake, but no *piñata* this year, no friends besides her siblings. The pink tulle skirt makes her feel like a ballerina, and the sequined heart on the top portion reminds us all what a big heart she has. As the pastor speaks, she is up in one parent's arms, then in another's, then holds her sister's hands and does a few dance steps. From time to time (especially when her name is mentioned), she glances at the pastor, who mentions how the members of the church all know Mahelia as a little girl who radiates fun and joy.

My youngest grandchild differs from her redheaded sister and her brown-haired brother in that she shows her Mexican blood more, with black or nearly-black hair. Otherwise, she looks a great deal like her sister.

Her dad, with goatee and glasses, is wearing a turquoise tie. Do men still wear ties to church? I think how I've been surprised in northern climes to find how churchgoers often dress more casually than in Mexico. Perhaps it's a sort of bow to the fact that this is a special occasion. The pastor is tieless but wears a suit coat. My fuzzy memory brings back an image of me and my husband in the front of our Mexican church with our firstborn baby, now a dad.

I feel like an anonymous onlooker until my son is asked to introduce his family. Mahelia, in her mom's arms, turns to grin at the pastor when she is named. Steve also mentions, "My Mum is watching us from Mexico!" Being acknowledged, especially as the grandma, makes me feel included, though a tinge of regret still remains.

Not only I am affected by distance. The pastor explains that because of COVID restrictions he cannot hold Mahelia or place his hands on her, but during his prayer he stretches his arm out in blessing and invites the congregation to do so as well. I can only glimpse a few who do so from the front row, as the camera fails to show any others.

Both the parents and then the church members are invited to commit themselves to bringing my granddaughter up in the faith, answering "We do." Although not a

christening service, in which more fuss tends to be made, it is still a meaningful ceremony for those present... and those of us much further away than a few meters.

Finally, the pastor hands the couple a pot of pink gerbera daisies. I remember the nun who gifted me with a rosebud from the hospital gardens after I had welcomed my premature newborn, Steve. She wished that my son would also bloom and grow, as he did, and as we pray each child does.

If I were there, as we'd all hoped, would there be an additional celebration? Would I take them out for dinner? Perhaps I'd even make a special cake.

As it is, I again fade into the distance.

A few days later, unseasonal snow blankets Quebec.

COVID regulations, flights between our countries cancelled, my second vaccine awaiting, and now snow there late in April, warmth and bright blue sky here.

It wasn't meant to be.

A WIDOW'S WALK

The alarm sounds, and drags me up to turn it off. I try to resist the temptation to check my messages, as they are sure to postpone my walk. My exercise gear is all in one place, ready, removing excuses as they mill through my mind.

Excuses depend on the day and time of year.

- It poured rain and there's too many puddles.
- It's cold and windy out there!
- It's late; the sun's going to be right in my eyes.
- Gosh, I hardly got enough sleep last night!

What's no longer an excuse for me is a job to get to, or a major deadline, as a rule. No longer do I expect to hear my husband asking, "Going for a walk?" He's no longer here.

Ever since my Refugio (yes, Refuge, my refuge) passed away and, months later, I decided to retire, gumption has won out over excuses more frequently. The loneliness of the house drives me to the streets, where I occasionally cross the path of others walking dogs, jogging, or just heading to work that cannot be done online.

Then COVID clinched it, with no more outings or café time with friends. No other escapes to look forward to. No parties, meetings, or trips. The simple act of walking became part of survival, perhaps moving on.

Habit and ritual bring me into reality. Now the daily countdown has gone from "keys, shades, and cellphone ready!" to include that ever-present face mask. I've even thought up a way to sing those items into the children's ditty, "Head and shoulders, knees and toes."

I am literally undercover, hiding my reality, trying to hide my tears.

My usual hike takes me through my unspectacular neighborhood. As is traditional in this part of Mexico, people live behind walls. There is little chance for a friendly "hello" over the fence. The street is lined with walls and garage doors. Only occasionally are there barred openings that give me a glimpse inside, perhaps to a tiny strip of garden or a few brave flowerpots on a patio.

Only a few of my friends know or understand my loneliness. I understand; I too have lived the rat race, where work and family and daily responsibilities make the needs of fellow humans disappear in the shadows.

I too live behind walls, in a mini walled community. Only a couple of neighbors can see my meager attempts at gardening, although one has shared some irises and a calla lily with me. My excuse to have those other closed doors open is to take an offering from my oven, perhaps banana bread with sunflower seeds and cranberries.

Sometimes I pass a little shop offering fruit and veggies. That's where-Refugio would, from time to time, stop the bright yellow Nissan and tap the horn, then ask for a hand of bananas when the shopkeeper came out. Even when he no longer had the strength to walk, the car gave him a sense of freedom.

As I go briskly along, sidewalks are unpredictable. Often they slant up to driveways, forcing me to walk at an angle or resort to the roadway. Sometimes there is a very high step up or down, even a foot high, or spots where tree roots have split the cement open. Such sidewalks are obviously not designed with the elderly or handicapped in mind, or even those with strollers.

Life is not designed for those who mourn, for the invisibly handicapped. We want to wear a black ribbon, or a pin that says "handle with care." We want others to slow down and look us in the eyes or pat us on the shoulder.

The latter is impossible, nowadays. No touching allowed!

My neighbors are hermetic and share little of their creativity with me, limited by those walls. There is one, however, that shows off a collection of bird cages in her gated garage, including parakeets chirping cheerfully. Another cage holds an unusually fashionable pigeon, always fanning out its spectacular white tail... but she seems to me like Rapunzel in a tower, beauty behind bars.

I am no Rapunzel, but these days of enclosure have taken their toll.

The cost of property here means that many homeowners don't have a yard. My favorite house is unusual in that it actually has a small front yard and well-kept garden on view to the public. It specializes in rose bushes of different hues; I never fail to take a look, admire them, and occasionally snap a picture. I am told the owner is a widower, and without a doubt this little paradise was his wife's creation; for a time it was unkempt and bedraggled.

Sometimes, on a walk, I will see a mass of magenta bougainvilleas cascading over a wall, just begging to be shared, and pull out my phone to record their beauty. Those brief moments of wonder cause the dreariness of lonely pandemic days to be more bearable.

Blue morning glories climb gaily upwards on a mundane chicken-wire fence enclosing a weed-filled empty lot.

There is hope curling upwards in my empty lot.

The most attractive reward is one that greets me halfway through my normal walk, as I glimpse the horizon beyond the city. It is especially breathtaking in the rainy season, for the rains here below usually mean a fresh fall of snow on the peaks of our two volcanoes. Even through the tangle of telephone and other lines, the view pulls my eyes above and beyond the dreary grey cement.

"I will lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence cometh my strength?"

A sixty-something couple passes hand in hand, oblivious to their uniqueness. How long has it been since I held my husband's hand? In our latter years together, we would often drive places, or when walking do so too briskly for contact, or find ourselves on narrow sidewalks where we had to go Indian file.

A bonding so simple and so meaningful. I want to go back in time and hold hands again.

My ordinary walk draws my senses out of four walls and lets them re-create. It reminds me that I am not alone, and the simple gifts of human contact – albeit in passing – and nature's embrace give me hope and strength to continue my journey.