

Moving 'a Step Down' in Mexico

Fresh tortillas and loud fireworks

We had rented a spacious house far from the city center after years of living in an apartment in the smoggy downtown of our Mexican city. Our new home was calmer and quieter, with a park across the street where our children could play with the neighborhood kids. Although the office there was a boon for my husband's entrepreneurship, we didn't need the extra bedroom or the space for a gym on the roof, a partial third floor.

After a year, we had to accept the fact that renting that spacious house was truly beyond our financial possibilities. For months at a time, we had had to live without any propane gas for cooking and for heating our water, in order to save. But we'd gotten used to the new neighborhood.

As we checked out options, at one point we saw a 'Se renta' (For Rent) sign on the second floor of a house with peeling, sickly-salmon paint. Three bedrooms – check! Same area – check! Much cheaper than our home at the time – check!

So it became our salvation.

Perhaps eight blocks from the too-big house, the apartment was close enough that to start moving, we could make dozens of short trips with a squeaky two-wheeled cart back and forth before finally borrowing a friend's van to take the furniture. Yes, we had to cut corners.

It was a considerable step down from our previous housing, and we gradually realized that the neighborhood was actually very different, being on the borderline between the city and what used to be a small working-class town, once somewhat rural. This had its pros and cons.

One pro was the *tortillería* across the street, where women threw big, fat tortillas on a huge *comal* (traditional round steel griddle), then served them steaming into waiting embroidered cloths. That was a major switch from buying thin, cold, machine-made tortillas in the supermarket, all stuck together and falling apart when you tried to separate them.

There was a small-town, friendly feel, despite the lack of front yards or gardens and porches in most homes in our area of Mexico. Buildings or brick walls usually start at the sidewalk. You rarely catch a glimpse of those who live there. Here, however, houses often had logs, cement blocks, or benches on the sidewalks outside, inviting neighbors to sit and chat. Walk a block, and you felt like you were no longer in a big city.

One day I was frightened by loud explosions. I soon discovered the cause: festive

Carnaval celebrations, with brightly costumed men dancing down the street and shooting shotguns into the air. On other holidays, booming fireworks proclaimed that it was a saint's festival. Life was noisier than the more staid middle-class neighborhood we had come from.

Another celebration was that of the patron saint, Balthazar, traditionally one of the Three Kings or Magi (the name of the old town, now neighborhood of the city, was actually San Baltazar). So, for the week of Epiphany, streets were closed off for the annual fair. Music blared from the rickety rides. Barkers hawked their fare. Hot *chalupas* sizzled in lard, spread with salsa and shredded meat. The sugary smell of fresh cotton candy drew the attention of kids and adults alike. Corn in a cup, dusted with spicy chili, and giant pancakes called out to consumers. Tiny ponies stamped as they awaited riders. Revelers squeezed up to game booths to shoot metal ducks in a row or toss hoops onto bottles in hopes of grabbing cheap stuffed animals.

In our new abode, we were further from the supermarket that later became a Walmart, and without a car, we came to appreciate the family businesses nearby. We nicknamed one little grocery shop for the chunky brothers who ran it, *los Gordos* (The Fatties), although at one point we learned that we were not the only ones who gave it that nickname! There you could buy one piece of fruit or a couple of eggs if necessary. I once spoke to a little girl who had gone for the latter, revealing her family's financial situation. There was a fair variety of basic fruit and veggies, chilis, rice, milk, and so on. Nothing fancy, like mushrooms or kiwis. People hung around to chat with the owners about the latest gossip, unlike the impersonal Oxxo convenience stores that had begun to spring up in many parts of the city.

Two blocks away was an unfenced high school campus that, when flooded in rainy season, drew my kids to collect polliwogs in the huge puddles. It was almost like stepping into a little piece of the countryside.

Like most places built decades ago, our apartment had a cement *lavadero* (sink) outside, with ridges like a washboard, for scrubbing clothes by hand if you wished, and clotheslines. From there I could glimpse the tortilla ladies hard at work, and the yummy smell of their culinary ware wafted toward me.

The tiny kitchen hardly allowed two people to work together, and our large fridge ended up in the dining-living room. The typical, miniscule *cuarto de servicio* (maid's room) became our junk and storage room. Gone were the days when many middle-class families could afford a live-in servant.

I could also look down into the owner's yard, where a scrawny, poorly fed, German shepherd looked almost embarrassed about the unpleasant sight and smell produced by his pee and poop covering the area. If he could have spoken, he might have complained, "Blame the human who's supposed to take care of me!" While I was

tempted to report the abuse, I knew it would be all too obvious who was responsible for any whistle-blowing, as walls prevented anyone else from seeing the poor pooch.

The grumpy owner, as I've mentioned, lived below. When our black cat left footprints on his car, we got a bawling out. Sometime later, our street-loving pet started to have convulsions and then lay still. It didn't take much intelligence to guess who had poisoned him.

The final straw was when we learned that the cat-murderer hadn't paid his water bill for years. Then came the day that the city government dug up the street and closed off the water main outside the house! After paying for a water truck to deliver water several times, it became obvious that improvements were not to be expected in the near future, and the search for a new apartment began.

What was once our salvation had become our damnation. All the same, that in-between neighborhood still brings to mind a bit of nostalgia as I look back on our days spent there.