

## Colonia Cuauhtemoc, 2001

Morning in my old neighborhood in Mexico City; and tamales still steam in large, shiny metal containers that look like new garbage cans. A man in a navy blue jumpsuit cuts oranges and soaks carrots, beets and celery to make juice. For a few extra pesos, he will toss in a raw egg, guaranteed to cure a hangover. Bundled against mountain chill, a young boy pedals by on his three-wheeled bicycle, a large drum of *atole*—a thick breakfast drink made of sweetened ground corn—secured behind him. The *gelatina* vendor balances a tray of quivering jellos and puddings on his head. Newspaper kiosks open orange-painted corrugated steel shutters, not far from the taco stands grilling beef and barbecued pork and onions for a quick breakfast.

The nearby American Embassy is still the same huge, squat building. Except that now it is a fortress. Surrounded by high iron fences topped with rolls of barbed wire, it has taken over all the surrounding blocks, walling itself off even more from the city. Soldiers armed with machine guns patrol empty streets where cafes and *taquerías* used to do brisk lunchtime business.

The market is also still here, just a block away from our hotel, buckets of flowers on the sidewalk announcing its presence. Crowded stalls overflow with squash, carrots, mango, papaya, oranges and corn. Sides of beef hang near whole fish staring at me from their icy perches. Grocery shops lining the walls offer everything from toilet paper to condensed milk. It was the first market I shopped when I came to this seductive monster of a city in 1971. In the beginning I simply

wandered, delighting in the jewel-like *moles*: burgundy red, dark brown, bright orange, dull green; the almond and cinnamon-flavored cooking chocolate shaped into rough balls, squares, discs, cylinders; and in the glorious smells: fresh lime, roasted coffee, *chicharrón* (fried pork rinds, artery-clogging and delicious), chiles sweet and lingering or hot and aggressive and perfumed branches of the eucalyptus trees whose tall canopy shut out the smoggy skies of our city.

Back then I had no refrigerator, so I bought fruit, vegetables and meat almost daily, trying to arrive early enough to receive a benediction for being the first customer of the day. The seller would extend a hand over her wares – sliced green and red cactus fruits, lustrous *chico zapote*, with sweet, black flesh; ruffly, deep green *acelgas* akin to Swiss chard; brilliant orange *mamey*, disguised in its sandpaper brown skin, soapy-sharp *cilantro* – make the sign of the cross and say, “May God bless you, little daughter.” Or more generically: “God bless you, *marchanta*,” meaning female buyer. As I left, men would whisper, “¡Estás como mango!” comparing my young self to the swooney, oh-so-edible fruit.

My mango days are over, but my old apartment is still here, just a few blocks away on Río Nazas #50, where I lived with Enrique, across from the IFAL, L’Institut Français d’Amérique Latine, where I saw Jean Cocteau movies. I have not returned to this street, this block, in nearly thirty years; and it throbs with memories.

On the summer afternoon when we moved in, the sky knotted in black and purple clouds and poured rain on us and our boxes. Nights were chilly, but roses, bougainvillea, calla lilies and geraniums bloomed on walls, in clay pots shaped like reindeer, in rusty tin cans.

Enrique and I were both driven, working class kids who'd managed to get an education to try to escape poverty. He was tall and slender, with irresistible golden skin and sleepy hazel eyes. His large family embraced me; his mother taught me much of what I know about Mexican cooking. I loved being part of this new clan.

Then one sunny November afternoon while we were eating lunch, the mailman yelled up at the window. He had a telegram for me. I ran all the way down and back up the stairs with the yellow envelope. It was from the sheriff of Lake of the Woods County, the jack pine wilderness on the Minnesota-Canadian border where I grew up. It said: "Call home."

The Río Nazas apartment did not have a telephone. Obtaining one in 1971 was a major undertaking, involving complicated *trámites* – bureaucratic procedures – and extensive bribing of Teléfonos de México. I ran across the hall to borrow the phone of my neighbor, Mercedes. "They found Carl this morning," my sister-in-law told me. My father had drowned in a deep ditch after a night of drinking.

Enrique walked me through the city for hours that night, until I was tired enough to sleep. I remember I felt numb; that he bought me *atole* and coffee to get the chill out of my body.

I returned to Mexico City from Lake of the Woods after Christmas. Enrique and I split up, but my relationship with Mexico was just beginning. I moved to a *pensión* and enrolled in the National University, my Spanish now fluent enough for graduate classes. I spent years in Mexico and made friends who are still in my life. But the time in Colonia Cuauhtemoc etched deep groves in my soul: I got to know the food, language and ways of the new country; I turned twenty-one, lost my father, became an adult.

Today on Río Nazas, I show my husband the windows of my old place, the bakery where I bought crusty *bolillos*, the route I took to my job at an English language institute. As we stand in front of the apartment, I see out of the corner of my eye a young thug approaching with a couple of pals. It is a bright blue day, like the one when the telegram arrived nearly thirty years ago, but the scent of danger is unmistakable. In the Mexico City of my youth, you could walk all over late at night like Enrique and I did when I found out about my father. But now people stay in after dark; and there are numerous holdups in broad daylight.

“Let’s go,” I say.

We cross the street and walk swiftly back to our hotel.

It’s not my neighborhood anymore.