

LIVING IN TEXAS 1

They remained in Texas until the end of August, 1957. By that time, as they were leaving for Denmark, José and Josy agreed that they definitely did not want to settle in Texas when they came back from their year in Europe.

At the beginning of their stay in Houston, many things about their new surroundings pleased them. The partly furnished garden-court apartment that they rented was spacious and comfortable. A huge living room connected with a cozy dining room, furnished with a pale-green Formica table and six dark-blue upholstered chairs. The kitchen, off to one side, sported a stainless-steel sink, and gave onto a small back patio shared with the apartment next door. Two enormous bedrooms provided adequate sleeping space – the children in one, José and Josy in the other. The grounds were beautiful and well-tended. Every neighbor they met greeted them warmly.

They made wonderful friends, several of them fellow-scientists from Methodist Hospital. From his first day there, José found Dr. Saul Kitt a stimulating and interesting scientist to talk to. At the very moment that the moving van pulled up to the front door of the rented apartment with some of the Rabinowitz's belongings from Philadelphia, Saul's wife Dorothy appeared on the front steps, introducing herself and offering both help and friendship. Both families, including their children grew close. They would spend at least one day almost every weekend together.

Another wonderful family was that of Nelson Waldman, an optometrist. Nelson's parents had been dear friends with the parents of Dr. Ralph Myerson in Boston. (Ralph had been José's associate at the V.A. Hospital in Philadelphia; he had insisted that José look up the Waldmans upon his arrival in Texas.) They proved to be a most out-going and wonderful family. Just two months after they first met, Nelson's wife June offered to take care of three-year-old Lois for the entire day while José and Josy were involved with the tonsillectomies of their two other children, Malva and Marty. Both these operations took place half an hour apart. The pediatrician, after examining the children and hearing that the family would be leaving to live in Europe that September for the coming year, insisted that two of the youngsters have this surgery before their departure, timing this just before the polio season was due to begin. It was a tremendous relief to know that Lois, the child who did not need a tonsillectomy, would be well-cared for during this traumatic event.

Shortly after this, Josy developed a severe bladder infection. The urologist whom she went to see insisted that she be hospitalized for a couple of days, and everything turned out well. Again, the Waldman family looked after the children during these two days.

When José brought Josy home from the hospital, Malva, then five, had a question for him.

“Where is the baby?” she wanted to know.

Perplexed at first, José finally realized that previously, every time that Josy had come home from the hospital since Malva was born, a new baby had arrived with her (first Lois, then Marty).

“There’s no baby,” he now tried to explain to Malva. But she refused to be convinced. He had to take her from room by room of the apartment, opening every closet, drawer, and cabinet in the place before she accepted his pronouncement. Then, upon her insistence, he took her outside to the car, where she had him open the back trunk, the front engine cover, and both car doors before she was satisfied.

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One of the neighbors at the garden court apartments was an American woman named Libby. She was married to a red-headed fellow, Fernando, a South American, and they had an infant whom they used to wheel around the grounds of the garden-court apartments every evening. Gradually, they struck up an acquaintance with José and Josy, Fernando often speaking to José in Spanish. Soon they began stopping by right around dinner time, and more often than not, Josy would end up serving dinner to this family almost every night. After a couple of weeks of this, when it became apparent that the timing of these “impromptu” visits had been carefully planned, and when the couple failed even once to reciprocate, Josy stopped serving food until they finally grew tired of waiting and left.

They came only one more time. José was away in New Hampshire and Washington, D.C. trying to finalize details of his sabbatical trip. His mother Rachel happened to be visiting with the family in Texas at the time. One evening before José returned, Libby and Fernando stopped by. (Josy had phoned them, suggesting that they might like to meet José’s mother, who spoke Spanish.) It turned out to be a very short visit. As soon as they arrived and Josy had made the introductions, Rachel switched the conversation to Spanish. It was clear to Josy, from the intonation and gestures, that Rachel was asking Fernando about his background. Suddenly, Josy heard the word “mestizo”, recognizing it as the Spanish term for “half-breed”. Fernando gasped, his face turning purple. Pulling himself up from his chair, he beckoned to Libby, nodded curtly, and they left. After that, they never returned any of Josy’s phone calls, and their visits stopped completely.

Before all this happened, however, Libby had suggested to Josy that they share in the purchase of half a veal. Libby knew somebody at a local freezer plant who, she said, could get them an extremely low price per pound, but that a full veal was too much for her. Since the small refrigerator in the apartment had a decent-

sized freezer, and since the price of the meat was so low, Josy agreed. When the purchase arrived, it filled the entire freezer and also part of the refrigerator. They ate veal every night, without exception, for the next six weeks.

Meanwhile, a new neighbor moved into the apartment next door, the one with which they shared the back patio. She turned out to be a divorced woman by the name of Dorothy Wellington. It was already mid-summer by the time they made her acquaintance, but quickly they and she got to be extremely good friends.

Little by little José and Josy began to learn their way around the city. Visually it was a most beautiful place. Tall sleek, modern, glass and metal skyscrapers lined Main Street; beautiful mansions, graceful in their Spanish architecture and lovely gardens, sprawled along scenic curving boulevards; numerous parks sported old trees, draped in Spanish moss. The Alley Theater, set off in a recessed cul-de-sac, presented numerous interesting plays in experimental theater, a few of which José and Josy attended. One that they continued to remember vividly, was the first American presentation of Agatha Christie's "Witness for the Prosecution", out well before the movie appeared.

Occasionally, when they were out for a drive, they would get lost, but Malva (then five years old), always managed to get them re-routed (she explained that she got her bearings each time from the Nabisco Factory and, from then on in, it was easy to find the way).

Josy got the children enrolled in a nursery school program affiliated with a synagogue. It was run by a Mrs. Robinowitz (she spelled her name with an "o" rather than an "a" as they spelled theirs). Once all the children were taken swimming at a nearby pool; they swam in their underwear, since no notice had been given that they would need bathing suits. What Mrs. Robinowitz insisted upon was that every child learn, from memory, to recite the ten commandments. It was gratifying to hear Marty, not yet two, lisp out in a sing-song voice, "Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother!"

One day a pharmaceutical salesman came to speak to José at his lab. After hearing about some of José's research, this fellow announced that he could get José into the Cork Club. José demurred, especially after hearing that it cost \$5,000 to join. The salesman insisted, however, that José at least accompany him there for one evening. Others, hearing about this, urged him most emphatically to go. ("I would give my right arm to be invited there!" one fellow said. "Do you realize the contacts you'll make! Most of the members are oil people and billionaires!") Reluctantly José agreed, after informing the salesman that he was nowhere in that league and had no intention of joining. "Come anyway, for the experience," the salesman persisted.

The place proved luxurious beyond words. Dinner was of the highest order, the most tender of Texas steaks, the most lavish accompaniments. What shocked

José, however, was something that he witnessed for the first time. At the end of the meal, several of the members called the waiters over, requesting that they give them “doggie bags”, containing their unfinished food to take home. José had never even heard this expression before, and he was astounded that men of such affluence would even consider such a thing.

People in Houston proved generally to be most outgoing. Occasionally, Josy would receive a phone call from a total stranger. “We heard you’re new in town,” the woman would begin, naming the friend of a friend who had acted as intermediary. “So if you’re free this afternoon, we’d like to come over and give you a Texas welcome!”

Despite all this, José and Josy were not happy living in Houston. Josy concluded that this over-friendliness probably stemmed from the fact that most Houstonians were themselves newcomers. She soon found out that nine out of every ten had themselves been born elsewhere. They had no local family ties here and were actively seeking friends.

She also learned that outsiders did not seem to settle for long in Houston. The climate was forbidding. Early in the morning, the skyline of the city could be seen in the distance, already steaming and emitting a cloud-like vapor from the heat. It never seemed to cool off. Ads for apartments all advertised air-conditioning (not yet common for residences in the North) or at least attic fans. Humidity always remained high, and even the short walk from the front door of the apartment to the air-conditioned car parked out in front left them exhausted before even beginning the day.

One time, when José and Josy were out for a drive with the children, they spotted a sign reading “Drive-In!” Curious, they decided to investigate. As they pulled into the driveway, an attendant ran up to the car, calling out, “Close all your windows except the two little front ones on the sides!” Complying, they watched as he thrust two hoses into the car, one through each small opening. As cold air blew in from one side, the other hose acted as an exhaust. Then the attendant shouted through the glass, “Our special for today is double cheeseburger! You want cokes with that?”

But it was more than the climate which soured them on settling permanently in Texas. Some of the things José witnessed at the Methodist Hospital upset him deeply. One night, when he returned to his laboratory after dinner to check on an experiment in progress, he noticed a taxi pull up to the back entrance. Attendants from the emergency room came running out with a stretcher. Onto this they laid the passenger of the taxi, a black man barely able to stand. Upon inquiring, José found out that this patient was here for a type of surgery not performed at the local hospital for blacks. Later that night, he was informed, as soon as the surgery was over, the patient would be loaded back into a taxi and transported, again by under

cover of darkness, back to the “black” hospital where he was officially registered.

One day when José arrived at his office in the hospital, he found that expensive new bookshelves had been installed. Constructed of blond mahogany. they exactly matched the grain of the wood in the desk across the room. Startled at this turn of events, about which he had never been consulted, José approached Dr. A. and inquired.

“Oh, those were paid for out of your grant money,” Dr. A. informed him. “All grants that you bring in with you automatically become property of the hospital, and they decide how to spend it.” When José objected, especially after hearing the exorbitant price paid for the shelves, one of the ladies at the front desk called out, “Oh come on, Dr. Rabinowitz! You can’t expect us to mix woods! The room has to look coordinated!”

José and Josy had long been aware of the signs frequently displayed in public parks reading, “No Dogs, Mexicans, or Negroes Allowed!” One day when Josy was in the supermarket with the children, Lois, then four years old, asked for a drink. At the water fountain, realizing that the child was too short to reach the water, Josy lifted her, holding at spigot level till she finished her drink. As she put the child down, she noticed that a crowd had formed around the fountain.

“Lady!” exclaimed a man in the group. “Do you know what you just did?”

“I gave the child a drink!” Josy answered. “Why?”

“It’s a black fountain!” came the reply.

“So, it’s water, isn’t it!” Josy responded without thinking.

“Oh, she must be a Northerner,” sniveled one woman to another as the crowd dispersed.

But the final straw came when Josy picked up the Houston Post one morning and read a news item with a message to this effect:

Houston welcomes the visit of Miss Bonita Jackson, educator and physical therapist from the New York City School System, to our area this coming week. Miss Jackson will be spending five full days in the elementary schools. She will be working mainly with six-year-olds, training them to master such feats as standing on their right foot with their left hand up in the air, then on their left foot with the right hand held high, on both feet jumping up and down and raising hands alternatively, etc. A few critics have argued that this will take time away from the schools’ reading programs. Everyone knows, however, that children will learn to read eventually. But where again could our youngsters find the opportunity for unique physical training like this?

After reading this, it came as no surprise to learn that the Houston Public School System had decided not only to completely ignore the existence of the

United Nations in New York, but to adopt a decision that year to rule World History out of the fifth-grade curriculum and replace it with the history of Texas!

By this time, José and Josy both decided that, under no circumstances, did they want to bring up their children in such an environment, political or educational. The time was fast approaching when they must leave for their Fulbright year in Denmark. They were sorry to leave the good friends they had made in Texas, but they remained firmly decided not to return and settle there. When they finally left for Europe, they knew it would be for good. But at the same time, they realized that they now had no roots in the United States; they did not know to where they were going to eventually return. The worst question anyone could ask them during that year in Europe, Josy came to realize was “Where in the United States are you from?” To this, they would have no answer until their return to American shores in September of 1958.