

LIVING IN TEXAS 2

José had found a partially furnished apartment in Houston, in a complex just three minutes drive from Methodist Hospital. The living room came with a sofa and one chair, and a rug that would have been pretty had they not walked on it (when they did it folded over with every footstep and had to be straightened out continuously). In the adjoining dining room was a table with a bright chartreuse Formica top, its four chairs topped with dark blue seat covers, a cheerful combination. A stainless-steel sink gave the small kitchen a modern look. The three bedrooms they furnished with their beds and bureaus shipped from Philadelphia. In the middle one, the corner room, they had their air conditioner installed, which kept that end of the apartment fairly comfortable.

They found most people in Houston unusually outgoing. On more than one occasion a call would come from a total stranger saying, “We got your name from a friend of a friend of a friend. Can we come over and give you a Texas welcome!”

It turned out that only one of every ten or so people they met were native Texans. The population of the city (about a million at the time) had a constant turn-over, many people coming for a year or two and then moving on. Most seemed to have no local family ties, which made them seek closer relationships with outsiders. All this made Houston of the 1950s a most openly friendly town.

Among the people they first met were the Waldmans, June and Nelson. He was an optometrist, tall, personable, outgoing, and exceedingly handsome. He was the son of a Jeanette Waldman, whose name had been given to José by his friend and colleague Dr. Ralph Myerson, from the VA hospital in Philadelphia.

“You’ll find the Waldman family warm beyond belief,” Ralph had told him. “Jeanette and her husband were close friends of my parents in Boston. They’re the warmest-hearted people I ever met.”

And so they turned out to be. Not only did they invite José and Josy with the children over and over again, repeatedly going out of their way to make them feel welcome. It would be the Waldmans who came to the rescue when there was no one to take care of Lois (then three years old) on the day the other two children had their tonsils out.

“She’ll stay with us, of course,” June volunteered, insisting that they bring Lois there every day the week before the surgery so when the time came she would be in familiar surroundings.

People often used to comment on how handsome Nelson was.

“Aren’t you afraid that he might look at another woman?” June was often asked, to which she jocularly replied, “I’m not really worried about Nelson looking at other women. What does worry me is other women looking at Nelson!”

They were a very happy couple, easy-going, warm and generous, instantly popular with everyone who met them.

Another couple who became close friends were Saul and Dorothy Kit. Saul was a researcher at Methodist Hospital in the laboratory next door to José’s. When he heard that the family was arriving from Philadelphia he immediately sent his wife Dorothy over to welcome them. She appeared on the doorsteps of their apartment even as the moving van from was arriving to unload their furniture from Philadelphia. From that very day hardly a week passed that the two families failed to spend some time with together.

There was another couple (Libby and Fernando, their last name long since forgotten) who lived in the same apartment complex as José and Josy. She had been born in the United States, he in South America. Every day around five-thirty they would take their afternoon stroll, wheeling their baby carriage, always making it a point to stop by just at suppertime. It got to be almost a daily occurrence, and Josy always invited them to stay for dinner, which they always accepted.

At one point Libby informed Josy that there was a real bargain to be had in purchasing a whole veal for the freezer. This was too much for her family alone, she said, and she convinced Josy to buy the other half of the animal so both families could take advantage of the bargain. For their entire stay in Houston that summer they ate veal just about every night to use it all up before leaving for Denmark.

Libby and Fernando continued to stop by regularly until one evening when José’s mother Rachel came visiting from Washington State. She arrived a couple days before José would return from the Gordon Research Conference in New Hampshire, meetings he had been attending every summer from the year 1951 on. This year it was particularly important for him to go so he could personally meet with Professor Linderstrom-Lang from Denmark, who would also be attending. Complications had recently developed in the arrangements for his Fulbright fellowship that only Professor Lang could straighten out. Before leaving, José had instructed Josy to be sure to introduce his mother to Fernando, hoping they would have much in common since both had lived in Latin America. Everything went well for the first few minutes after Josy introduced them. Then suddenly she heard Rachel ask a question in Spanish that included the word “mestizo”. Fernando’s face colored. Stiffly he and Libby rose, excused themselves,

wheeled the baby carriage out of the apartment, and disappeared, never to return after that. Josy guessed that Rachel must have asked if Fernando was “mestizo” (of mixed Indian and European blood) and that he must have construed this as an insult. They never saw or heard from him or Libby again.

The people in the local synagogue also were extremely friendly, offering free membership during their time in Texas. They enrolled the children in the synagogue nursery school where, to everyone’s delight, the little ones learned to recite the ten commandments, chirping in high firm voices, “Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother!” and “Thou shalt not commit adultery.”

One of José’s laboratory assistants, a young fellow named Jean Pierre Dupont, was Danish. He had married an American woman, and during that particular summer his mother Lis happened to come from Copenhagen for a visit. This was a stroke of luck for José and Josy, for when Jean introduced her they took to each other immediately, and would find her extremely eager to help them when they would come to Denmark several months later.

Lis Dupont was outgoing, charming and extremely delightful beyond belief. Back in Denmark she worked for *Politiken*, Copenhagen’s principal newspaper, where she held the job of Editor-in-Chief of its magazine supplement. As such, she kept well informed on events both local and international. Fluent in English, lively and cultured, extremely personable, she was constantly on the lookout for anything that might inspire an interesting feature article for her newspaper. Later in Copenhagen she would prove immeasurably helpful as they accommodated to the Danish way of life. There she would become a very close friend, and before long announce in no uncertain terms that she was dubbing herself the children’s “Danish Grandmaman”.

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And then there was Dorothy Wellington. One morning as Josy was throwing out her trash, the neighbor from the adjoining apartment happened to open her back door at the very same moment.

“You must be getting ready to move,” she surmised, glancing at the accumulating boxes and crates that Josy was discarding. “Where are you moving to?”

“Denmark,” Josy replied.

“Ah, Denmark,” the neighbor sighed wistfully. “That was where my first love came from.” And she proceeded to tell Josy the following story.

She had been a WAAC during World War II and, when the war ended, she had been assigned to post-war Germany. A Ph.D. in economics, she got assigned to work in the Allied Denazification Committee trying to distribute the assets and end control of the Farber Company's hold on the German chemical industry. There she had met a Danish count by the name of Frants Sporon-Fiedler. They had fallen in love and before long got engaged. They actually set a date to be married, and he took her to Denmark to meet his parents. Then two weeks before the wedding, along came an American captain, strapping, charismatic, and from a prominent New York family – the Wellingtons of the moneyed Wellington Fund Foundation. Within days he and Dorothy eloped, and that was the end of the Danish romance.

It now turned out, Dorothy told her, that she and Wellington had gotten a divorce a few years later, after the birth of their two children. He had since remarried, but remained on very good terms with Dorothy, coming often to visit. (He would actually take José and Josy out with Dorothy to dinner when he next arrived to see the children that August). But there had been a stipulation in their divorce agreement that Dorothy found almost intolerable. She would continue to receive extremely generous child-support as long as she remained a stay-at-home parent. The minute she went back to work, however, all alimony payments would stop. Brilliant, worldly, highly educated, Dorothy gave up her prestigious career. But the children were still preschoolers, and she felt stifled at the prospect of a long future of domesticity ahead. In desperation she took course after course at the local university to keep intellectually occupied.

She soon became on close terms with José and Josy, dropping into their apartment to socialize whenever she could.

“When you get to Copenhagen,” she told Josy one day, “and once you get settled there, do me a favor. Call Frants Sporon-Fiedler – I’ll give you his address – and tell him Dorothy thinks of him often and sends her love.”

This would eventually lead to a whole new friendship for José and Josy in Denmark that would last long after their year abroad was over, although once they left Texas they would never see Dorothy Wellington again.

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Despite all the pleasant social connections that they made in Houston, however, their few months living there temporarily convinced José and Josy that under no circumstances did they did want to make Texas their

permanent home. The unforgiving and unrelenting heat and oppressive humidity that every day brought they found utterly debilitating. In the morning from their apartment window they could see the skyline of the city, actual clouds of steam rising from the tops of the tall buildings in the distance. Even just the few steps from their apartment door to their air-conditioned car parked just yards away left them physically drained.

One time as they were driving down Main Street, Josy spotted a sign reading “Air Conditioned Drive-In.”

“This we have to see,” she told José. He pulled in to the lot.

“Close all your windows except the two front side ones,” the attendant instructed.

Once this was done, the fellow now forced two hoses in , one on each side. One shot cold air into the car; the other acted as an exhaust.

“Now what’ll it be?” he asked, taking out his note pad. “Hot dogs? Hamburgers? Fries with that?”

The city was visually beautiful, belying its insufferable climate. Spanish moss dripped everywhere from trees luxuriant in greenery. Tall glass-walled skyscrapers lined splendid modern avenues. Tucked away in secluded spots were charming surprises: the Allen’s theater, museums, stately imposing mansions. José once even got invited to the Petroleum Club, a snobby and prestigious association where being a millionaire was a requirement for membership. (One of the heads at Methodist Hospital liked him enough to invite him for dinner there as his guest.) This was where José first heard the term “doggy bag” used, long before it was common. Several of the more prominent members demanded that their leftover food be wrapped to take home to “their dogs”, as they pompously explained.

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But what José and Josy disliked most about Texas was the political climate. In several public places they saw signs reading “No coloreds, Mexicans, or dogs allowed.”

Once, inside a supermarket, Josy took Lois to a water fountain and lifted her up to reach the spigot. Suddenly she grew aware of a crowd forming around her.

“Lady, what you just did!” gasped a man nearby.

“What did I do?” she asked, nonplussed. “I just gave my little girl a drink.”

“Yeah, but from the nigger fountain,” he replied, horrified.

Looking down she spotted that there were two fountains side by side. Only one was marked “for whites only”.

“It’s the same water,” she remarked, at which point the crowd dispersed, several people murmuring, “Oh, she must be a Yankee”.

More offensive, though, was what occurred one evening when José had to return to the laboratory after supper to complete an experiment begun that afternoon. Arriving around seven-thirty he noticed a taxi pulling up to the front of the hospital. Getting out he driver, with the help of another man, lifted a black man out of the cab. Together they carried him into the building.

A couple hours later, as José was leaving, he saw the same two carrying the patient back into the taxicab, while several ambulances stood idly by.

“What’s going on?” he demanded.

“Oh, he needed an operation,” they told him, “They don’t do it in his hospital. So they sent him here. But he’s got to go back now. He can’t stay here; he don’t belong in a white hospital.”

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The politics inside Methodist Hospital were far from José’s liking as well. When he came to work there he had brought along a couple of his own research grants from Philadelphia. The one from Smith Kline and French he had earmarked for a particular project. Then one morning when he arrived at work he was shocked to find new bookshelves in his office. They were nothing he had ordered. Of fine blond mahogany. they had been installed over the weekend without anyone having consulted him.

“Where did these come from?” he wanted to know. “And what did they cost? They look very expensive. Who paid for them?”

“You did,” he was told. “We used the money from your grant. It just about covered them.”

Outraged, he stormed into the Director’s office. Here he was told that all moneys he had brought with him were now under the jurisdiction of the hospital.

“Your desk is blond mahogany,” they explained, “and this is a modern well-run hospital. We can’t have anything here that doesn’t match!”

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Other things about Houston that shocked them were what they were learning about the public schools. Inquiries revealed some startling details.

During their time in Houston a new state law was passed. Denying the very the existence of a new organization called the United Nations, it declared that world history would be replaced in fifth grade classes by Texas history.

“This must be one of those Texas jokes,” José exclaimed.

“No, seriously, it’s true,” he was told. “After all, anything that happens in Texas really involves the whole world.”

The final straw came when, one morning late in May, a small item in the *Houston Post* caught Josy’s eye. The gist of it was as follows.

As we come to the end of the school year, we are fortunate to have with us Miss (and it gave a name), Specialist in Physical Education from New York City. She will be visiting our schools for the next two weeks. She will work with first graders, teaching them exceptional skills. Under her direction they will learn to master standing on their left foot with their right hand up in the air for an entire minute, on their right foot with the left hand up in the air, etc. They will also learn to do jumping jacks in ever decreasing amounts of time...

(and on the article went with examples of other gymnastic feats).

A few people have complained that cut into reading instruction time. Everyone knows, however, that children will learn to read anyhow. But who can say when we may again have such an opportunity to gain valuable instruction like this from specialists like our current New York visitor.

“We have to get out of here,” Josy told José. “We can’t come back to Texas and put our kids into schools like these.”

And he agreed wholeheartedly.

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For the children’s medical care they used the services of two pediatricians in joint practice at Methodist Hospital. They first went there for the children’s immunization shots, at which time Malva and Marty howled (more in indignation than pain), while three-year-old Lois never uttered a whimper, to the amazement of the medical staff present.

Not long afterwards the two physicians ended their partnership. Josy had been noticing that the first doctor was now usually prescribing medications by phone without even seeing his patients. It came as a relief when she heard that the partnership was breaking up.

By now it was mid-June. She now took the children to see the other physician, who examined the children thoroughly and announced that both Malva and Marty needed their tonsils out.

“We’ll do it as soon as September rolls around,” he told Josy.

But when she explained that that was exactly when they would be leaving for Denmark for a year and that she was reluctant to start looking for surgery abroad, he insisted that he do the operations immediately.

“The final week of June is the last we can do tonsillectomies. Then the polio season starts,” he told her. “We’re not permitted to do take out tonsils all summer.”

(This was still a few years before the advent of the Salk vaccine.)

He scheduled surgery for both children, one immediately following the other, on the same morning the last day of the month. That was when Lois went to stay with the Waldman family while José and Josy went to the hospital to be with the other two children.

“Oh, so your wife will be away all night,” his boss Dr. A. teased.

“This is your chance to go out with a blonde.”

“I will,” José answered, “and she’s three years old.”

Josy spent that night at the hospital while José went to the Waldmans to pick Lois up and take her home with him.

He took her first to a restaurant for dinner before heading back for the apartment. No sooner had he bought the food and set it down than she announced that she needed to use the bathroom. Leaving everything where it was on the table, he took her to use the facilities, only to discover, on their return, that somebody had come by and removed all their dishes. In frustration, he had to go through the cafeteria line again and order a new meal for them both.

Not long afterward Josy developed a urinary tract infection, and the urologist insisted on sending her to the hospital for overnight treatment. The following day when José brought her home, Malva (then six years old) met them at the door.

“Where’s the baby?” she wanted to know.

“What baby,” Josy told her. “Mommy went to the hospital for medicine, and she’s all well now.”

“Where’s the baby?” Malva repeated. “Every time Mommy goes to the hospital she comes home with a baby!”

“There’s no baby,” José insisted. But he had to take her through the entire apartment before she would believe him, opening all the closets and drawer after drawer so she could search for herself. It took several days before she finally became convinced.

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Just when things seemed to be calming down a new problem suddenly arose. It was a pressing dilemma, unexpected and disconcerting. One day José received notice from the Fulbright Commission that they would be sending him to the Max Planck Institute in Gottingen, Germany instead of to Professor Lang’s laboratory in Denmark. This presented a quandary they had no immediate idea how to cope with. There were absolutely no housing accommodations for the visiting scientists in Gottingen.

The Commission was adamant about this. Living conditions were so overcrowded that families who ignored the warning and took the chance of coming there anyway in the hopes that somehow someplace would open for them were unceremoniously sent back to the United States on the next plane out. There had been several who tried, and the results were always the same. Josy spent hours on the telephone with Lufthansa Airlines, trying to convince them to look into the matter for her and use whatever influence they could, despite all odds, to find accommodations for them in Germany. Lufthansa Airlines, she stressed, also stood to gain if they succeeded, for this would mean the sale of five airline tickets instead of just one. The company did actually look into the matter, but also came up with failure.

There was no longer a house in Philadelphia for Josy and the children to return to if José were to go to Europe alone for the year. They had no strong ties in Houston to depend on, so for her and the children to remain there without him was out of the question. José's mother Rachel invited Josy to come live with her in Vancouver, Washington for the year if necessary. But she let it be firmly understood that should they come, then it would be she, and not Josy, who would be entirely in charge of supervising the children’s upbringing. It was a dark period indeed, and time was growing extremely short. Not until very late in July, when José traveled to the New Hampshire Gordon Research Conference, did the matter get sorted out. There, meeting face to face with Professor Lindstrom-Lang, José was able to apprise him of the situation, at which time Lang, using his personal influence, succeeded in getting the Fulbright Commission to assign José to his laboratory in Denmark as originally agreed upon. By the time this

became officially authorized it was already early August, just three weeks before he was due to leave for Europe.

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José left Houston one week before Josy. She and the children remained until September 1st, the day their apartment's monthly lease expired. Just before he left, they advertised in the *Houston Post* and found a buyer for their car, a middle-aged woman who eyed them suspiciously on hearing their specifications. They were asking two hundred fifty dollars with a down payment of twenty-five dollars immediately and the rest payable a week and a half later, the night Josy left Texas. This was Josy would have use of the car until the last minute. At that point they would turn the vehicle over to the buyer just before leaving for the airport.

Grudgingly the woman agreed. Paying the twenty-five-dollar deposit, she promised to come with the balance at six in the evening on September 1st. One of José's laboratory technicians, a young man named Victor, promised to arrive that night to drive Josy and the children to the airport, where they would take the plane (again the "red-eye special") through Atlanta to Philadelphia. They planned to spend one week with her father before flying on to New York and from there to Copenhagen. José would meet them in Denmark after first attending the Atoms for Peace Congress in Paris.

It was a complex arrangement but for the most part it worked. José left Texas late in August as scheduled. He stopped in Philadelphia for several days, then went to New York to sail on the *Queen Mary* for Europe. It was agreed that from the pier in New York he would call her at her father's place on September 2nd around nine o'clock in the morning just before the ship set sail. This way they would both be caught up on the latest happenings in their complicated schedules.

Josy spent that last week in Houston packing, tending to last minute details, and preparing to turn the apartment keys over to the landlord on the last day when she would get her escrow back. Her neighbor Dorothy Wellington was especially helpful, not only with small practical details, but in keeping her company and giving her moral support. They had grown quite friendly in the past several weeks, and Dorothy promised to be present when Josy turned the car over to the new owner.

Though due at six o'clock, the buyer did not show up till eight thirty. She arrived with a surly looking man who scowled maliciously but said

nothing at first. Seating themselves on the sofa, they looked from Josy to Dorothy and back again, and then the woman made spoke.

"I decided to give you only two hundred twenty-five dollars for the car, not two hundred and fifty" she said.

Josy was shocked. "But you owe me two hundred twenty-five. That was the price you agreed on," she told her.

"No, I'm only paying you two hundred dollars more now," the woman responded.

Josy stared at her in disbelief.

"I know you're leaving for the airport tonight," the woman continued, sure of herself. "So you got no choice. It's too late for you to find another buyer now anyway. You're going to have to take my offer."

Recovering her composure, Josy reminded her of their previous agreement, tried reasoning with her, and appealed to her sense of fairness, all to no avail.

"Take it or leave it," the woman said. "You're stuck!"

For the first time the man spoke. "We have you over a barrel," he said, "and you know it."

It was not so much the twenty-five dollar-difference that offended Josy, but rather their premeditated plan to cheat her.

"I'm not selling you the car unless you pay what we agreed on," she retorted.

"But what will you do?" the man exclaimed. "You can't take the car on the plane with you, you know!" and he laughed.

"Then I'll leave it with my friend to sell," Josy replied angrily, "He'll send me the money whenever he gets it."

Shocked, they both sat in silence. Then the woman demanded. "Give me back my twenty-five dollars then."

"Not on your life," Josy replied. "That's what a deposit is for. You deliberately tried to cheat me. If you pay the price we agreed on you can still have the car. Otherwise, forget it."

Reluctantly, the couple got up and shuffled out in disbelief.

It turned out to be after ten o'clock when Victor arrived. He had gotten unexpectedly delayed, and now Josy had to take the time to explain the latest developments to him. She handed him the keys of the car, and wrote down her address in Copenhagen. (It would take three months, but he did finally manage to sell the car for them, getting the full price and forwarding the money to them in Denmark. It arrived around Christmas.)

Now suddenly they found they were running late. Hugging Dorothy Wellington good-bye, Josy rushed the children into the car while Victor

loaded the luggage. Off they sped out onto Main Street, racing towards the airport, tearing down the highway as they sped through one traffic light after another. Victor raced through each intersection honking the horn wildly. Whizzing into the airport, he jumped out of the car and rushed her suitcases inside, while Josy flung Marty (not quite two) into his collapsible stroller and shouted to Lois and Malva, "Hang on to the handles, Girls! Let's run!" They tore through the doors of the building just as the announcement came over the loudspeaker, "Last call to board for Atlanta!"

"Hold the plane," shouted, a steward, spotting her, "There's a woman with six children coming!"

And that was how they finally got out of Texas.