



My Landlady

My landlady in San Miguel swept her patio every morning whether it needed it or not. The tiles were not always strewn with debris that blew over the walls during the night, but she swept the patio anyway. She said: “If you clean something every day it never gets dirty.” Her words, as simple as they are profound, have stayed with me for some forty-five years. Their underlying ethic has served me as a sort of north star, although I’m afraid I have never been as disciplined as Lupe was.

Lupe and her husband, José, owned a piece of land in San Miguel Allende, a small town in central Mexico. Their lot was on Calle Atascadero, a few blocks up the hill from the market, up where the breeze blew in fresh from the mountains. They built their home on the ground floor and, as money permitted, added three more floors above them. I lived on the first floor. A young chanteuse lived on the second floor with her very young daughter. And a painter lived in the rooftop apartment, with a view of the rolling countryside all the way to the horizon. Sunsets viewed from the top floor were spectacular.

José had a job in New York and spent several months there every winter. He had a U.S. work permit and could travel back and forth any time he wanted. He worked at a delicatessen in New York City for an employer who recognized him as an honest, hardworking man. The owner welcomed José back year after year and would have kept him on the payroll full-time if he’d wanted to stay.

But José had a long-term plan. He worked all day at the sandwich counter and in the evening, he watched TV and went to bed early. When he returned to Mexico, he brought a wad of money which he spent on bricks and cement. Then, during the summer, he and his two brothers built a home for

him and Lupe and, bit by bit, added three apartments that he rented to Americans and others, like me, who came to San Miguel to attend the Instituto Allende art college. They were not luxury flats. They were built simply with no frills. But they were bright and airy, with whitewashed walls, some furniture, and all the necessary appliances. Mine had a fireplace that kept the whole space warm on cold winter nights. There were large windows in the living room and a glass door that led onto the balcony, where I had my first cup of coffee in the morning. From there I watched Lupe sweep her patio with her daughter Teresa at her side.

Teresa lived with Lupe and José in an arrangement that suited them all. She was a single mother with a tiny baby girl and had her own room at the far end of the patio. She helped her mother with the housework and kitchen work, although Lupe did most of the cooking herself, and kept her company while José was in New York. When they swept the patio in the morning, they wore long, loose-fitting nightgowns and walked barefoot on the rust-coloured tiles. They both had thick, shiny black hair that fell down their backs to the waist. Later they would braid their hair and wear it coiled around their heads during the day. While the baby snoozed in a cradle on a chair, the two women swept their way around her in a graceful pattern that I could see choreographed from my vantage point on the balcony. They were in no hurry. This was not some odious chore to be dispatched as quickly as possible. Not at all. It was their way of engaging with the day, an essential ritual that gradually yielded to the other activities that would keep them busy until nightfall. One day I asked Lupe why she swept her patio every day whether it needed it or not. That’s when she spoke the words I have never forgotten: “If you clean something every day it never gets dirty.”