

# Mexican Smells

by Rocio Guenther

Black smoke swirls from behind the bus as it stops. Marta coughs lightly as a response, something she's gotten used to every morning. She wraps her knit scarf around her throat and climbs inside the bus. She eyes Doña Pepa, the lady from the marketplace and decides to slide in next to her. Coming from Santa Anna, it's not unusual to share a bus seat with a neighbor, or even a family member. She sighs as she remembers Armando's floppy hair from that morning, how he quickly ate his quesadilla and left to tend to his *Tejuino* stand. Marta's eyes gleam out toward the awakened city of Guadalajara from the foggy bus window. *Ese niño no para*, she says to herself. "That boy does not know when to stop." The bus thumps and wobbles to the side, as passengers hold on tighter to the slimy metal poles.

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When Marta first met Mrs. Castellanos she wore her long black hair in a bun, and her best white-laced apron. Her previous boss, Mrs. Gomez had moved to another state and had recommended Marta. Mrs. Castellanos showed Marta around. Three patios, two dining tables, one TV room, eight bedrooms, two living rooms and a terrace later Marta gasped, mouth wide open. Slowly but surely, Marta learned her way around the house, quickened her pace, and finished her duties in a flurry. She would always leave the bedrooms for last. She enjoyed admiring the teenagers' rooms. *La Señora* had two adolescent children, whom she never cooked food for: Bernardo and Mariana.

Marta would make tasty *mole*: tortillas wrapped around chicken pieces topped with a chocolaty sauce, peppered with a hint of chipotle. Bernardo and Mariana would praise her for her meals. The only time they ever addressed her was at the kitchen when she served the food. Her communication stemmed from glances of approval pertaining to her spicy Mexican dishes, and her zesty flavors simmering inside Mrs. Castellanos kitchen pots.

During chilly autumn mornings Marta wished for Mrs. Castellanos's life to be her own. For them, everything looked effortless, nothing brought up struggles. They had too many clothes to count, no dirty house to worry about, and no real fear of the world.

"Here, take these old clothes. We have no need for them anymore," Mrs. Castellanos told her one afternoon, as she handed over a white plastic bag to Marta. She recalled telling Mrs. Castellanos that if she ever needed to get rid of something, to hand it over to her. She would get good use out of it. Euphoria encircled Marta's thoughts; these clothes would get her closer to moving forward in her life.

Armando, her son, would have new t-shirts for school, and keep the old ones to wear under the scorching sun while he sold *Tejuino* in the hottest mornings. At home, Marta ripped the bag open, the plastic squeaking with every tear. As she analyzed every cloth piece, she noticed brands, brands, and more brands. Big words sewed onto each shirt reading fancy foreign names. To Marta, clothes were enough, not what label name was on them, as long as they served their purpose. Maybe the better life involved being too picky. Nevertheless, she wanted her life to be so much better.

Mariana spent endless hours on her computer, just staring at the glowing screen. Marta didn't understand. Girls in her neighborhood played outside, kicked the ball on the soccer field with the boys, making the dirt on the field levitate with every kick. For Mariana it was just the click-clack from the keyboard. She just locked herself up in her room, and only went out at night to parties she would come back home drunk from. When Marta stayed over one night she heard Mariana's footsteps, heard her barfing near the kitchen sink. But when a maid listens she keeps everything to herself.

Bernardo thumped away at his controller. His school bag never moved from that one corner in his room. *Why does he even go to school then?* Marta would muse. *My son works extra hard for his grades, gets up extra early to roll through the streets selling drinks.* Bernardo only worried about what type of Armani perfume he wore for his outings. Armando, on the other hand went to school in the evenings, his day always filled, having to balance work with schoolwork. Marta was proud of her son. When the sun rose, she would bless him by gesturing with her hands the Virgin's blessing upon his face every day. He would come home to shower before school, his cinnamon skin beaded in sweat.

"*Mami, I'll see you tonight,*" he would whisper, always looking forward to Marta's kitchen smells.

Mrs. Castellanos did nothing to motivate her children. She wasn't really there; although physically she was, her superficiality would overshadow any emotional connection with her children. Every morning she would go to hair salons, long breakfasts with her *comadres*, and get her nails done. Coming home with long white-tipped nails which enhanced her smooth hands; hands that Marta could never have. Hers were calloused and plain, hers were made for bleaching clothes and mopping floors. Oh if only she could be like *La Señora*. Her life would be so much better.

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When Marta got her first raise, she felt like she was dipping her toes into the stream of prosperity. With the money she had saved over the years, including the short months working with Mrs. Castellanos, she was ready to ride the bus home and buy something special. Clothes? A big TV screen for Armando and herself? How about a new couch? Marta fidgeted in her seat, and flattened out her skirt in anticipation. As the bus stopped, and Doña Pepa scurried off toward the cobblestone roads of Santa Anna, Marta went straight to the market. Her nostrils flared as she smelled and decided what seasonings to purchase, and her pupils widened as she eyed freshly baked bread.

When the stars popped up through the sky, Marta laid out her newly bought tablecloths on the tables outside her humble home. As pots bubbled, and salt was sprinkled, smells and steam traveled through the town, calling her family and friends to the table. *Chiles rellenos, mole, tortas ahogadas, tacos, quesadillas, gringas,* and beans were only but a few of the dishes Marta had managed to make for her neighborhood. Armando finished his shower and ran to the kitchen, hunting the strong smell of *chiles*.

“Mother, what is all this?” he asked, astonished. As he asked this, Doña Pepa entered the house.

“It’s been too long since a family reunion.” Marta answered. “Doña Pepa, call the townspeople, tell them supper is ready.” Swarms of life-long friends and family members served themselves and smiled. They all shared the warmth, and the flavor of real Mexican unity. Her life was so much better.

1. Tejuino: A cold beverage made from fermented corn popularly drunk in the Mexican state of Jalisco. It is often served with a scoop of shaved ice.