

Green Bananas - Part 2

Esther offers me a glass of coca cola that she pulls out of the cupboard. The scent of *Fabuloso* lingers in the air. It's a Mexican all-purpose cleaner available in the local variety store. She has finished her Saturday cleaning early so we can visit in peace. We've been talking about what it's like to adjust to life in Canada. She covers her mouth and laughs self-consciously remembering the first time she attempted to bake cake in Canada. It was the first time that she and her husband drove to the grocery store by themselves, the new Licence burning a hole in his pocket. He had worked hard learning the English words for all the signs and finally passing the road test.

They'd made a few wrong turns along the way leaving Esther a nervous wreck by the time they arrived at the packed store on a Friday night. It had taken some time to realize why the shopping cart was stuck and then having to gesture to a friendly customer that they didn't have a quarter to release the cart. Manoeuvring through the aisles trying to decipher the labels had been overwhelming. Nothing seemed to make sense, and the whole chicken she'd found!? Well, it may as well not be called Chicken Noodle Soup for the lack of flavour that it had produced. In the end she had not found the vanilla and the wrong kind of flour so that her cake flopped in the centre and even her boy who devoured everything she put in front of him had wrinkled his nose at it. She'd wished yet again that she'd been allowed to go to school and learn to read better.

Esther recalls her father expressing a hope that his children would get a better schooling than he'd had. And since Esther was an eager student he was altogether disappointed when the time came for Esther to quit school at the age of 10. She had learned the ABCs, graduated to learning the Catechism and then learning from the Bible, but since her mother had needed help cleaning, cooking and washing the heaps of dirty laundry created by a family of 14 it was decided that Esther would stay at home and help instead of continuing her education. Esther was happy to help her mother, who'd always had a generous heart for her family and friends. But now looking back, she wishes again to be a more capable reader and it is this realization that pushes the family to enrol the children in Canadian schools. The younger children make the trip to the local public school by bus and Anna and Susie are taking courses through an alternate high school program that allows them to take their school work home.

Today, the two girls sit at the sewing machine together working on a new dress to be worn at Anna's upcoming baptism. The deep brown folds appear under her skillful 16 year old fingers. The girls ruminate that the most difficult thing about leaving their home was selling all of their belongings at an auction. During the last few weeks in South America they'd had to borrow some dishes from their grandparents. The house had felt so empty 'as though a part of you was also missing'. No more cows to milk in the mornings, no chickens to feed or feathers to pluck and make into pillows or furniture to dust. They had not known what to do with themselves without any work to do. Susie wonders whether their old dog is still waiting for them at the end of the driveway.

The first snow fall in Canada had been exciting and they'd all gone out to enjoy it even without proper winter boots and coats. Their cousins had been a big help those first weeks and months by including them in social activities. Although, their cousins had often slipped

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into English among their friends; Anna and Susie had felt left out, lonely and nervous a lot of the time and the small cramped apartment felt stuffy and crowded. Esther says that the field work was a relief when spring had finally arrived because then they'd been able to earn a better income and working together on the cucumber machine drew them all together even if the younger children were playing more than working.

And now after a few seasons they have moved into a larger house with a yard; Esther is grateful to be able to raise her own chickens and plant a garden. The girls are making friends, going to youth gatherings to play volley ball, snack on sunflower seeds and visit. She is pleased that they are learning to read and write well, and playing volley-ball would never have been allowed in her village. Instead, she and her husband had worried about them, wondering if they'd fall into bad habits with nothing to do on the village streets to keep them occupied. But this, these supervised gatherings where young people could have fun and get to know each other, is proving to be a wonderful change. And that Anna has decided to be baptised is especially good news. Esther shares this with me privately, not wanting her girls to hear her speaking negatively about what could have been.

Yes, life has been difficult at times especially in the beginning when everything was new. But deciding to stay put and trust that God would provide them with employment, friends and a church family has been rewarding as well. Esther points out that God seems to put us in a place where we not only do what needs doing but also what we enjoy doing. This has been true in her life and she smiles remembering how she had prayed for a better life for her children and how here she is seeing it come to fruition.