



THE SUBTLE BUILDING OF A LIFE

She didn't much like Orange County, and never intended to stay. But stuff happens.

by *Barbara DeMarco-Barrett*

Almost as soon as I arrived in Orange County in the late '80s, I wanted to leave. We relocated here from San Francisco for my fiancé's family and the sun, but I couldn't make sense of the place. Sunsets here perplexed me. The sun didn't seem to set in what was true west. And the neighborhoods all looked the same. The architecture was so nondescript—nothing like

San Francisco's Victorian houses and cantilevered homes clinging like barnacles to the sides of the hills. How *did* people in Irvine find their way home with all those loops and curves?

In the rest of Orange County, tall, cement-block walls surrounded houses rather than the fences or hedges that separated the yards of my East Coast childhood. It was all white bread, and I was a multigrain sort of gal. Even though I'd had to move half a dozen times before I was 18, during my third year in Irvine I stood gazing through our living room window and said to our dog, "What's become of me?" My life had gone from kaleidoscopic to beige.

I FOUND US A RENTAL HOUSE IN Corona del Mar. I loved the bungalows and vernacular architecture and thought: "It's not San Francisco, but it's good, unique." My husband and I moved again. But after 10 years together, three of them married, we called it quits. He moved out and life began anew.

It was a fun time—for a while. I had an adorable home in a great neighborhood, a freelance public relations business, and time to work on my novel and do whatever else I wanted. I dated a bit, but a few strange experiences made me swear off men. Maybe it was time to leave, return to San Francisco, or even move back east.

And then, after I'd quit looking, I met Brian, a full-time musician and an Orange County native. We married and our son was on the way. All of Brian's family was here, and who moves with a newborn, anyway?

But I still complained. The cute old bungalows were being bought up and torn down to make way for McMansions and faux Italian villas. Hummers, Range Rovers, and SUVs dominated our tiny streets. Their drivers' sense of entitlement infuriated me. It was time to move

to a more humble neighborhood.

BY THEN OUR SON WAS ATTENDING the public school up the street. Wealthy parents poured money into its programs. But being benefactors also made them arrogant and demanding, which drove my friend the principal nuts and made me crazy, too.

“We’ve gotta get out of this place,” that line from an old Animals song, became my anthem. Every so often we’d consider moving. In the cities we could afford, the schools were less than what we’d grown accustomed to, and private school was too expensive. We opted to stay where we were until our son was in high school, but by the time he was, *he* didn’t want to leave his childhood home or his friends. So there we were—still. We’d stay until he graduated.

Besides, things were going well for me. I was teaching at UC Irvine Extension and running private writing workshops in my home. I worked as an editor, wrote freelance articles, had a radio show, and sold a book for a tidy sum. But I continued to bemoan the county’s politics, the entitlement, and the lack of programs for the local poor.

After our son finished high school, we still didn’t move. What was our excuse now? By then Brian began taking daily swims in the ocean a couple of blocks away (even in the winter!), and he had steady gigs close to home, a godsend for a musician.

The thought of relocating was suddenly more ... complicated. Then something unexpected happened.

I REQUIRED TWO MAJOR SURGERIES within the space of three months that kept me off my feet for weeks. Before my first surgery, a friend invited me to coffee. As we sat in her Newport Coast kitchen, she began writing down the names of friends. She wanted to organize a food train to make sure my family had home-cooked meals when I returned from the hospital.

In the old days, neighbors did this sort of thing for each other, but in 2015? It made me teary-eyed.

“I don’t want to be a burden,” I said. “Everyone’s so busy.”

“We want to do this,” she said. “It’s what

friends do, and your friends want to help. They love you.”

I cried more, but she wouldn’t let up. She wanted to know what we liked for dinner.

I told her what my physical therapist and doctor told me: lots of iron-producing foods—lentils, beans, spinach, greens—to deal with my anemia and to help with healing.

So for five weeks, five days a week, students and friends traipsed through the door with meals they prepared themselves. They were busy women—and men—without a lot of leisure time. We are a family of vegetarians, which meant they couldn’t just throw a chicken or a roast into a pot and be done with it. They had to chop and dice and spend serious time, and imagination, to create meals. One friend came over on Thanksgiving and spent the day helping Brian and our son, Travis, prepare a labor-intensive vegetarian dinner. Another who was scheduled to bring a meal ended up overwhelmed with her kids’ activities and drove a half hour each way to Au Lac, a Vietnamese restaurant in Fountain Valley, to pick up a four-course vegan dinner for us.

Another group of friends sent me a gift certificate to Bite Me Kitchen, a vegan meal delivery service, for when I was in a pinch. Others did errands, and still others brought lunch from Zinc Cafe down the street. A neighbor delivered homemade lentil soup and salad. And another left get-well cards and fruit by the door.

And it struck me: People rallying during hard times means you’ve made good friends, and having good friends means you’ve put down roots. All that time I was complaining, I was creating a life filled with loyal, loving friends.

This takes time.

These days when friends and colleagues complain about the county and threaten to leave, I’m its biggest fan. Consider what you’ll be leaving, I say. Think of the open space, the beautiful beaches, the culture, the restaurants. Think of your friends, because good friends don’t come easily. I surprise them with my attitude, but I surprise myself most of all. Even here in this sandy drought-dry soil, roots burrow deep. **OC**