

JUDITH GILLE

IN GRACIA'S KITCHEN

There are many women, including myself, who rack up thousands of frequent flier miles each year traveling the world in search of themselves. It's a major theme in women's travel writing. From Isak Dinesen and Beryl Markham to Frances Mayes and Elizabeth Gilbert, women have written compelling memoirs about how their stints in faraway places not only changed their lives, but also helped define who they ultimately became.

Yet the majority of the world's female population doesn't have the luxury of trotting around the globe in hopes of defining who they are, creating a new life abroad, or discovering love in places like Italy, Africa or Indonesia. My friend Gracia certainly doesn't. She has a husband and four children to support. But one day, while hanging out in her kitchen, I come to the realization that she's traveled as far as I have in the eleven years we've known each other. Without ever leaving home.



I've been hunched over my computer all morning, editing an essay, and need to stretch my legs and quench the thirst that is ever-present on Mexico's arid central plateau. So I stroll across the alley to Gracia's store in search of a Sidral. But the doors to her tiny *tienda* are closed.

Her youngest son, Cholo, is squatting on the steps above me, bouncing a soccer ball between his legs. He points toward the kitchen, indicating that his mom is up there.

Gracia's kitchen lies at the back of her house and is reachable only from an outside set of concrete stairs. I make the steep climb, not only for the soda but because it's our daily habit to check in with each other. I check in with her because her house is lively and full of people I care about. She checks in with me, I think, because she sees me as lonely and a bit pathetic. My