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The Silent Killer: Carbon Monoxide

30th July 2010 Mong-Lan

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In mid April of 2009, I came to Buenos Aires to study song and dance. I came here for the tango and to complete my novel. I came here ready and eager to begin a new life with my cat Dusk, my constant companion. This was not my first trip to Buenos Aires – it was my ninth trip here. But this time, I planned on staying for half a year or more.

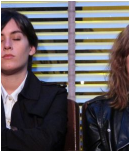
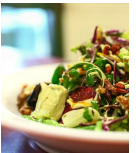


Gas Flames afire (Photo/Domiriel)

I found an apartment on Craigslist.org in the more up-market neighbourhood of Palermo, on Charcas and Scalabrini Ortiz. The landlord was a twenty-something circus performer and an actor. When I first saw the apartment, I thought it was a good apartment, luminous with a large balcony on the top floor.

It was a typical apartment rented to tourists. An apartment rented to tourists is usually furnished, with all expenses included, and costs about 3 or 4 times more than the rental rate for Argentines. At this point, unfortunately, I was unaware and knew very

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little about Buenos Aires apartments and what was a legally installed or an illegally installed gas unit.

I wondered why I was constantly feeling sick and tired, groggy, living in a state of stupor, experiencing flu-like symptoms. I wondered why my cat would go to the bathroom to take gulping breaths of air. Although I opened my patio doors while I was at home about an inch or so, the bathroom was the only place that had one window open all the time.

After my cat died one early morning in the dead of winter in late June, I put two and two together and turned off the gas heaters in the bedroom and the living room. Only one North American believed me when I told him that my cat died from carbon monoxide poisoning. He has lived here more than three years, and heard stories of Argentines being asphyxiated in their apartments from the gas heaters. *Porteños* believed me immediately and added that it is not uncommon here in Buenos Aires. People have died from gas heaters here for years during the winters and continue to die from gas heaters. Babies and small animals die first, because carbon monoxide stays on the ground.

I notified the landlord that my cat had died, and that there was something wrong with the gas heaters or there was a gas leak. He came, looked around and said there was nothing wrong, no gas leak and that all the gas heaters were working fine.

So I stopped using the gas heaters. While grieving for my cat and crying constantly, I now had to worry about how to stay warm. I bought some portable electric heaters. My opera-singing teacher noticed that my voice had improved considerably and that I could breathe. She asked me what happened. I told her that I stopped using the gas heaters in the apartment after my cat died from carbon monoxide poisoning. She said: "You have to do something about this. You can't just let it go. You have to cause trouble. Get a lawyer."

Several days later, after thinking it over, I wrote to the landlord again saying that indeed, there was something wrong, and that I wanted to talk with him. Specifically, I told him that under the circumstances, I wanted some compensation from him, or, if



Image by Jan Charles Linus Ekenstam

not, I would pursue legal action.

We made an appointment to meet at the apartment. I asked a friend to be present at the meeting. The landlord came with his “lawyer”. Immediately, both began to attack me. This attack was to last for a whole hour. The lawyer was ravenous, foaming at the mouth.

“You don’t know how to use the heaters. You have to leave the door open,” he said. While at that point, I was no longer using the gas heaters and had the electric heater on, the lawyer said: “Here, I am taking a photo with your patio door

closed. It should be opened.”

With regard to the gas heater in the living room, this one was placed right in the middle of the room attached to a wall without a funnel for the carbon monoxide to escape. I read aloud what it says on the heater in the living room: “*No instalar en locales sin ventilación permanente.*” (Do not install without permanent ventilation). I said, “Obviously, this heater was installed illegally.”

The lawyer yelled, “You have to leave the patio door open. That is permanent ventilation. We Argentines live like this and have lived like this forever. You are stupid because you did not leave the door open.”

The landlord’s girlfriend also came, and said in an outburst: “You are stupid. You are like an adolescent who does not understand about carbon monoxide!”

“The gas heater in the bedroom is working fine and has ventilation to the outside, and you don’t need to open the door in there,” the landlord assured me. I was not

convinced because I saw black marks on the wall above the heater.

At the suggestion of my friend, immediately after the meeting I called MetroGas, the national gas company's emergency number, and they came that very night. The MetroGas man looked at the place and the heaters and gas units in several glances, and told me very quickly: "This is my profession, and I can see very clearly what is wrong:

- 1) The gas heater in the living room needs permanent ventilation to the outside. The heater in the living room, without a funnel for ventilation to the outside, *is illegal*.
- 2) The gas heater in the bedroom is not functioning correctly, emitting carbon monoxide into the bedroom, causing the walls to be black. The landlord needs to repair it.
- 3) The kitchen gas heater needs a cover to the pilot light, to cover the carbon monoxide being emitted.
- 4) Also the kitchen and the eating area are lacking compensatory openings for the gas to escape."

He turned off the gas to the apartment, and said that until the repairs were done by the owner, the gas would not be turned on again. I told him I was moving the next day. He said that if I had not called, the person who lived here after me would have died.



Gas Heater all lit up, (Photo/Warrenski)

In the end I did not sue the landlord because, given the time, effort and expense, it probably would not have been worth it. Upon leaving the apartment, the landlord gave me back my deposit. And, furthermore, apparently

feeling either some remorse or possibly simply wanting to protect himself from anything that I might subsequently do, he asked me to sign a document that stipulated I would not seek legal action and would keep my mouth shut. For agreeing, he would give me \$500. I did not accept the \$500 and did not sign the document.

Carbon monoxide has no smell. It is odourless, colourless, tasteless and extremely toxic. Carbon monoxide poisoning may resemble other illnesses or infections, such as the flu, and symptoms include headaches, vomiting, dizziness, lethargy and weakness. Neurological signs include confusion, disorientation, visual disturbance and seizures.

I heard that most of the apartments being rented here are illegal because they do not pay taxes on the rental income. If there are rules and regulations for those who rent out apartments, most landlords do not follow them. It is up to oneself and one's common sense to know what apartment to take and what not to take.

Here are some tips for renting an apartment in Buenos Aires:

- Avoid renting from Craigslist.org. Do try renting from rental agencies, even though some might charge commission or a higher rent. There are some rental agencies that do not charge commission, just higher rent. There are no rules and regulations for landlords in Buenos Aires and landlords will rent out anything they think will bring in US dollars. Use your common sense about safety.
- Be sure to trust your instincts about strange smells in the apartment. It may be a natural gas leak. If there is a gas unit in the kitchen, make sure the pilot light is covered, so no carbon monoxide can be emitted. If you are renting during the winter, make sure the gas heaters have permanent ventilation to the outside.
- If you have rented your apartment sight unseen and have come to your apartment and smell a gas leak, report it immediately to the landlord! Get the problem fixed or change apartments.

After renting the apartment noted above, I rented another one for tourists, and this one too had a gas leak. This time, it was a gas leak from the kitchen stove. At the time, the owner was away on vacation and the porter was not there. Not knowing what to do,

I called MetroGas again. They came, verified the gas leak, and shut off the gas. It wasn't until two and a half weeks later that the gas leak could be fixed properly with all the bureaucracy.

I have also found that when you tell people you have a gas leak, most people will think you are crazy and are imagining things. People take you seriously only if your suspicions are backed by MetroGas.

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Cherie on 2nd August 2010

I am so very sorry about your cat! What a horrible experience. I too came here with my cat, so I feel your loss, and in this case, it was tragically unnecessary.

Thank you for writing about what happened—it truly may prevent someone from dying. We take it for granted in other countries/societies that an apartment we rent is legal and up to code, but like so many things in Argentina, user beware!

Melanie Henderson on 8th August 2010

Mong-Lan thank you very much for bringing this to light. It is an unsure issue, as most people turn a blind eye to gas leaks here.

I am sorry to hear about your cat too, that sounds awful.

I have recently moved to a new place and we have a gas smell that is coming from a pipe as you come into the flat, and then another in the kitchen where the old boiler is. We had a plumber round (who thought he was a gas expert, who checked the gas meter and its surrounding pipes in our entrance and told me that a little gas is natural and nothing to worry about..... right.

This has all happened very recently, but after having read your advice I will certainly not hesitate to call the landlady directly and get MetroGas over to check things out.

Renting in BA indeed is tricky and where there is not one problem, another

appears! C'est la vie!

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I intended to send you that little bit of note to thank you once again on the pleasant guidelines you have documented here. It has been certainly seriously open-handed with you to deliver without restraint all that some people would have offered for an e book to help make some dough for their own end, particularly now that you might have done it if you considered necessary. The guidelines also acted to be a easy way to recognize that the rest have a similar eagerness like my own to realize great deal more regarding this issue. I know there are millions of more pleasurable opportunities up front for people who scan through your website.

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