

Greenville.14

5,600 words

## Los Hombres of Room 229

By Dan Baum

The evening news from Mexico City is coming on as the last can of Busch disappears from the little fridge in Room 229. At once, the question zips silently around the room: who's going to go for more?

Javo can't do it. He's busy at the two-burner electric hotplate, trying to remember how his mother would turn the mountain of beef, onions, and tomatoes heaped on the dresser top into a pot of carne en su jugo. Victor, who looks for any excuse to drive and would enjoy making a beer run, is deep asleep on one of the beds, oblivious to the ranchera-howling boombox six inches from his ear. Beto, sprawled like a bear on the bed next to Victor, is the wrong guy to send for beer; the last time he went driving the group lost one of its precious three cars. Jesus could go if he wasn't trimming his mustache again in a Cinderella tizzy over a dance tonight at the Civic Center; it's been hyped all week on "La Brava" and will be his first whiff of women in weeks. Melancholy Octavio is absorbed in the weekly phone call to his

mother, and Alonzo, a doe-eyed sixteen-year-old, can't go for beer without inviting a world of grief from the rule-crazy gringos. That leaves Mario, who pulls himself off the bed and covers his muscular belly with a sleeveless t-shirt. "Vamonos," he says with the vigor of a recruit stepping up to his duty.

It's the end of a 12-hour day hanging sheetrock for these guys, and the air in the room is thick with the musk of seven tightly-compressed men in a miasma of cigarettes, cumin, and cilantro. Mario looks for his keys as the television tries vainly to compete with the boombox, screaming a commercial for a do-it-yourself English course: "We're going north to seek prosperity," sings a Spanish-speaking family from the windows of a storybook clapboard house being pulled up a country road by a team of oxen. "With Ingles sin Barerras, all our dreams come true!" A full set of Ingles sin Barerras study books sits, in fact, beside the television -- between a garish framed print of the Virgin of Guadalupe and a stack of soft-core porn videos. "Without that," says Mario, pointing first to the study books and then to a naked blonde on a video cover, "you don't get that." All the study books, I can't help noticing, are still shrink-wrapped shut.

We step outside into the torpid evening and Mario looks right, left, right like a spectator at Wimbledon. "Where are we?" he jokes. He

and his friends have worked in half a dozen cities along the east coast in the past couple of years. "Oh yeah," he winds up. "Greenville."

Greenville is an immaculate Baptist city of 60,000 souls a thousand miles from the Rio Grande. It commands what it likes to call the Upstate -- the high northwest corner of South Carolina -- to distinguish itself from the state's poorer rice-and-tobacco coastal plain. The city embraces seven named historic districts<sup>1</sup> and vast parks of sweeping green lawns watched over by concrete Confederate heroes. Its waitresses refill your glass of syrupy iced tea all day long and say "you all come back and see us" like they really mean it. Greenville is also home to the punishingly Christian Bob Jones University. It likes to compare itself to Atlanta twenty years ago: optimistically prosperous while still friendly. The past ten years have been kind to Greenville. Businesses are growing so fast their biggest problem is finding enough people to fill new jobs. Mario and his friends have been in Greenville six months, earning an average \$14 an hour for as many hours as they want to work.

As we cruise along Greenville's could-be-anywhere strip of Ethan Allen showrooms, Burger Kings, and Goodyear Tire outlets, Mario tells me it was Victor who "blew \$400" on the unopened Ingles sin Barreras course. "You don't need to know English," Mario says. In every city in

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<sup>1</sup> Greenville's Historic Districts,  
[http://www.greatergreenville.com/neighborhoods/historic\\_districts.htm](http://www.greatergreenville.com/neighborhoods/historic_districts.htm)

which they've worked, the foremen are Mexicans: "Nashville; Memphis; Dayton; Daytona Beach; Atlanta; Groton, Connecticut. . ."

"Groton, Connecticut?" I ask, trying to picture this bunch of noisy brown Catholics in the epicenter of WASP culture. "There were Mexicans in Groton, Connecticut?"

"Actually no," he says. "In Groton were nothing but Salvadorans, Colombians, and Hondurans."

We approach a gleaming Piggly Wiggly supermarket the size of an aircraft carrier, but Mario drives past it, and then another mile to a tiny store, wedged between a Tai Kwan Do studio and a taxidermist and sporting a hand-painted sign in the red, white, and green of the Mexican flag. Inside looks like any of the dark and crowded general stores that stand on every fifth corner in a Mexican town, crammed with Herdez canned chiles and sheaves of Mexican lottery tickets. The store smells of meat and onions and votive candles . . . of home. Mario buys four six-packs of Busch for \$4.25 apiece. At the Piggly Wiggly we passed they're \$3, but to shop there, under harsh fluorescent lights, he'd have to figure out which check-out line to stand in and maybe be assaulted with a rat-a-tat spray of English.

It's not that Mario is afraid of being picked up by La Migra. The Immigration and Naturalization Service, stuck in the outdated notion that Mexicans are clustered in California and Texas, has only four

agents covering both North and South Carolina.<sup>2</sup> In the past five or six years, though, the world has changed. The honorary Mexican consul for the Carolinas says he's now looking after half a million Mexicans in the two states,<sup>3</sup> which means one of every 24 Carolinians is a citizen of Mexico.<sup>4</sup> Mario would have to be unlucky indeed to run into a Migra agent. So it isn't fear of deportation that keeps him out of the Piggly Wiggly. It's just that he is not an exchange student craving cross-cultural experience but rather is here to earn a pile of money as quickly and comfortably as possible. Within busy Greenville, a secret archipelago of Hispanic meat markets, clothing stores, check-cashers, pharmacies, and taquerías – plus a 24-hour all-Hispanic radio station and an all-Spanish television channel – makes it easy for Mario to pretend he's never left home.

“This is our life,” Mario sighs as we load the beer into the car.

“Work, eat, sleep, work, eat, sleep.”

“Sounds terrible,” I say, taking the bait.

Mario chuckles. “No,” he says, pinching his thumbs and forefingers together in a gesture of delight. “It's good.”

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Gottlieb, INS Charlotte, NC, 704-672-6901

<sup>3</sup> Wayne Cooper, 704-394-2198, 704-906-2584 (cell), cooper@arconmfg.com Half a million is Cooper's estimate. According to the Census figures in The Hispanic Population 2000, US Census, there are about half a million Hispanics in the two states. Cooper says by rule of thumb, more than 65 percent of those are Mexicans. But, he says, he sees a thousand Mexicans a month in his office “and I've never met one yet who answered the Census.”

<sup>4</sup> The Hispanic Population 2000, US Census, Table 2

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Forget for a moment the idea of “immigrants.” The word implies a desire to stay and become Americans, as waves of Europeans and Asians did in the last two centuries. The guys in Room 229 have no intention of becoming Americans. They have specific dollar goals to achieve before going home, and after that they don’t care if they ever see the United States again. They are lucky to be hanging sheetrock; millions of other Mexicans are frying doughnuts, sorting recycled trash, making motel beds, harvesting cucumbers, and doing many other \$7- and \$8-an-hour jobs that in these good times most Americans don’t want. “They’re the new niggers,” a black Greenville preacher told me. “Except at two percent unemployment, there are no niggers.”<sup>5</sup>

The hardships Mexicans endure – the border, the lack of women, the cramped quarters -- are meaningless because they’re temporary. To guys like Mario, Javo, and Beto, a few years in the States is a right of passage like a stint in the army – hard, sometimes demeaning, but relatively short, and survivors can come out the other end with useful skills and wads of cash.

About nine million Mexicans live in the United States, half of them illegally, according to the Washington D.C.-based Urban Institute.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Rev Robert E. Dennis , Cedar Grove Missionary Baptist Church, 864- 243-3745 or 864-963-6935

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Passel, the Urban Institute, 202-261-5678, jpassel@ui.urban.org

That means some nine percent of Mexico's entire population lives north of the border, about as many as in Mexico City.<sup>7</sup> If the guys in Room 229 are at all typical, many of the nine million individuals here today weren't here two years ago and won't be here two years from now. The \$8 billion they send to their relatives each year is Mexico's third-biggest source of income after oil and tourism,<sup>8</sup> and Mexican President Vicente Fox calls them "the greatest asset our country has,"<sup>9</sup> but he tells only half the story. They're an American asset as well. Federal Reserve Chair Alan Greenspan told Congress he wants more foreigners allowed into the U.S.<sup>10</sup> because they eagerly work millions of unattractive jobs that can be neither filled domestically nor exported. Their labor is so coveted by American hotels, restaurants, hospitals, nursing homes, builders, landscapers, and farmers that those industries lobby Congress to make hiring Mexicans easier.<sup>11</sup>

Even without Congress's help though, and despite considerable harassment by U.S. law, the guys in Room 229 and their compañeros are turning the United States and Mexico into a single, interdependent, binary economy. The INS considers them criminals, yet all they're doing is taking the North American Free Trade Agreement at its word:

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<sup>7</sup> Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, <http://sites.netscape.net/fcsklabrie/mexstates.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Fox appeals for Mexican unity Leader seeks help of former residents to revitalize nation By Oscar Avila and Dan Mihalopoulos The Chicago Tribune, July 16, 2001

<sup>9</sup> Fox appeals for Mexican unity Leader seeks help of former residents to revitalize nation By Oscar Avila and Dan Mihalopoulos The Chicago Tribune, July 16, 2001

<sup>10</sup> Greenspan sees benefit in relaxing immigration law, Reuters, January 26, 2000

<sup>11</sup> John Gay, Essential Worker Immigration Coalition, 202.289.3123 jgay@ahlaonline.org

If a hard border is bad for capital, it's bad for labor, too. As investment dollars flow back and forth in search of better return, human beings do likewise in search of better jobs. To Mario and his friends, the United States doesn't feel so much like a foreign country but rather a rough, rich-veined territory of their own. Commuting across the Rio Grande, they display a commitment to the global economy the barons of the World Trade Organization can only envy.

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When Mario and I get back to Room 229, the guys are sitting on the beds in their underwear, chowing meat in a fiery red sauce and watching rodeo videos. Javo is sadly nuking packaged tortillas in the microwave; his mother makes them by hand and cooks them on an open fire. These guys are all from the same tiny village, Cofradía de Suchitlán, in the state of Colima about halfway down Mexico's Pacific coast. Cofradíans cultivate tiny, intensive plots of coffee, sugar cane, and corn, and they herd cattle up and down the steep, rocky terrain that leads to the smoking Volcano of Fire. Their houses are arranged around a leafy town square with a stone gazebo and paths leading through raised flower beds. Just about all the houses in Cofradía have electricity and cold water; some have boilers and telephones. A few families own cars but burros and horses are common, carrying milk cans or loads of stove wood through the cobbled streets. Everybody in

Cofradía has enough to eat but cash is short. A typical wage for a worker in the cane fields is about three dollars a day. Most of the men do time allá, as they say – “over there,” in the United States.

The rodeo video on the motel television looks to me like a tape loop: one cowboy after another jerking up and down on the back of a bull. But after one bout everyone murmurs appreciatively, “Hmm, Suiza” about the breed of bull the way Americans would sigh over a Michael Jordan jump shot. Cofradíans know their fighting cattle.

In walks Hector, another Cofradían from three doors down, and everyone looks up expectantly. Hector stayed late at the job site to learn if they’d be working tomorrow. Stocky and fit, with a baby’s big head and wide-spaced round eyes, Hector takes his time dramatically wiping his boots on the mat. “Si,” he says finally, and a wave of relief breaks over the room. This will be their third seven-day week in a row, which is what they want. “What are we going to do all day if we don’t work?” Javo tells me, handing around yellow disks of corn like a poker dealer. “Sit here in the room drinking beer, no mas.”

“That’s why I’m through with this,” grunts Octavio, who has moped all evening since his phone call home. “As soon as I pay off my coyote, I’m going home.” Octavio once fell from the top row of Cofradía’s rodeo ring and the zig-zag scar between his eyes pulls his face into an ever-present wince that deepens his air of gloom. “There’s

no life here," he says darkly, dabbing a tortilla in his stew. "It's nothing but work and the clock." A brief ripple of silence parts the conversation. Then handsome Jesus of the obsessively trimmed mustache boasts: "I don't miss a thing about home. I'd just as soon stay here making \$14 an hour."

"Andale," say the others, raising their beer cans.

These men are dream employees – a kind of cheerful, volunteer chain gang. Without wives, children, or girlfriends nearby, without hobbies, without vacation plans -- without lives, in other words, to distract them – they are eager to work their every waking hour. They don't ask questions or make trouble. They don't mind working on contract rather than full-time with benefits, because they don't plan on hanging around to receive benefits and they don't mind moving on when a job site closes. The company for which they work pays them \$11 to \$16 an hour, depending on experience. Compared with \$3 a day, these are incomprehensible riches.

The village of Cofradía and the Texas-based construction company for which they work are old friends. A decade ago, a Cofradían named Florencio Velasco got a job with the company and started bringing on relatives and friends. Nowadays, any Cofradían who can run the border gantlet and get to one of the company's job sites is welcomed. The guys in Room 229 speak of Florencio Velasco in

the reverent tones American schoolchildren reserve for Christopher Columbus. Velasco drank himself to death in a homecoming binge last Christmas.

Javo wipes his hands on a towel and pulls out his computer-printed pay slip from the previous week. He worked 64 hours, at \$14 an hour, for a total of \$896.00. The company, though, took out \$98.56, or 11 percent, for "insurance."

"You're getting ripped off," I tell the guys. "Only if you're full employees can the company withhold any money, and then it has to deduct taxes, too. You're contractors," I say, "so the company can't legally deduct a penny."

The guys look at each other, and then, as though connected by wires, shrug in unison. "I cut myself and the company paid the doctor," Mario says, holding up a finger prickly with stitches. Everybody nods. The company pays well, covers doctor bills out of its own pocket, and gives them all the work they want. Even with the deduction they're earning every day what would take two months to earn back home. Why complain?

Federal law requires employers to see proof that a job applicant has permission to work in the United States.<sup>12</sup> The guys in Room 229 bought their proof – phony Social Security cards -- from an Atlanta

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<sup>12</sup> Karen Kraushaar , INS spokeswoman in Washington, DC, 202-514-2648

forger for \$45 apiece. "Of course the bosses know they're fakes," says Victor. But seeing the fakes protects the employer from a charge of knowingly hiring illegal aliens.<sup>13</sup> Employers like to go even further and say discrimination law forbids an employer to question an applicant's documents, because you can't doubt the dark-skinned applicants named Rodriguez without questioning the ID of every blonde named Smith.<sup>14</sup> When their company is temporarily short of work, the guys in Room 229 easily find work with other companies, and have never had their phony Social Security cards doubted.

President George W. Bush made his play for the growing Hispanic vote in July by announcing plans, in Press Secretary Ari Fleischer's words, to "make immigration safe and legal." But all he has on the table is a vague "guest worker" plan that would, at least in the near term, tie Mexicans' immigration status to a single employer.<sup>15</sup> Senator Phil Gramm of Texas has a bill circulating that would do much the same thing: Migrants would get a temporary visa to work for one sponsoring employer and would no longer be able to move around in search of work as the guys in Room 229 like to do. With control over their employees' work permits, bosses could threaten "troublemaking"

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<sup>13</sup> Karen Kraushaar , INS spokeswoman in Washington, DC, 202-514-2648

<sup>14</sup> John Gay, Essential Worker Immigration Coalition, 202.289.3123

<sup>15</sup> Bush Panel Backs Legalizing Status of Some Migrants, New York Times, July 24, 2001  
US Mexico Guest Worker Proposal: A Prospectus,  
<http://www.senate.gov/~gramm/press/guestprogram.html>

workers – such as those trying to organize a union – with a call to the INS. Such a program would more or less revive the “Bracero” program of the forties, fifties, and sixties, which turned farmworkers into indentured servants by exposing them to employer abuses and sending them home the minute the harvest was in. The guys in Room 229 would have no incentive to participate in any program that paid less and offered less freedom than their current gig, so they’d surely ignore the program as they’re ignoring American immigration law now. All the talk in the past few weeks about changing “immigration policy” is mired in wishful thinking. It isn’t so much about what Washington and Mexico City will allow, but whether they will find humane and sensible ways to conform to the cross-border realities that first capital and now labor are forcing upon them.

But enough about work; this is a baile Saturday night. The guys stack their dishes in the sink and get in line for the bathroom, pulling out creased jeans, sharp cowboy shirts, and fancy tooled boots with toes like bayonets. They have only one cowboy hat among them, a gleaming white straw texano, and decide they’ll have to share it. There is some anxiety, though, about how all of us are going to get to the dance. The police have taken away Beto’s car, and nobody expects to get it back.

Beto is a great, brooding tower of a man on whom alcohol and manual labor have carved a face of stone; he looks twice his 22 years. I was a little scared of his size and scowl until I saw that the flowery tattoo covering his upper arm bears the names of his parents. Two weeks ago tonight, Beto had the misfortune of getting caught in the American buzzsaw.

He was coming home from the Saturday night beer run when a Greenville police officer pulled over his orange 1985 Blazer. The crumpled yellow traffic citation he shows me is remarkable; hardly any of the boxes are filled in, because Beto had no ID to give the officer and neither knew a word of the other's language. Even the name is spelled wrong: Volberto Ramirez instead of Nolberto. The charge, though, is clear: open container. Beto spent a night and a day in jail until his friends could come up with the \$935 fine.

"Okay," I say, "so where's the car?"

"The fucking cops stole it," he says wearily, as though it's normal for police to steal a car. I carry the cordless phone to the balcony overlooking the parking lot to get some quiet, and dial the police station. The desk sergeant is crisp and cheerful as he punches up Beto's case number. The car was impounded, he says, because it had no registration, no insurance card, and expired license plates.

“All Mr. Ramirez needs to do,” he continues, “is present valid registration and insurance, and his driver’s license.” Before he hangs up, I ask why, when the police had ample reason to suspect they had an illegal in their lockup, they didn’t call the INS. The sergeant laughs. “The INS tells us not to bother calling unless we have 50 of them,”<sup>16</sup> he says, and wishing me a safe Saturday night, hangs up.

I duck back inside, ready to save the day. “Where’s the registration?” I ask. “No hay,” Beto says. There is none. Insurance? No hay. Why does the car have Florida plates?

“I bought it from a guy who worked in Florida,” Beto says. Might he have the registration? “He went back to Mexico.” Gradually I’m made to understand that the car was basically the communal possession of the entire undocumented Mexican community in the southeast, changing hands every time its current owner returned to Mexico. This appears to be the first time questions of registration or insurance have been raised because it’s the first time it encountered the buzzsaw.

As I sit on the edge of the bed counting off to Beto, in my hyperanalytic norteamericano way, the steps we might take to recover

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<sup>16</sup> This was actually said by Police Chief Willie Johnson, 864-467-5310 johnsow@greatergreenville.com. I put it in the mouth of the desk sergeant because there was no smooth way to work the police chief into the story, and as this is a police point of view it seemed okay to let an unnamed police official say it. If you don’t agree, let me know.

the car, Beto's eyes go dim. "Daniel," he says wearily, "to you, a car is all about papers, I know. You think they don't run if you don't have the right pieces of paper." He opens his arms grandly on the roomful of friends. "All we need is gasoline."

I can't let it go. How about getting a driver's license? I suggest. Cops react differently to people who have valid ID. Turns out, none of these guys can get a driver's license because South Carolina, like most states, won't issue one to someone without a Social Security number. The Department of Motor Vehicles, unlike private employers, have no incentive to accept a fake Social Security card. A guy Beto knew wasn't allowed to put his name on his son's birth certificate because he didn't have a Social Security number. Another guy fell off a roof on the job and, because he didn't have a Social Security number, couldn't file a Workman's Compensation claim. Now he's paralyzed and destitute. Lack of access to Workman's Comp is a big deal for Hispanics, who are 20 percent more likely to get hurt or killed on the job than whites – partly because they're more likely to take dangerous jobs and partly because many don't understand safety instructions.<sup>17</sup>

The guys in Room 229 can't open bank accounts for the same reason; banks check Social Security numbers. In nearby Charlotte, North Carolina, gringo thugs have figured out that Mexicans, having

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<sup>17</sup> Hispanic Workers Die at Higher Rate, New York Times, July 16, 2001

nowhere to put their money, are loaded with it once they cash their checks at the local bodega on Fridays. The thugs wait outside those Mexican stores like deer hunters watching a watering hole on opening day. Some have figured out, too, that Mexicans cram a lot of people into a single motel room or apartment, and on Friday nights they kick in the doors with shotguns, hitting seven or eight cash-laden guys in their underwear all at once,<sup>18</sup> a richer and safer haul than knocking over a Seven-Eleven. Now the Mexicans in Charlotte are starting to buy pistols for self-defense. This can't end well.

Treating a driver's license or a bank account as privileges of "legal" status doubtless appeals to the same electorate that approves of the Border Patrol's Operation Hold the Line. But withholding a driver's license isn't going to keep Beto off the road. A man who walked across the desert to work isn't going to stop driving for want of a piece of plastic in his wallet. It occurs to me that I'd be happier, as someone who shares the Greenville roads with Beto, if he were encouraged to go through the licensing exam, carry liability insurance, and be a thoroughly legal driver. I'd also feel safer if he and his friends could deposit their money in banks instead of turning prey every Friday afternoon or arming themselves.

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<sup>18</sup> Wayne Cooper, 704-394-2198, 704-906-2584 (cell), cooper@arconmfg.com

Beto turns back to his carne. The car was worth about \$1,700, he says, fishing in the gravy for a chunk of meat. He was lucky to have had it for a while, but now he doesn't. End of story. Can we go to the dance in my rental car?

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Hector of the big baby face rolls up his sleeve to show off a tattoo – “Cuca,” in old English letters – stretched across a red and swollen upper arm. We move in close to admire it. Like everybody in Room 229, he has known Cuca since they were tiny. Hector went home in January, his first visit in three years, and somehow in the course of a brief ten days, talked Cuca into marrying him. “Did it hurt?” I ask of the tattoo. “Si!” he says happily. “Mucho.”

Hector asks if the 16 Mexicans who died in the Arizona desert this spring made news in my world. “Five hundred died last year trying to cross,” he says. (The real number is 491, according to the Mexican government)<sup>19</sup> “It could be any of us,” he says. “I spent three nights lost out there.” He wants to know how the people who died were portrayed.

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<sup>19</sup> Skepticism greets border-crossing message. Lure of jobs overshadows Mexico's new 'Don't Risk It' campaign, critics say By Rick Badie The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, July 14, 2001 (in file leading up to 7/17 announcement)

“They sounded more desperate than you,” I say. “The New York Times said they were escaping ‘grinding poverty.’ The Daily News said they couldn’t find ‘honorable work’ in Mexico.”<sup>20</sup>

“The work’s honorable,” Hector laughs. “It just doesn’t pay worth shit. The only time we were desperate was when we were out there in the desert.” These guys are hardly the poorest of Cofradía’s poor. The really poor, who live across the arroyo from the town square, can hardly imagine what is beyond the volcano, let alone envision traveling two thousand miles across a hostile border to a strange and bewildering land. Rather, the ones who travel north are in many ways Cofradía’s elite, the ones with the resources, energy, connections, and imagination to make the trip.

Hector wants to go home with \$10,000 and still has to pay off \$2,000 to the coyote who guided him across the desert. His father optimistically built a one-story house a decade ago with two-story rebar that pokes skyward like antennae. Now’s the time for Hector to put on the second story for himself and Cuca, and go to work alongside his father as a plumber and probably earn about \$30 a week.

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<sup>20</sup> Border takes senseless toll, The Daily News, May 29, 2001

Javo wants cows. At home, he sings to his father's cows as he milks yet with a twist of his huge arm on a halter, he can bring the most menacing Suiza to heel. Cows are his life.

None of the bucolic ranching life for Victor, who is so car-crazy he got excited over my rented Chevy Lumina. His uncles and grandmother kill and stew whole bulls for village weddings and baptisms. The deed is usually done on his grandmother's cement porch, the cut-throat animal thrashing around in its own blood and manure until it dies. No, Victor has seen enough cattle. He wants to return home with at least \$8,000 here for a good used car, so he can be a driver in his sister's package-delivery company. He'll earn the equivalent of \$75 a week plus \$20 every time he makes the three-hour drive to Guadalajara: good money.

Sixteen-year-old Alonzo is saving for college -- a jaw-dropping idea for Cofradía kid, so few believe the option exists. He needs two more years of high school, which is a half-hour bus ride away and charges tuition, and then three years of university an hour away in the state capital. Between tuition, books, lunches, bus fare, and support for his mother and sisters while he shares their house, Alonzo figures he needs \$2,000. An uncle in the United States lent him \$2,000 for his coyote, so he needs to earn \$4,000 during his stay in the U.S.

“Why didn’t you use the \$2,000 loan from your uncle to go straight to college?”

Alonzo blinks his huge round eyes and shrugs. Betting \$2,000 on him as a hanger of sheetrock, it seems, has a far quicker, far surer payback than betting on him as a college student.

The fragrance of Javo’s stew keeps roping in neighbors. A short barechested man I’ve never seen before slips in the door, with a knotty smile and an angry, bubbly scar that runs from the center of his sternum around under his arm to the center of his back. Smaller, puckered scars surround the main welt. “Caramba,” I say (the only one who ever uses that word). “What happened to you?”

“An operation,” he says with a shy laugh, and something about the nervous way the others laugh makes me press on in the unseemly way consistent with my profession. The guy’s name is Jose and he’s a quiet type so it takes a while to pry this story out of him:

A few days after Christmas of 1996, Jose, then 30, kissed his wife and two small boys goodbye in Mexico and left on his first trip north, to Nashville, because the Cofradía gang was there. The construction company couldn’t put him on right away, so Jose went to work as a cook at McDonald’s. “Sin queso” and “con queso” was all the Spanish his three co-workers knew, but he got by all right until a Saturday night in March when a tall white man named Paul Reid

walked up to the counter, brandished a pistol, and herded the four employees into a store room. One by one, Reid fired two bullets each into the heads of Jose's co-workers. When the gun came to Jose's head, it clicked empty, so Reid plunged a knife again and again into José's torso and the back of his head. Jose played dead and Reid ran off. After two weeks in the hospital, Jose woke from the morphine to find he'd hit a strangely American jackpot. McDonalds' insurance gave him \$15,000 in disability, a neighborhood collection for the victims' families gave him another \$10,000, and he earned a \$28,000 police reward for testifying against Reid.<sup>21</sup> It was a \$53,000 bonanza, and all he'd had to do was watch his co-workers die, endure a brutal slashing, and help send a man to death row. Bienvenidos a los Estados Unidos.

The incident hardly dampened his enthusiasm for working in the United States. The next time he came, in fact, he brought his wife. "She's in Nashville," Jose says with his first hint of a smile, "cooking at McDonald's."

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The dance is a bust. Greenville's "Civic Center" appears to be a disused supermarket in a ratty, semi-abandoned shopping center. After paying \$10 apiece and standing for a vigorous frisk from three black linebackers dressed as security guards, we pass into a dimly lit

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<sup>21</sup> Jose's account, plus stories from the Tennessean in the file "Tennessean on Jose's Ordeal"

cavern filled with DJ music so overamplified I fear for the roof supports. The dance floor is as barren as the polar ice cap. After half an hour two pretty girls slink out and start dancing with each other, watched by a roomful of single men so poleaxed with tequila, desire, and homesickness that none can rouse himself to join them. The crowd is about three quarters male. Any woman up from Mexico is in Greenville with a husband, or brothers, or her whole family, and is no more likely to be trolling for singles on a Saturday night than she would be back home. The few Hispanic women at the tables are guarded so ferociously by their sharp-eyed men that approaching them would be like attacking a machinegun nest barehanded. But around 11:00 gringas start showing up in groups of two and three. They're country girls with big hair and troweled makeup, clearly not Greenville's intellectually curious cross-cultural set. They've simply figured out that one way around Greenville boredom is to investigate this huge population of lonely, courtly, and grateful Mexican men. Language is no barrier at 400 decibels.

Beto, wearing the precious texano, scores a dance with a small dark-haired girl and swings his bulk around with surprising grace. Then he hands off the hat to Jesus who dances with a heavysset gringa and hands off the hat to Victor. Homesick Octavio expends all his courage asking the harried waitress to dance; she predictably refuses and he

sinks moodily back into his tequila-and-Pepsi. Eventually, everybody drifts back to the table by himself and the party atmosphere of preparing for the dance evaporates in the reality of the dance itself. The guys from Room 229 slump in their chairs as inanimate as chainsaw sculpture. Awash in a booming ocean of banda music and glass after glass of tequila, each is lost in his own yearning memories. I want to be off the roads before this roomful of dreamy drunks heads for its cars, so after assuring myself that the seats in my Lumina won't be needed, I excuse myself.

How they get up the next morning at seven after all that alcohol is a mystery to me, and after another ten-hour day of hanging sheetrock they look pretty haggard. Only about half the guys show up at the motel after work, though. Gloomy Octavio says the rest have gone to "las de treinta," Greenville's \$30 prostitutes. This, apparently, is the climax to a baile weekend. One of the guys – he has a girlfriend at home so I won't name him – decides he wants to get laid too but there's no car available, so the rented Lumina gets pressed into service once again. He directs me up a dirt road between the Home Depot and a Shell Station to a dirty grey single-wide with a headless pink flamingo out front. A huge, scar-faced boriqua– Puerto Rican -- looks us over and lets us in. I sit on the mossy couch, nervously watching the Spanish equivalent of America's Funniest Home Videos

while my buddy ducks through the beaded curtain. Two commercials later, he's back, flushed and sweaty. Outside, it's starting to drizzle.

"She was old," he says as we pull away. "Thirty-two. Another boriqua -- trying to support two children in New York." He yawns and looks sadly out at the rain. "That's how it is, Daniel," he says. "They come, get mixed up with the traficantes, and men use them for sport." Then he shakes off his funk and stretches luxuriantly in his seat.

"How are you feeling?" I ask.

"Relaxed," he smiles.

I ask if he comes to the trailer often, and he says this was only his second time in nine months. The rest of the time it's "puro trabajo manual," he says, pure manual labor.

"That's what we're here for, right?" he asks, and lighting a cigarette, laughs richly at his own joke.

End.