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# 1,000 Miles of Hope, Heartache

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EDINBURG, Texas—On a sweltering South Texas afternoon, the kind that stifles everything but the cactus and mesquite, Greyhound bus No. 6462 pulled away from the Mexican border and set off for the American heartland. We were headed north to work, seven strangers and I, none too certain of where we would end up or what to expect once we arrived.

We'd all seen the help-wanted ad offering to send us to Missouri, to a place where the chicken factories were hiring. "No experience needed, we train," it had said in English and Spanish. "Transportation provided and housing available. Good starting wages." Those lines had been running in the local papers for more than a year, passed from one family to another like word of a cockfight in the shantytowns of the Rio Grande.

It didn't matter that few could have pointed to Missouri on a map. It didn't matter that a chicken factory, whatever went on there, couldn't possibly be very pleasant. These borderlands already had shown what they were about, the Texas side floundering under one of America's highest unemployment rates, and its southern neighbor many times the worse. Hitting the road surely offered better odds than staying put.

I pressed my damp back against the cool window of the bus, studying the travelers who would become my co-workers and roommates. To my left was Erasmo, a young Texas native in a Mickey Mouse shirt and Nikes who made the sign of a cross over his heart as soon as we lurched out of the station. To my right was Antonio, a stern, leathery veteran of Mexico's oil fields who left a trail of cigarette butts on the ground before taking his seat. Somewhere in the back, Roberto already was asleep, snuggling up with the plastic grocery bags that served as his luggage.

Twenty-four hours up the road, in an emerald, spring-fed corner of the Ozarks, Hudson Foods Inc. was facing the opposite quandary. Its customers—everyone from Wal-Mart to Hooters to Safeway—kept demanding more chicken. The appetite seemed insatiable, stoked by the public's desire for health-conscious meals. Hudson expanded, running its machinery on overtime, but orders still went unfilled. There just weren't enough people in this part of Missouri, at least not enough willing to take a job plucking chickens.

Although it sounds peculiar in an era of corporate downsizing and global labor markets, many U.S. companies are finding themselves similarly short-handed, often saddled with hundreds of vacancies at a time. The problem is most severe in unskilled and low-wage fields, especially in the Midwest and Southeast, where booming economies have shrunk

unemployment rates almost to zero. Hudson, like a growing number of those firms, finally went looking for help in one place as desperate as it: the Mexican frontier.

To learn more about that human pipeline and the mutual necessity that fuels it, I came to the Rio Grande Valley last summer and answered the ad for a chicken job.

That act launched me on a weeklong odyssey, beginning here in the southern tip of Texas, where I showed up with only a few changes of secondhand clothes. It ended 1,000 miles away in tiny Noel, Mo., where I was outfitted with a hairnet, earplugs and a plastic apron, then ordered to hook raw chickens onto a shackle line until 2 a.m.

Along the way, my colleagues became confidants. We ate together and slept together. We gave each other nicknames and showed off family photos. Even after submitting my resignation at Hudson, I continued to visit, each time learning new details about the lives of my *compañeros*.

This is the story of that journey up “the chicken trail,” a route forged by thousands of Mexican and Mexican American workers every year.

It reflects a nationwide shift in Latino migration, not unlike the great exodus of Southern blacks to Northern cities after World War II, or the westward flight of Dust Bowl refugees during the Depression. It has expanded the concept of migrant labor to include not just the farm, but the factory, an evolution that federal regulations have been slow to address. It also has transported the nation’s immigration debate beyond the border states of California and Texas and into some of the most insular pockets of Middle America—places with little exposure to another culture or race.

The moment they set foot on the bus, Erasmo, Antonio and Roberto joined that transformation. Only I had a ticket out. Even if “the chicken trail” led to a dead end, they’d have to earn their passage home.

## GETTING HIRED

The journey, for all of us, began in here: an old house tucked behind a Chevrolet dealership near a banner spanning this town’s main drag. “Welcome to Edinburg,” it said. “All-America City.” The house had two benches outside and a sign of its own. “B. Chapman & Co.” it said. “Labor Recruiting.”

I opened the door and peeked inside. Bo Chapman was sunk back in a chair, his feet kicked up, wearing old shorts and a Harley Davidson cap. He had a puffy face, blue eyes and long blond hair braided into a ponytail. He sucked on a Heineken and fumbled for a cigarette. It was 1 p.m.

“You got a light?” he asked. “Somebody took my goddamn lighter.”

His office was decorated with promotional materials from corporate clients: a catfish farm in Alabama, a sausage factory in Tennessee and half a dozen poultry processors,

mostly in Arkansas, Georgia and Missouri. A pennant celebrating Hudson's first billion-dollar year hung from the wall.

"You ever worked in a chicken plant?" Chapman asked with a scowl. I was wearing faded jeans, work boots and a grubby T-shirt with "Viva Mexico" stenciled on the back. Whoever I was, Chapman clearly sensed I wasn't fit for the task. "If you're expecting Disneyland," he grumbled, "this ain't the place."

With that, he flipped on a grainy, black-and-white video. It showed an assembly line of busy workers clad in lab coats, coolly efficient as they guided chicken parts through a maze of stainless-steel machinery. There was no narration or sound—Chapman said he couldn't stand the white noise of the factory—just the silent motion of gloved hands on featherless birds.

The tape then shifted to the living quarters, an old, rustic hotel, with the camera zooming in on a hand-painted sign that said, "Ginger Blue Gift Shop." The rooms looked dingy but functional, complete with a refrigerator, stove and TV. The weekly rent of \$45 would be deducted from each paycheck.

"Forty-five *dolores*," Chapman repeated, mangling the Spanish pronunciation of dollar, instead using the word for aches and pains.

While the film played, another applicant walked in, eyes low to the ground. He was a thin, fragile man with a fuzzy goatee and specks of gray in his black hair. He said his name was Roberto.

Chapman didn't need to think twice. He offered no warnings or admonitions. There was only one thing he wanted to know.

"How soon can you go?"

"Now," Roberto said.

Chapman handed him an application. I started to ask for one, but he cut me off. "You should really think about it before you go to a place like this," Chapman said. Then, with a nod toward Roberto, he added: "There's no work for these guys in Mexico and there's no work for them here. Besides, they've put up with worse stuff than this. So—boom!—they just pick up and go. It's the best option for them."

I said nothing, caught short by Chapman's bluntness. In a matter of seconds, he'd concluded that the white man in his office could afford to reject this job, while the brown one had no choice but to endure it.

For reasons Chapman wouldn't find out until later, I wanted the job as badly as anyone. He finally took my ID and asked me for a urine sample. Then he produced an agreement, typed in English. Hudson would pay us \$6.70 an hour.

Only later did I learn what Hudson paid Chapman: \$175 for each worker he put on the bus.

“Be at the station no later than 5,” he said, herding us out.

We still had a couple of hours, so I ran over to Wal-Mart and bought some sheets and a pillow. Roberto, I found out, was Roberto Sebastian. He was 40, married and the father of two little girls. He once had a good job, working as an accountant in the northern Mexican industrial center of Monterrey. But he had lived many miles from there, in a desert village, which forced him to rise in the darkness and spend several hours on a slow, rickety bus. The stress was too much.

“I got sick,” Roberto said. It wasn’t clear exactly how he meant that, but it had been enough to cost him his job.

Here in the Rio Grande Valley, seeking a fresh start, he’d discovered “the chicken trail.” The first time out, nearly two years ago, he ended up skinning breasts at a poultry plant in Mississippi. But he got sick again—from standing in wet shoes inside the refrigerated factory—and had to return to Mexico.

This time out, Roberto was determined not to falter. Before walking to the bus station, he spent all he had on a \$35 ski jacket. Never mind that it was a triple-digit summer day. He knew where we were headed, *el norte*, and he wasn’t taking any chances on the cold.

## THE ROAD NORTH

The bus wasn’t too full, so we each grabbed a row, splaying ourselves across the vacant seats. My companions were mostly young, in their 20s and 30s, except for Antonio, a grandfather with a nicotine-stained face. There were six men and one woman. She steered clear of us the entire trip, dabbing her cheeks with a washcloth.

In the beginning, only Erasmo talked, a flutter of nervous energy. “If I was home, I’d be watching ‘Beavis and Butt-head’ right now,” he announced.

Soon, the Greyhound Americruiser was barreling north on Highway 281, past chalky ranchland and prickly cactuses and blistered storefronts that looked like they’d been baked for a century. With a bit of rain, this earth can sprout just about anything that’s planted, cucumbers and peppers and watermelons and cotton. But the valley had been dry all summer, scorching the crops and idling their pickers.

Some of the guys on the bus—and their parents and grandparents—had worked these very fields. They’d stooped in the hot sun, caked in dust and chemicals, paid not by the hour but by the number of bushels they could fill. Now they were inside looking out, moving up, or so it seemed. The factory would mean steady work and a dependable paycheck, even a hint of respectability.

“At least, on my next job, I’ll be able to put ‘Hudson Foods, chicken plucker’ on the application,” said Erasmo, who at 25 was among the youngest in our crew.

His full name was Erasmo De La Rosa, and he spoke in a rapid-fire staccato, chattering about cars and girls and his favorite nightclubs. Having followed the migrant stream most of his life, “I figured out, early on, poverty sucks,” he said. To counteract its effects, he’d racked up \$4,000 of debt—an ‘88 Pontiac, a Ninja motorcycle and credit cards for JCPenney, Mervyn’s and Sears.

If he was going to have to pay it off, better plucking chickens than yanking onions from the ground. “People don’t see a chicken factory as low as they see a farm worker,” Erasmo said. Even so, it wasn’t long before he’d begun questioning whether this was the step up that he’d imagined. The true measure of success, he decided, was “more using your head than physical,” a job with a desk, a computer and an expense account. A bit farther up the road, Erasmo said: “Right now, I’m just thinking, ‘Damn, I got to get an education.’ ”

Our first stop was Falfurrias, about 75 miles north of Mexico, home of the U.S. Border Patrol’s last Texas checkpoint. An agent flagged down the bus and stepped on with a flashlight.

“OK, ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “let’s get this over with.”

As he strode down the aisle, I felt my throat tighten, an instinctive reaction to his badge and his gun. It could only have been worse for the others, groping for their IDs under the officer’s battery-powered beam. At least half our crew had been born in Mexico; one of them, I later learned, had bought his papers on the black market. But whether they were here legally or not, they all produced enough documentation to get past this final hurdle and on to the North.

By then, it was dark. The bus windows had been hopelessly scratched by years of grit and wind. Lightning flickered on the horizon, illuminating each scuffed pane like a headlamp on a spider’s web. For the rest of the night, I shifted stiffly in my seat, nodding off every few minutes and waking up every time a limb went numb.

### **'DOES ANYONE KNOW WHERE WE ARE?'**

We hit San Antonio around midnight, and Dallas about dawn. Rush hour had already begun and traffic helicopters were buzzing the freeways, clogged with harried men and women in business suits and power ties. Miguel rubbed his eyes and craned his neck, taking in the neon-trimmed skyline. “Son of a bitch,” he mumbled. “*Qué grande.*”

Miguel Angel Lopez had been a waiter at a steakhouse in the Rio Grande Valley. He prided himself on his refinement, packing along a pair of stylish cowboy boots and boasting of his proficiency behind the bar: “I know all the different wines, the aged cognacs, how to mix a Long Island Ice Tea,” said Miguel, who was 25 and married, with three young sons.

He'd lost his job a few months earlier when the restaurant went bankrupt, and was living in a mobile home, perched atop cinder blocks, on a hardscrabble *ranchito* near Edinburg. Later, when I went to visit him there, he pulled out a lacquered case of razor-sharp cockfighting spurs, the kind that get strapped to a rooster's claw.

The loss of his job, he explained, was only part of his financial bind. The slaughter of his prized gamecocks—all 50 of which had been killed last spring by roving coyotes—was the real blow.

"Those roosters had been good to me," he said sadly.

As the bus rumbled north, crossing the Red River into Oklahoma, fat raindrops dribbled down the dusty windows. The driver stopped at a McDonald's, allowing us 15 minutes for breakfast. Back on the bus, Miguel asked: "Does anyone know where we are?"

"Chihuahua," a voice hollered.

"Michoacan," another added. "Guerrero. Tamaulipas."

It was meant as a joke, but by then it was clear that nobody really did know where we were. In San Antonio, we'd driven right past the Alamo; in Dallas, we'd changed buses two blocks from the site of John F. Kennedy's assassination; in Oklahoma, we'd traveled through the heart of the Cherokee and Choctaw nations—yet it might as well have been another planet.

The signposts of America were as invisible to us as we were to the rest of America. That point was underscored when we hit Tulsa, where we swapped buses one more time. The new one was packed solid, seats filled with grunge rockers, tight-jeaned cowboys and harried moms toting armfuls of kids. But joining this typical Greyhound scene was also another group of migrants—about two dozen sleepy, dark-skinned travelers who looked just like my companions, only with numbered stickers on their chests.

As the bus pulled out, they began counting off in Spanish. "No. 7, where's No. 7?" a man shouted. "*¿OK, número ocho, quién es ocho?*"

"Are you guys from Texas?" I asked the one closest to me.

"Tijuana," he said.

"Where are you headed?"

"Slaughterhouse," he said. It was located in Indiana, or maybe Iowa. "Hogs," he added, closing his eyes. "Seven bucks an hour."

Somewhere in eastern Oklahoma, out on the Will Rogers Turnpike, the chicken trail and the pork trail had just crossed paths.

## OUR NEW HOME

A full day after we'd left Texas, our trip finally ended in Anderson, Mo., about 10 miles north of the Hudson factory in Noel. The bus doesn't go into Noel. It doesn't actually go into Anderson, either. It just pulled onto the gravel shoulder and dropped us off on Highway 71. For a while, we stood there alone, bags scattered and cars whizzing by, wondering what to do next.

Then a yellow school bus trundled up and swung open its accordion door.

"Are you here for Hudson?" called out a plump woman sitting next to the driver. "Well, hop on."

They were taking us to the Ginger Blue. "You're going to have a good time up here," said the woman, herself a South Texas migrant, as the bus careened down a narrow backwoods road. This was Ozark country, limestone bluffs and mountain streams, ramshackle trailers and Confederate flags. "It's a pretty small, little redneck town," she conceded, "kind of prejudiced against Mexicans." She started coughing, swatting her chest with each gasp. The cold factory air had made her sick.

"But don't get me wrong—it's going to be great," she said. A few minutes later, as our bus came to a stop outside the Ginger Blue, she added: "Welcome to your new home."

The Ginger Blue's best days, we quickly discovered, were long gone. Built in 1915 on the banks of the Elk River, it had once been among southwestern Missouri's premiere resorts, boasting a cozy, barn-like lodge with Jacuzzi suites and honeymoon cabins, an antique-filled bar and a dock for renting canoes.

Now, wooden beams were sagging, paint was peeling, a swarm of flies surrounded the front door. Rusted appliances were piled outside and the swimming pool was a putrid swamp. A sign still said, "Ginger Blue Gift Shop," but the gift shop was not to be found. Old mattresses and used tires were stacked in the lobby. Cobwebs clung to an unlighted chandelier. Out by the road, a sign said that the whole thing was up for sale.

"Welcome to hell," Miguel said. "I think Freddy Krueger lives around here."

In the office, a burly, red-haired man told us to divide into groups of three, then gave each group one key. I went with Roberto and Antonio to Room 201.

We opened the door. Cockroaches scattered in all directions. The smell of urine hung in the air. The air-conditioner was busted. The wall above it was burned. A smoke detector had been yanked from the ceiling. The only window—a glass door that once led to a balcony that no longer existed—was smeared with nesting bugs.

There were three bed frames, side-by-side, with soiled mattresses. But there were no chairs. There was a refrigerator with a dead cockroach inside. But there was no stove.

There was a small table and one lamp with a bare bulb. But there was no TV or radio, no clock or phone, no dishes, no trash baskets, no toilet paper.

Roberto, who seemed to drift into a meditative slumber at every chance, flopped onto the middle mattress and curled up with his ski jacket.

Antonio smoked a cigarette, flicking the ashes into the dregs of a foam coffee cup. A former Pemex man who spent a quarter-century drilling oil off Mexico's Gulf Coast, Antonio Mendez Jr. was gruff and calloused, unyielding in his opinions. He was 50 now, living on a pension, but ill-suited for the inertia of retirement.

"I'm a man of action," he had said on the bus. "You show who you are by how hard you work."

He hadn't said it then, but Antonio had a more tender reason for being here. His youngest daughter would be 15 next year, the age most Mexican girls celebrate their *quinceañera*, the traditional coming-out gala. He wanted to make sure he'd have enough money to throw a memorable one.

As I lay on my bed, writing a letter to my wife, Antonio paced. His last words of the night became the last line of my letter.

"What a life," he sighed, turning off the light.

▪ **First of three parts**