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For Determined Factory Hands, Hope Quickly Fades

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NOEL, Mo.—We awoke ready to work.

As grueling as our trip had been, and as gruesome as our lodging turned out to be, we were all anxious to make the most of our time at Hudson Foods, the giant chicken processor that had brought us from the Mexican border to the foothills of this Ozark town.

We'd been told to meet at 8 a.m. in front of the Ginger Blue, a decrepit resort that was doubling as a migrant camp. But when my seven traveling companions and I showed up, the lobby was deserted. The front office was locked. We had no idea where or when or how we were supposed to start our new jobs.

So we waited. We made instant coffee on a hot plate. We swatted flies in front of the lodge. We looked for traffic on the single road that cuts through the dense countryside. Trucks loaded with young chickens whizzed by on Highway 59. Trucks emblazoned with Hudson's logo—"Helping Feed America"—roared back the other way.

Hour after hour passed. A church group delivered grocery bags of tortillas, beans, hot dogs and mayonnaise. It began to dawn on us that, three days into our journey, we still hadn't met anyone from Hudson. We'd been put on a bus by Bo Chapman, the labor recruiter in South Texas who earned \$175 a head. We'd been picked up in Missouri by someone from the Ginger Blue, which would be getting \$45 a week from our paychecks. But so far, not a word from the company that had actually hired us—at \$6.70 an hour.

"Do they think we've come for a picnic or something?" said Antonio Mendez Jr., the elder statesman of our crew. He was 50, bullheaded, a chain-smoking retired oil-driller from Mexico. We'd begun calling him El Capitan.

Finally, at 2:30 p.m., we heard the honk of the Ginger Blue's yellow school bus. It was time. The road to the Hudson plant followed the Elk River, twisting past shady campgrounds and rent-a-canoe outlets. Although chicken has long been king here, Noel fancies itself as something of a vacation spot—"one of the Ozark's best-kept secrets," as the Chamber of Commerce puts it.

Three miles later, we pulled up to a concrete fortress, accessible only through the tinted glass that encased the lobby. A slender smokestack rose from a jumble of tubes and tanks behind the building. A chain-link fence, topped with barbed wire, surrounded it all.

The bus was gone almost as soon as we stepped off. We walked to the security booth, but were halted by the guard. Orientation didn't start until 4:30 p.m. He picked up the phone and called into the plant.

"What do you want me to do with these guys?" he asked.

GETTING ORIENTED

We were told to wait in the company cafeteria, where we spent the next two hours watching weary workers take their breaks. None of them spoke to us as they hunched over steaming plates of Hudson chicken, their lips tensed and jaws clenched, eyes narrow and nostrils flared.

The room appeared evenly divided between whites and Latinos, a striking development for a corner of America long renowned for its countrified ways. In the 1920s, a young Missourian named Paul Henning attended Boy Scout camp in Noel; many years later, he drew upon that experience to create a hit TV series, "The Beverly Hillbillies."

An employee roster on the factory wall showed just how dramatically Noel had changed. Not a single Latino surname was listed among the workers hired between 1959 and 1990. But in 1994, buoyed by the nation's surging appetite for chicken, Hudson expanded. The number of birds processed here jumped from 850,000 to 1.3 million a week. The number of jobs soared from 750 to 1,200—a work force roughly equal to the population of Noel itself.

Since then, virtually every new name on the Hudson roster had belonged to a Latino, now 45% of the plant's work force. Like my *compañeros*, almost all had been recruited from the Rio Grande Valley, where chronic unemployment and a porous border ensured a steady flow of cheap and willing labor. With annual turnover at the facility topping 100%, Hudson sends for another 50 migrants, on average, each month.

Some of the older white workers glared our way, my companions so obviously the latest incarnation of that trend. In the bathroom, we saw walls marked with epithets: "Go back to Mexico," one said.

But I was surprised to find that the animosity was far from universal. Everywhere we looked, cross-cultural romance appeared to be in blossom, especially between the white women of Noel and the Latino men of South Texas. The last manager of the Ginger Blue, in fact, had run off with a Tejano, leaving her husband to operate the hotel by himself. Within the Hudson plant, a parade of purple hickeys underscored the connection.

“Looks like the *chupacabras* is running loose up here,” leaving its mark on the workers, said Saturnino Orives. He was referring to the mythical “goatsucker,” which has been blamed for a rash of unexplained attacks on Latin American livestock.

Saturnino was 51, a former railroad worker and disc jockey in the Mexican border town of Piedras Negras. He was blunt about his reason for coming: His son had been charged with vehicular homicide while driving drunk and the family needed \$3,000 for bail. When he joined our bus in Oklahoma, Saturnino was wearing a T-shirt from a Mexican band known as Bronco, so he instantly became El Bronco, the wild one.

Unlike the rest of us, El Bronco had been recruited to work for Simmons Foods, a chicken processor in nearby Southwest City, Mo., that also houses its workers at the Ginger Blue. After it became clear that he was the odd man out, El Bronco went to the Ginger Blue office and asked to be transferred to the Hudson roster.

“Simmons has already paid for you,” he was told. Just before coming to work, however, Simmons agreed to swap him for another Hudson employee, the one woman who had traveled north with us.

“I’ve been traded back,” El Bronco announced.

Two hours passed in the cafeteria without anyone coming to get us. So we began wandering down the halls, poking our heads through doorways. After a few wrong turns, we ended up in a conference room, seated around a large table with another group of new recruits, 18 of us altogether.

A portrait of James T. “Red” Hudson, the firm’s 72-year-old founder and CEO, was hanging on the wall. So was a copy of his motto, handwritten in elegant script: “We will strive to be a company whose worth in dollars is determined by its emphasis on human values, rather than a company whose human values is determined by its emphasis on dollars.”

Everyone was given a thick folder of informational brochures and at least a dozen preemployment forms to fill out. All the material was in English—health insurance, withholding allowance, medical history, immigration status, union dues—even though most in the room spoke only Spanish. We were expected to wade through it while also watching a safety and sexual-harassment video. “So we can get out of here sooner,” the orientation instructor said.

Some of the guys couldn’t even write their own addresses in English, much less make sense of the video. Although they still didn’t know I was a reporter, they did consider me the most proficient English-speaker of the bunch. “C’mon, you’re the gringo,” said El Bronco, urging me to help out. I hesitated, not wanting to tamper with the course of events. But I began translating W-4s and I-9s anyway, swayed by their desperation.

A man in a hard hat and white lab coat walked into the room. He had a clipboard and began jotting notes. He looked first at Erasmo De La Rosa, a beefy young man with a

heavy brow, eyeing him from head to toe. "He likes men," the orientation instructor said. It was meant as a joke, but he never explained why we were being sized up.

The man looked at me and asked if I was tall. I shrugged and stood up. Then he turned to Baldemar Torres. Baldemar was 30, a shy ex-U.S. Army soldier who carried a Bible and scarcely had opened his mouth in three days. The man asked him if he liked the cold.

"I guess so," Baldemar said.

"I mean, really cold," the man asked again.

Baldemar looked as if he wanted to shrink under the table, unsure of what to say or do. Later, in the hallway, he spoke to me for the first time. "Didn't they used to do that 100 years ago?" he asked. It was a genuine question. "Didn't they used to do that when they sold black people as slaves?"

ON THE LINE

After the orientation, we were led to the medical office, where we underwent a battery of tests to measure the strength of our fingers and wrists. The nurse said it would help the company determine which tasks were best-suited to our physical capabilities.

But Erasmo didn't buy it. He was sure that Hudson had devised a scheme to thwart workers-compensation claims. When his turn came, he grimaced and squeezed the machine with every ounce of his might, hoping to establish just how powerful his hands had been should they later be rendered lame.

From the nurse's station, we were taken to a supply window. Rubber boots were issued to us for \$18 (the cost would be deducted from our paychecks). Then we were given a cotton lab coat, a plastic smock and plastic sleeve guards, cotton gloves and latex gloves, a hair net, a beard net and a handful of rubber ear plugs. Soiled gear could later be exchanged. But if it was lost or damaged, we were told, the replacement fee would be ours to pay.

We stood in a hallway, dressing slowly, fumbling with the apron strings and double-layered gloves. I felt like a tenderfoot facing combat for the first time. The floor was slick with chicken fat. El Bronco tried to lighten the moment by doing his best Michael Jackson imitation, moonwalking across the greasy sheen.

Every few seconds, the double-doors at the end of the corridor swung open, providing a glimpse of the processing line.

"That's a pretty mean scene in there," Erasmo said.

The next thing I knew, we were in it. Pale yellow chickens were flying past us by the thousands, propelled through the cavernous factory by a dizzying maze of belts and

pulleys and hooks and chains and gears. Everything was wet—drenched in water, fat, blood and offal—dripping down gutters and gushing down drains. The smell of flesh, although not fetid, was raw and gamy. I shivered. It was 47 degrees and I had on only a T-shirt under my uniform.

The scene would have been downright medieval had the technology not been such a marvel. Each bird was hooked by its drumsticks to a shackle line, then carried through a series of precisely engineered turns. The machinery slashed its neck, vacuumed its bowels, plucked its feathers and quartered its limbs. We were there only to fill in the gaps, our fingers and hands and arms doing the hooking and cutting and packing that the equipment could not.

Nobody bothered to explain how this system worked or where we fit into the design. Nobody even told us how the chicken would be packaged or to whom it would be sold. Each of us was given just one task—a simple, rote, numbingly mechanical motion—and told to repeat it all night long.

I was assigned to the grading station. A half-dozen workers were already there, inspecting and sorting the gutted birds before hooking them back on the shackle line. Unblemished chickens went on the “A-grade” line, and defective birds went on the “B-grade” line. A supervisor briefly told me what to look for: bruised meat, torn skin, missing limbs, pustular sores. That was my training. It was time to work.

I yanked a bird from the conveyor belt, sizing it up with a roll of the wrist. This one’s good, that one’s bad. Then I chucked it onto a passing hook and reached for another one. Again and again. Hour after hour.

If the video we’d seen in Chapman’s office back in South Texas had made the factory appear quietly businesslike, the reality was a sock in the gut. The chickens flowed faster than any of us could hook them. They piled up on the conveyor belt until they spilled onto the floor. No matter how frantically we worked, it was impossible to keep up. There was no sense of accomplishment, no way to measure our progress. There were always more chickens waiting to be hooked.

My back started to knot up. My feet were turning numb. Greasy water splashed in my face. Icy needles shot up my arms. In a moment of exhaustion, I asked my supervisor how fast I was supposed to be working. “Thirty-five a minute,” he said, a stopwatch dangling from his neck. I tried to do the math in my head, but gave up. I later calculated it at more than 15,000 chickens a night.

Time froze in the factory. I saw no windows and no clocks. Between the earplugs and roaring machinery, nobody could even talk. If we had to go to the bathroom, we needed the supervisor’s permission. We were given two half-hour breaks, but we spent the first 10 minutes of each one stripping off our gear and the last 10 suiting up. If the boss didn’t think we were working fast enough, he rolled his arms like a basketball referee calling a traveling violation. Once, when the bell signaled a break, he ordered us to stay put.

“Lower this pile of chickens,” he barked. “Now move it!”

By 2 a.m., I could hardly move. I rolled my smock and gloves and sleeve guards into a slimy wad, then tucked it under my arm. Outside, we waited for the Ginger Blue bus. It didn't come for an hour.

UNREALIZED DREAMS

I tried to sleep late, but the sun was baking the stale air of our dingy room. My hands and neck felt sticky, then I remembered that I'd been too tired the night before to bathe. I stumbled into the shower. The roaches in the stall didn't even bother to hide.

El Capitan was already awake, pacing in his undershorts and smoking a Marlboro. Roberto, the sickly Mexican accountant, was in one of his insomniac trances, eyes closed but not really asleep, sitting cross-legged on a soiled mattress. We'd begun calling him La Flaquencia, skin and bones.

“Look at La Flaquencia,” El Capitan said with a shake of his head. “All the time dreaming. Up in the sky.”

Erasmus soon came over, along with Miguel and El Bronco. We sipped instant coffee and ate cereal from plastic bowls with disposable spoons. It was our first chance to compare notes from the night before. The others were sore, complaining about stiff hands and backs, but they seemed more resigned than me to the toll of such rigorous labor. What most bothered them was this decaying hotel, which served as home to us and 135 other poultry workers.

“That goddamned, lying, son-of-a-bitch video,” El Bronco said.

He was fuming about the little home movie we'd seen back at Chapman's office, the one that showed furnished rooms with stoves and TVs. Although I didn't think the film had painted an especially attractive portrait of the Ginger Blue, it had depicted amenities that didn't exist—while also ignoring some of the more subtle, if nauseating, details of our accommodations.

“I can just see Chapman's face now: ‘Adios, suckers,’ ” said Erasmus, who was 25, the most Americanized of our crew. He hadn't been expecting luxury, but he also hadn't bargained for filth—the open dumpsters, the vermin and cobwebs, the exposed pipes and wiring, the gaping holes punched in the walls. “We're not animals; we're just a different color,” he said.

My two roommates were impatient with Erasmus's indignation. “Look, man,” El Capitan shot back, “I came to work.” La Flaquencia had been roused from his slumber by all the commotion. “We're already here,” he piped in. “We might as well just deal with it.”

But Erasmo was insistent. He said the trip had been a wake-up call, opening his eyes to distinctions of class and race more clearly than he'd ever perceived. "When I get home, I'm going back to school, and I'm going to make something of myself," he announced.

As time wore on, however, the perseverance of even my most dogged companions began to wane. After a second night of work, the weekend was upon us. It was the last thing anyone wanted. As long as they were away from home and putting up with such discomfort, my fellow migrants were determined to sacrifice themselves—to work as many hours as they could physically, or legally, manage. Now they were being told to relax.

On Saturday, the Ginger Blue staff organized a shopping trip to Wal-Mart, but nobody in my group had enough cash to bother. We were still five days shy of our first paycheck. Even after the money started flowing, it would arrive minus deductions for rent, supplies and meals at the Hudson cafeteria. Like our first day at the Ginger Blue, we had nowhere to go, nothing to do but wait.

The isolation was suffocating. "These gringos—they need us, but they don't want us," El Capitan said in a moment of frustration. "I've never quit a job before, but this place is death."

He was one of the hardest to figure: brusque and stubborn, often dispensing unwelcome advice, yet unexpectedly delicate at times, even sentimental. That weekend, he called me aside and pulled out an old, yellowing notebook that he had carried with him from Mexico. In it he had written every fact he had ever learned about geology and engineering, page after page of impossibly neat, block letters on tiny lines.

It was testimony to his 25 years on the deep-sea oil platforms of Veracruz and Campeche and Tabasco, a professional life that ended abruptly when the Mexican government began forcing veteran workers into early retirement. El Capitan wanted me to understand that he was an accomplished technician, not merely a chicken plucker. By toting his papers on this journey to Noel, it was as if he also wanted to convince himself.

"Everything in this book comes from here," El Capitan said, pointing to his forehead. "I've lived it."

El Capitan was carrying another memory with him, a different labor of a lifetime. As a teenager, he had come this way looking for farm work and fallen in love with a white woman. He had reason to believe she was still around.

"We're old now, so nothing would happen," El Capitan said. "But if I could just see her one last time."

Before the journey was over, he would find her.

THE ROAD HOME

The weekend resulted in one unexpected diversion. A convoy of canoes filled the Elk River, sending hundreds of beer-chugging revelers paddling past the Ginger Blue.

We went down to the riverbanks and stared. The sight of so many carefree Americans, especially the bikini-clad women, seemed like a cruel joke. Some of my colleagues started to leer. “Hey, blondie, you look good to me,” one of them hollered. “Take it off, *mamacita*.”

The boaters responded, somewhat good-naturedly, with a stream of expletives—the only Spanish words they could conjure.

I originally had intended to work at the Hudson plant for at least a week. But just two nights on the processing line had convinced me that Chapman was right, I wasn’t cut out for this sort of work. My wrist was turning to jelly. By the weekend, I couldn’t even grip a chicken with one hand.

Before leaving, I’d told everyone in our group that I was a reporter, a revelation that was greeted with amusement and goodwill. “Ay, the tremendous Chuy,” said El Capitan, employing one of his favorite nicknames for me. Most of them were eager for their plight to be exposed. El Bronco sensed an opportunity.

“Take me with you, my little gringo,” he pleaded.

It was awkward saying goodbye. This was real for them, a chapter of their lives. I, on the other hand, had stashed away a credit card, which would buy me a night at the nearest Hilton, followed by the earliest flight back home. I promised to return.

I did come a few days later, accompanied by a photographer. It was like a family reunion. We hugged and joked and toasted the dawn. Within a week, Erasmo and El Bronco had taken their first paychecks—\$87.77—and returned home, one to the Texas side of the Rio Grande and the other to the Mexican side. A week later, Miguel left, soon followed by El Capitan.

By the time I returned again two months later, only La Flaquencia and Baldemar were still at the Ginger Blue. I knocked on the door of my old room, but the men living there were strangers; I finally found my friends in a far-off corner of the lodge.

It was noon, and La Flaquencia was sitting in a chair, alone, in the dark. I startled him when I walked in. He’d been meditating and didn’t recognize me right away.

“What a miracle,” he said. We took a drive in my rental car, ending up at a small park in Noel, alongside the river.

By then, I’d learned that La Flaquencia didn’t owe his fragility just to the gentleness of his soul. During his stressful years as an accountant in Mexico, he told me, a doctor had

begun prescribing Valium. For much of the next decade, he said, he'd lived on a diet of pills, eventually growing so addicted that he was twice institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital.

He was clean now, he insisted, although he admitted to still battling his old demons. He slept only in fitful spurts and sometimes heard voices. At odd moments, he would pound his chest as if fighting for breath. In the plant, he feared that other workers were ridiculing him behind his back. "I don't really blame them," he said. "I'm such a bundle of nerves."

El Bronco and Erasmo thought they'd been exploited, but not La Flaquencia. The way he saw it, it was him using Hudson. His drug problem had destroyed his career and embarrassed his family back in Mexico. Although Hudson didn't know it, the company was giving him a chance to restore his reputation, to show his wife and two little girls that he was a decent man and a dependable provider.

"I just want people to believe in me again," he said.

I took the same drive with Baldemar, who had remained distant and silent during my stay at the Ginger Blue. He'd spent most of his time alone, in bed, reading the Bible. To the extent that we'd even noticed him, he was simply El Hermano, the church brother.

As we sat under a towering tree full of webworms, which had enveloped the leaves in a ghostly shroud, he explained that his faith was a shield. "If it wasn't for the Lord, I'd have been gone by now, like the others," Baldemar said.

When things get tough at the Hudson plant—when the chickens turn to a blur and his hands freeze up—he retreats into a world of prayer, silently singing songs of praise as the shackle line shoots another bird his way.

▪ **Second of three parts**