

The Women They Leave Behind

By Dan Baum

The women in the back whoop and flail to keep their balance as the old pickup squeals to a halt in front of Cuca's house. Zoraida's legs shoot skyward as she tumbles off the wheel well, ramming her sister Argelia, who keeps her feet by slapping the roof of the cab like a barfly calling for drink. Claudia -- who has swapped her customary sweatshirt and jeans for a low-cut frilly blouse and polyester bellbottoms tight enough to stanch a hemorrhage -- surfs across the rusty truck bed like a sailor on a storm-tossed deck, spilling her tequila-and-pomegranate punch. Andrea, preoccupied with the ordeal she faces tomorrow, clutches the gunwales and mouths a prayer to the Virgin.

The women are scrubbed, painted, and perfumed, their fragrance mingling with the wood smoke, flowers, and toasting corn that are the olfactory signatures of Cofradía de Suchitlán, a village of 1,200 souls in the hills of western Mexico. They have two excuses to doll themselves up and carry on: Argelia's 28th birthday and Andrea's imminent illegal border crossing to the United States. Really, though, they're off to a botanero – an indoor-outdoor bar where the food and live music are free as long as you keep drinking – to celebrate the fact that nobody can stop them from doing so.

Their men are gone.

"Hurry before Hectorín calls," shouts Argelia to Cuca, and everybody screams with laughter. Cuca's fiancée Hectorín is 3,000 miles away, hanging sheetrock in Greenville, South Carolina. He doesn't let Cuca out of the house to work or visit friends, let alone to party. He calls several times a week to check up on her and God help her if he gets no answer.

"He called yesterday so I should be okay," laughs Cuca, as she hikes her tight skirt and swings her legs over the tailgate. Twenty-year-old Claudia hands Cuca a cup of punch, lies her fingertips on her chest and flutters her eyelids comically.

"I'm even luckier," she says. "Alfonso hasn't called me for two weeks, ever since he caught me out selling tamales. Ooo-eee, was he mad!"

"Andale!" yell the others, raising their cups in rebellious solidarity, splashing punch and pomegranate seeds. Three are Greenville widows; the men of Zoraida, Cuca, and Claudia are sharing a house there, along with Claudia's brothers Beto and Chuy and half a dozen other men from Cofradía.

Up front, Licho -- Cuca's mother-in-law-to-be -- grinds the old Ford into gear. Noticeably missing is Reyna, mother of Argelia and Zoraida, who loves botaneros. Reyna's bluff and noisy husband,

Rubén, who invested his youthful Stateside earnings in a couple of buses and no longer has to migrate, forbade her to leave the house.

“If my husband were here, he’d never let me go either,” confides Zoraida.

“Mine would kill me for even asking!” says Andrea, whose husband is in Los Angeles.

“Wouldn’t they want to come along?” I ask, wondering what man wouldn’t want to party with this bevy of attractive and animated women. They recoil in disgust.

“Come with us?” they shriek in unison. “Who’d want that?”

The truck bounces over the cobblestones, scattering chickens before it, and the women of Cofradía de Suchitlán are off on their subversive tear.

(line break here)

After years of lean times in Mexico and fat times up north, some nine million Mexicans live allá (pronounced ayá) – or “over there,” as they refer to the U.S. Most are young men¹ from villages like Cofradía,

¹ Jeffrey Passel
Urban Institute, Washington DC
Census Demographer
202-261-5678
and
Hans Johnson
Public Policy Institute of California
415-291-4400

where good work is scarce². About half are in the U.S. illegally,³ doing the hard, dirty, dangerous, low-paid jobs Americans no longer want. Cofradians still raise coffee, corn, sugar cane, and cattle in the fields surrounding the village, but the real money comes from allá. Migrants earn, as in Hectorín's case, more in two weeks than they could in a year back home.⁴

In a way, Cofradía no longer inhabits Mexico but rather a new Spanish-speaking country that lies south of the Rio Grande and whose capital is Los Angeles. When people here speak of the "the city" they mean Los Angeles, not Mexico City. (Often, when they speak of "Los Angeles," they mean everything north of the border, including Nashua, New Hampshire, and Greenville, South Carolina.) The region's northward orientation is evident at the Colima airport, where the daily flight to Mexico City is half-empty, while the one to Tijuana is jammed with people aiming to crossing both legally and illegally. "The border," as we know it, no longer exists economically. To Mexicans, the United

² [TK from Juan Hernandez, in charge of the Department for Mexicans in the Exterior in the office of President Fox. He has a list of the 90 places in Mexico most severely affected by immigration and is sending it to me. In the interview, however, he did characterize the places that send the most men as rural.]

³ Jeffrey Passel
Urban Institute, Washington DC
Census Demographer
202-261-5678
jpassel@ui.urban.org

⁴ Most people in Cofradía earn between \$20 and \$30 a week, or maybe \$1,500 a year. Hectorín and his friends earn about \$14 an hour and usually work 60 hours a week. That's \$840 a week.

States has become a high-wage satellite: Mexican President Vicente Fox said in July that the nine percent of his countrymen living allá earns more, collectively, than the 91 percent living at home.⁵

The money enters the economy through a strange back door. It isn't taxed, so none of the dollars the men wire home goes toward public infrastructure.⁶ While Cofradía's school, roads, and water system go to hell, a stay-at-home mom watches her new house go up cinderblock by cinderblock as her husband sends wages from a meat-packing plant in Glendale. A fourteen-year-old who used to spend her days making cheese and selling it door-to-door suddenly appears in a high-school uniform, courtesy of her brother mowing golf courses in Atlanta. A late-model pickup appears in front of a bride's house, a honeymoon substitute from a husband who's gone back to frying doughnuts on the graveyard shift in Torrance. Especially for young men whose families have no one else allá, pressure to do a stint abroad starts building at around age 16. One year's wages as a gardener in Memphis can open a hardware store in Cofradía and obviate a lifetime of whacking weeds with a machete for two dollars a day. It takes so few dollars to work such magic.

⁵ 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

⁶ Lorenzo Sanchez Velasquez, former mayor of Cofradía de Suchitlán, 011-52-339-54254. He speaks no English.

The new houses and pickup trucks, though, are the least of the changes dollars are wreaking. This strange new country that Cofradía inhabits has a demographic vacuum that's striking as you drive through town. You see women sweeping the cobblestones, women carrying plastic pails of milk and bundles of stovewood, women silhouetted against the sky hanging laundry on sagging rooftop lines. You see a cluster of gray-haired men by the corner grocery, and everywhere, clouds of children. But you see few young men. Although Mexican men have been going to work in the United States for generations – the migration from the Cofradía area is said to have started during a yellow fever epidemic in 1914 –they have never gone north in such numbers. Their absence leaves the women in charge at home -- and Mexico poised at the top of a giant socio-sexual roller coaster.

"I miss Erik," says Zoraida of her husband, "but when he's gone, it's like a vacation." She covers her mouth and blushes, appalled at her temerity. Machismo has long been the organizing principle of family life in rural Mexico. According to traditions as old as Cortez and his native lover Malinche, a man conquers a woman and then seals her off, protecting her decency from further assault whether real or imagined. A woman submits, gaining a kind of sainthood through long-suffering service. The green and white Cofradía bus that grinds its

smoky way up the hill from Colima, the state capital, is in effect a diesel-powered time machine, traveling, in one hour, from the mid-twentieth century back to the eighteenth. In urban Mexico women may have careers and lives outside the home (though most still do the cooking and housework). But in a village like Cofradía a man is king of his castle, even if the castle is a cinderblock cube with a fiberglass roof and a burro tied in front. That means a man works, a woman pats tortillas. A man goes out with his friends to drink, a woman goes out only to grind corn at the village mill. A woman rarely challenges her man's rule: Reyna wouldn't think of defying Rubén.

Rubén, however, is physically present. The men abroad are trying to control their women via long-distance telephone. And as today's party demonstrates, the phone is a dubious leash.

When commentators try to explain Islamic rage against the United States, they talk about the power of the dollar, the subordinate position of Arab countries in the global economy, the western values of individualism and sexual equality that fundamentalists believe are contaminating their culture. Mexico is Catholic, not Islamic; women here, even in rural areas, cover their heads only in church. And no country is more agile in adapting to outsiders – Mexico welcomed the west 500 years ago and is a true melting pot. But the 2,000-mile border Mexico shares with the U.S. puts it closer than any other poor

country to the cultural and economic heart of global capital. The stresses of living “so far from God, so close to the United States,” as Porfirio Díaz put it, are felt in friendly Mexico as acutely as anywhere. The intrusion of Pizza Hut, Halloween, and the Simpsons twists the Mexican soul one way, and the extrusion of a generation of young men twists it another. With no husbands around either to comfort or police them the women of Cofradía are getting used to not asking permission. When the cat’s allá the mice will play. Or maybe mutate: because when the cat comes home, the women are no longer mice.

(line break here)

Several things happen at once as our butts hit the chairs at the botanero on the outskirts of Colima. Waiters in short yellow jackets converge from every direction, bearing platters of tacos, pickled pigs feet, cold sliced pork with jalapeños, and galvanized buckets of bottled beer on ice. Although a seven-piece mariachi in full regalia wails away three tables over, four norteño musicians – snare drum, accordion, guitar, and bass – swoop down on us in a full-throated rendition of “La Tumba de Francisco Villa.” I embarrass myself by looking for an opener to uncap a Corona; Argelia snatches the bottle from my hand, lies it against the table edge, and with a practiced whack sends the cap flying. Ninety seconds later the empties are upside down in the bucket and the women are reaching for more.

"En la casa," shouts Cuca over the clashing music. A dark beauty of 22, she is new at having her man allá and is struggling to cope. I've asked her what she does all day, and her answer, "in the house," means more than just where she spends it. It means a whole universe of feminine chores: soaking dried corn kernels in lime, carrying them to Cofradía's gasoline-powered mill to be ground into masa, making stack after stack of tortillas, feeding chickens, hand-washing clothes in an outdoor tub, watching a cousin's babies, cooking, watching soap operas on a scratchy TV with a coat hanger for an antenna, and scrubbing the cement floor until it's time to scoop another batch of corn kernels to soak for the night.

There is a beauty to the rhythms of rural Mexican life, but this generation of twenty-something women straddles a great divide. They are halfway between old Mexico -- with its communal lands, Catholic traditions, and stable family values -- and global trends toward freer markets, more education, and a feisty individualism. Cuca, for example, is unusually well educated for a young Cofradían. She finished junior high --which became obligatory only three years ago -- then scraped together tuition for a technical high school and commuted down the hill to it for four years to get a degree as a veterinary technician. She was on the point of starting her first job last Christmas when Licho's son Hectorín made his first visit home in three

years. During his 14-day stay Hectorín not only talked Cuca into marrying him, he also convinced her to walk away from four years of hard-earned education and smother her career in its cradle. "I support you now," he told her.

"Are you happy?" I ask.

She shrugs cheerfully and gives an age-old Mexican reply: "Así es." That's how it is. I might as well be asking if she's happy about gravity. The norteños fire up a cumbia and Argelia and Claudia leap to their feet, tottering hand in hand toward the dance floor.

The last time I saw these women dance was at a Cofradía baile when their men were in town, and it was a grim sight. The men sat at a table, looking bored; the women sat at another, looking equally bored. When Claudia and her then-boyfriend Alfonso danced, they swayed woodenly, looking past each other, barely moving, until the song was over. Then they flew apart as though radioactive and rejoined their own camps. Jealousy is so central to machismo that a woman cannot dance – or even talk – with a man other than her own at such a party. Neither can she dance with her own man in a way that might draw another man's attention. So all the energy that a co-ed affair might generate is drained away, leaving nothing but beer and overamplified tubas.

Today, though, the party is all women, so Claudia and Argelia shake it with abandon, wiggling their butts and shimmying their breasts. While Argelia peels her blouse off one shoulder, Claudia grabs her waist and gives her a wild spin. Such are Mexico's ossified sexual politics that a single-sex party is sexier than a co-ed one. Men at other tables roll toothpicks along their lower lips and watch. They are city boys, sleek and well dressed, part of the lucky cadre who have found work in Mexico's exclusive technocratic economy. None approaches. The imagined threat that is the glue of machismo seems largely that: imagined. Besides, the women concentrate on each other in a way that keeps men away. Claudia spent an hour painting her eyes and choosing clothes for this party. She wants to be admired, but the last thing she wants is to be approached. She's not out for another man. She's got one, and she's not even sure one is worth the trouble.

Her 20-year-old husband Alfonso, like Cuca's fiancé, has ordered her never to leave the cinderblock house with the open-air kitchen she shares with her parents and younger sister. He means never – not to work, not to visit friends. And he calls at random to check up on her. Claudia largely obeys him. She spends mornings with her mother hand-grinding fresh corn kernels, mixing them with sugar and wrapping the paste in leaves of green corn husk. But come afternoon, Claudia steams the bundles and loads them hot into her rusty

wheelbarrow. In defiance of Alfonso's orders, she slips out to wander Cofradía's cobblestones calling "taamaaaales." On a good day, she can earn three dollars.

The cellphone played a walk-on role in her subterfuge. When cellphones first appeared in Cofradía about a year ago, Telcel didn't charge for incoming calls and Claudia carried one. It let her sound like she was home even if she wasn't, and because she never made calls it was free. But Telcel started charging to receive calls about six months ago, and Claudia had to give up the phone. Hence, two weeks ago, Alfonso busted her. He loves the United States for giving him a \$14-an-hour job hanging sheetrock, but the goodies come with a price. If he could see what the dollar economy has wrought today – his unsupervised wife drunk and gyrating before a roomful of men – he'd blow a gasket.

(line break here)

You can still find men in Cofradía if you know where to look. Rigo the butcher performs a weekly rite guaranteed to bring them out, making an all-meat breakfast the old-fashioned way. As the dawn mist dissipated one Sunday, I found Rigo behind his house slicing up pig lung with a long curved knife. Two huge fires roared in pits, and on each sat a round galvanized cow trough five feet in diameter full of amber-colored, boiling fat. They looked like cannibal pots in a 1930s

adventure movie. In one simmered strips of skin, bits of lung, heart, intestine, and ears -- chicharrones. In the other bubbled racks of ribs and football-sized chunks of pure lean pork – carnitas. Rigo is 47, short, and mustachioed with a big, hard belly. His assistant Bayo, tall and baby-faced at 26, stirred the pots with what looked like a walnut canoe paddle. Bayo inclined his head toward me, wished me a healthful and prosperous morning, and bid me sit on a pile of scrap lumber. “Careful what you say,” Rigo jokingly warned Bayo as he gestured toward me with the bloody knife. “He’s a spy for Ross Perot.”

I found myself asking an odd question: why were two able-bodied Cofradía men living at home with their families when they could be making buckets of money allá?

“Won’t go,” said Rigo, tossing the lung slices into the chiccharón pot. “I’d rather starve.”

“Looks like you’re not in any danger,” I told him.

Rigo hitched his paunch and laughed. “My seven siblings are there,” he said. “I am the only one who stays.”

“Why?”

He thumped his chest with a comic flourish. “Puro Mexicano,” he said. “Lots of work, little money.” In other words, he’d rather live in familiar Cofradía and earn little than live a lucrative but alienated and sometimes humiliating no-speaka-English life up north.

"I have three little boys, Sir," said Bayo as he opened a can of Tecate. It seemed to me that beer at six a.m. would water down a lecture on responsible fatherhood. But Bayo didn't touch it to his lips, rather he upended it into the fat, sending up a roasty aroma of hops. "If I go to the States, they won't have a father," Bayo said. "And what could I bring back? Money. Nothing more." He set down his paddle and walked into the kitchen.

"Most men are thinking about educating their children," I called after him, "or bequeathing them land. . . ."

"I already have land!" Rigo shouted. Then he lowered his voice and made a tiny square with his index fingers. "In the cemetery," said with a laugh. "Two meters."

He stoked the fires. "There are two kinds of men," Rigo said, wagging a polemical finger. "Those who go, and those who sacrifice – to stay Mexican!" He laughed again, tickled at the idea that refusing dollars might be an act of patriotism.

Bayo emerged from the house with a blender-pitcher full of whipped-together milk and fresh garlic. He poured a measure into each pot, raising a fragrance to swoon for. "Not going is a sacrifice," he said philosophically, "but in another sense, we're the lucky ones. The butcher's children never starve. We can afford to stay." As though drawn by the smell, a throng of men suddenly filled the yard, crowding

the pots and poking through the fat for choice pieces of crunchy pork. The chicharrón pot is a place for male bonding all over Mexico. The men stooped over Rigo's pots were grey-haired and leathery. Leaning against his paddle, young Bayo stood out.

(line break here)

A singer bursts onto the botanero patio, wearing an embroidered sombrero the size of a birdbath and a gold lamé cowboy suit with a plastic pistol on the belt. With one hand splayed on his frilly shirt front and the other pointed skyward he bellows a tumescent ballad –right over the mariachis and the norteños. I'm in trouble now: three sources of music, and I have only two ears.

Andrea sits quietly. She is slender and pretty, and also red-haired, which is unusual in this land of morenas. But her green eyes are shiny with panic at the prospect of tomorrow, when she will fly to Tijuana to be stuffed like a bale of marijuana into a hidden compartment beneath the bed of a pickup for the ride through the checkpoint. She's glad her husband Alvarro, who has been in L.A. for most of the three years they've been married, misses her enough to pay a coyote to smuggle her. But she despises the United States. She spent her seventeenth year with a brother in L.A., who wouldn't let her leave the house even to buy food or do laundry. To her, the United

States is four walls and a TV. She's going to miss her mother, she says.

A waiter slams down a plate of mango chunks dusted with rock salt and dried red pepper; Andrea ignores it.

"Tell me," she says, gingerly touching my hand. "The women allá – they're more liberal, aren't they?"

She wants to know if her husband has been sleeping around. All the Cofradía women with men allá live with this fear; some, like Andrea, are driven crazy by it. Life in a village without men is a bit like life during wartime. A cloud of terrors bedevil the women –that their men will die crossing the desert, that they'll decide not to visit at Christmas, that they'll one day stop calling, having found another love allá. The men aren't the only ones who get jealous, and a twisted facet of the dislocation is the anonymous, nation-to-nation gossip rocketing through the phone lines.

The Mexican men I know who work allá are at it six or seven twelve-hour days a week, I tell Andrea, which leaves neither time nor energy for tomcatting. Few single Mexican women live in the U.S.; they're mostly someone's wife, daughter, or sister and kept under lock and key the way Andrea was. As for gringas, not many cross paths with the Mexican laborers. Either way, the men I know allá aren't

getting anything they're not paying for. So while disease is a risk, a love affair is not.

Andrea is straining to listen but with a hurricane of mariachi blowing in one ear and a tornado of norteño in the other – to say nothing of the cowboy tenor -- it is impossible. "Don't worry about it!" I finally shout. "If he had another woman he wouldn't want you to come north!" She nods and shudders, then pinches the tiny watch on her wrist and darts off.

I've gone deaf. No, the musicians are taking a break, all at once. Claudia, hitching up her bellbottoms like a gunfighter, returns to the table to catch her breath and open a beer.

"I won't stop selling tamales," she announces as a waiter sets down a platter of chicken flautas dripping with salsa and sour cream. "If Alfonso doesn't like it, too bad. He doesn't send home money anyway." She wraps her painted lips around a flauta and crunches.

"Of course he doesn't send money!" booms Licho, pounding the table. "None of them does!" At 47, Licho is a kind of den mother to the young women. Short and heavy with big round eyes behind thick glasses, she has fought her husband to a draw. She is most alive when strumming guitar, yet when she married, her husband Hector, a plumber, told her playing music, especially in groups that included men, was scandalous. He finally swiped her guitar and sold it. But

when Hector went to work in Atlanta, Licho bought a new axe and fell to spending afternoons singing and playing with friends of both sexes.

She learned, in his absence, that she was capable not only of remaining loyal to her marriage while making music in public, but of supporting herself. Women with husbands allá called Licho when their faucets dripped or their toilets backed up, and Licho, having watched her plumber husband, found she could help. She started baking elaborate birthday cakes to augment the small sums her husband sent, and in time opened an evening sandwich shop on the town square. When Hector came home he ordered her back to her old life. But just as women in the U.S. changed during their brief factory stints in World War II, Licho had changed during her years of independence. She stood her ground, and Hector was in no position to complain. He'd rarely sent money, and after three years allá had saved only \$3,500, which he promptly squandered on binge-drunks with his cousins. In a sense, then, Licho bought her freedom with three years of single motherhood. And having bought it, she now rages at her son Hectorín who she says wants Cuca to be his "slave."

"They like to say they're supporting a woman," Licho growls. "It makes being allá that much more pleasant for them. But Hectorín hasn't sent Cuca nada." She grabs her beer bottle as though to throttle

it. "I don't know where he learned that stuff," she says. "Certainly not in my house."

(line break here)

To Licho's eleven-year-old daughter Elisita, her roving father and brother are heroes. Their stories gave her the elements of a game that's delighted her friends. She invented it one stifling hot afternoon when she and her gang had already harvested all the hard underripe fruit on a wild guava tree and scoured the creek for little crabs. We were walking up a cobblestone road through a field of sugar cane toward The Pines, a park-like hacienda overlooking the village. "Don Daniel," Elisita said, using the archaic honorific Cofradíans use with elders. "Let's pretend you're the Border Patrol and we're the wetbacks. You have to catch us before we reach The Pines."

I was appalled. First at her use of the term "wetback," which hits my ear as harshly as "nigger." Cofradíans, though, use the word to describe anyone who crosses the border illegally, whether they swim the Rio Grande or not. "Se fue mojado," Cofradíans will say -- "he went wet" -- even if the man in question was smuggled through the checkpoint in the trunk of a car. The term is grimly hilarious when you consider that the lion's share of a "wet" trip these days is often through desiccating desert. Beyond the word, the idea of playing Border Patrol was acutely embarrassing. Like any American, I was thoroughly

welcome in Mexico – no visa required. Yet Elisita’s father and brother were criminals in my country simply for wanting to hang sheetrock twelve hours a day.

The other kids immediately understood how much fun Elisita’s game would be, and there was no getting out of it. I was to station myself ahead at a bend in the road; they would try to get past me. La linea – the line – was a barbed wire fence in a field beside the road. The Pines, shady and green at the top of the hill, would be Los Angeles, the promised land. If they made it there they’d be safe.

I spotted the first group almost immediately. Elisita and ten-year-old Alma were leading four-year-old Oscar by the hand through a field of corn stubble. All three bent low, creeping furtively. What a weird, self-loathing game, I thought.

“Halt!” I shouted in English, giving my voice an electronic buzz. “This. . . is. . .the. . .United. . . States. . .Border. . . Patrol!” They froze as though struck by lightning and thrust their hands skyward.

“Run!” I shouted, laughing. I thought chasing them was the point of the game.

“Oh no,” said Alma, whose brother Javo works with Hector in Greenville and has made the crossing twice. “If you get caught by la Migra you give up at once! If you run, they shoot.”

This seemed a valuable detail.

I rounded them up and marched them toward The Pines. Alma's skittish sister Teri was still at large, as was Alejandra, the dreamy 11-year-old sister of Claudia. I looked behind me and there was Alejandra, sitting calmly on the "Mexican" side of the barbed wire. "Afraid?" I taunted. She wagged a forefinger.

"I don't want to cross," she said. Alma and Elisita rolled their eyes. Alejandra wins, I thought, remembering Rigo the butcher.

Eleven-year-old Teri was at The Pines when we arrived, stretched like a leopard on a tree branch. "You made it too easy!" she laughed, and I realized: this isn't a self-hating game at all. Sooner or later, everybody who wants to sneak into the U.S. gets through. They bring home uproarious stories of zigging when la Migra zagged, of fooling la Migra into dashing down one arroyo while they zipped up another, of making clowns of those blond border agents in their crisp green uniforms and snappy white trucks. Migra y mojados makes for a classic game of hide-and-seek, as weirdly patriotic as cowboys and Indians was for me when I was their age.

"Well you guys are going back," I said to Elisita, Alma, and Oscar with mock roughness. "I'm putting you on the bus for the border tonight!"

"No matter," Alma teased. "We'll try again tomorrow!"

(line break here)

Argelia and Zoraida bang the caps off a couple of beers. Licho is furiously counting on her fingers all the Cofradía men – including her husband -- who went north and neither sent home significant amounts of money on a regular basis nor brought much at the end to make up for their absence.

“Así es,” Argelia says, spearing mango chunks and licking chile from her fingers. “They go with nothing and they come home with nothing.”

“It’s not true for all of them,” Zoraida says, drawing herself up. “Erik sends me money every week. Usually about \$1,000. Sometimes it’s less, because he has expenses up there, but he sends it every week.” Zoraida has bought a used Ford pickup and is banking the rest. Erik’s dream is to own land and raise, he says, “the animals you can eat”: cows, sheep, pigs, rabbits, quail. By sending Zoraida the lion’s share of his earnings every Friday, instead of drinking and whoring them away, Erik’s going to get his wish in a way few Cofradía men do.

Red-haired Andrea returns, grinning with tearful relief and clutching her long-distance phone card. “Alvarro doesn’t have the money for the coyote yet!” she breathes rapturously. “I don’t have to go tomorrow!” It’s like a death-house reprieve from the governor. She is uncapping a beer when Claudia yells, “duck!” and everybody but Licho dives for cover as though a rival gang is about to open fire. The

green and white Cofradía bus passes, full of inquisitive faces peering from the windows and gossipy fingers itching to dial north.

(line break here)

Cofradía sits on a slope leading up to the 11,000-foot Volcano of Fire, a massive smoking cone that looms over the town and erupts at unnerving intervals. The mountain makes its own peculiar weather and halfway home the truck plunges into an opaque bank of fog, forcing me to slow to walking speed. When we emerge into the clear again we are back in Cofradía, turning onto the narrow main drag, and the women in the back of the truck have sat down and gone silent, slumped low in the bed to draw as little attention to themselves as possible.

Cuca, who has been drinking steadily for six hours, hops down nimbly, runs inside, and in a second is back at the doorway, gleefully wagging a finger. Hectorín hasn't called: she's safe. Everybody cheers.

By the time we've dropped off the rest, Licho needs to open her evening sandwich shop on the square. As we park, I notice a new business has moved into one of the garages facing the square on the same side as Licho's loncheria. Inside, to my amazement, sits Lourdes, the second-grade teacher, a woman so overworked by her job and four children that she rarely appears at the baptisms and birthday

parties that constitute Cofradía's social whirl. Yet here she is at dusk, putting price stickers on a set of garish lipsticks.

"What's this?" I ask.

"I have to make some money," she says busily, barely meeting my eye as she marks the lipsticks. "If I don't, Poncho is going to go back to the U.S." Her "store" is nothing but a fluorescent-lit cement garage full of what my grandmother used to call tchotchkes – cheapjack bronzed roses with mawkish sayings, ten-cent nail polish, Lucite figurines of big-eyed kittens. On the counter beside the lipsticks and the cashbox sits a stack of math papers Lourdes is grading.

Her husband Poncho drives one of the green-and-white Cofradía buses, but two of their children are in high school, which costs them \$700 a semester, and their combined salaries aren't covering expenses. "He says things like, 'maybe just for a few months,'" Lourdes says. "If you let them go even for six months," she says, "they come back changed."

She stops and rests a hand on her forehead. School lets out at 1:00, after which, with her mother's help, she makes, serves, and cleans up her family's big afternoon meal. Then she grades papers and prepares the next days' lesson. Now that she has the store, she'll be here until 10 every night. Whoever came up with the stereotype of the Mexican dozing away the day under a big sombrero didn't know the

guys in Greenville or their wives. Today is only Lourdes's first day in the store and already she looks exhausted.

"I had to tell him," she says, "if you go again, don't come back." Her eyes go wet. "Así es. Can you imagine?" she asks, and leaves the question hanging.

Licho closes at eleven, and I help her carry home the money and leftovers. As we enter her house and snap on the bare bulb, the telephone begins snarling. It's Hectorín calling; even from across the room, I can hear he's furious.

"Where have you been?" he shouts at his mother. "I've been calling you for hours!"

"At the loncheria. . .," Licho begins. She smothers a laugh and calls me over to listen.

"Before that!" Hectorín snaps. "You took Cuca to a botanero! Didn't you? Didn't you?"

"Ay, son, listen. . .," she tries. Already someone, probably from the bus, has called Hectorín.

"No I will not listen!" Hectorín yells. I hear a car go past him; he's standing in a phone booth in Greenville, South Carolina, at 2 a.m. Eastern time, trying to maintain power in a tiny village 3,000 miles away. "Cuca is my fiancée!" he shouts. "I say when she goes out. What were you thinking?"

Licho's back is up. "Don't turn her into your property, my son," she says. "She needs to enjoy herself. . . ." But she's already talking to the dial tone. Hectorín has hung up.

"Así es," Licho chuckles wearily as she hangs up the phone. "Así es."

end