The New Americans

wild with fear and uncertainty and trauma. But Guerra’s melody is the sound-track to these scenes, reminding me that in Latin America, we bear the horrors of our trek through the present by carrying a knapsack of memory and hope. In Spanish, “ojalá” means, literally, “I hope so.” But in Guerra’s lexicon, it means more than wishful thinking, passive desire: It is a communal yearning that paves the way toward the future.

4 :: Mexico to Mecca ::

The Flores Family

Pedro Flores
It is 95 degrees at nine o’clock in the evening in Mecca, California; not unusual for the month of September. Ventura Flores, a woman of forty who looks closer to fifty, sits in the dim light on the front steps of her sister’s thirty-foot trailer home, where she, her husband, Pedro, and five of their children, along with her sister and five of her children, live. It is a Friday night, and the kids are glued to the TV inside the stifling-hot trailer. In an effort to save money, the owner of the trailer, Ventura’s sister Irma, does not turn on the cooler—not an air conditioner, but a contraption that works by dint of evaporating water, also known as a “swamp cooler.” It gets its name from the fact that the evaporative system works wonders when the weather is hot and dry, but if there’s even a tad of humidity in the air—such as during the “monsoon” summer months, when towering thunderheads rise over the desert floor—the machine merely redoubles the moisture in the air, creating a “swamp” indoors. The Floreses didn’t have any kind of cooler in Mexico, but they also lived not in the desert but in the temperate climes of the central part of the country.

Few people would consider Mecca, a small desert outpost about forty miles southeast of Palm Springs, a paradise. It is some fifteen miles off the interstate; the only reason a tourist would wind up in Mecca is, perhaps, to visit the Salton Sea, a strange body of brackish water created when the Colorado River flooded at the turn of the last century. The river no longer floods, having been manipulated by human hands, dammed and diverted, for hydroelectric purposes—and agribusiness. The fortuitous proximity of Mecca to the California Aqueduct transformed the badlands into a booming agricultural region. That’s the reason the immigrants are here. Once a place that attracted only a handful of desert rats, Mecca’s population is now overwhelmingly Mexican.

Increasing numbers of immigrants work in such out-of-the-way places—the economy pushes and pulls, from Third World to First, from city to suburb, from coast to interior, from factory to farmland.

There is no movie theater, no mall, only a couple of motels on the outskirts of town. “Downtown,” in fact, is not much more than a gas station and a convenience store. Not much for a teenager to do here—and there are plenty of them, hauled in by their migrant parents. Many of them work alongside the elders in the fields well before their eighteenth birthdays. Many of them will not finish high school; if they’re lucky, they will attend a couple of night classes to learn basic English. Wound tight with nervous energy—the tension between their desires and the reality of their station in life—some of them turn to the “cholo” lifestyle, emulating the gangsters of East L.A. with oversized pants, bandanas, and badder-than-bad shades. They cruise the dusty streets of town in their dilapidated mobiles looking for action, but they find only the vastness of desert night, an inscrutable black mirror. By day, they take their place alongside everyone else in the fields.

The five working adults of the Flores family (including Ventura’s daughters Nora and Lorena, nineteen and eighteen years old, respectively) all work for $6.75 an hour, just a cut above the minimum wage in California, but there are thirteen mouths to feed at home, rent for the trailer park space, and utility bills. The income is barely enough to cover these expenses.

The air is dead without the slightest breeze. The heat radiates up from the ground, from the walls of the trailers, from every solid surface that sat under the white sun all day long. The only sound comes from a couple of TVs and radios, but even these are turned down low. For most of the American workforce, Friday night is time to cut loose, but not for the Mexicans of Mecca. Most of them work six days a week. Saturday is just another workday that will begin well before dawn.
I ask Ventura’s daughter Nora, the eldest, what she usually does on a Friday night. “Nada,” she says, although she clearly wants to go somewhere, anywhere. When she comes home from a day in the fields, where she crouches alongside her aunt from six-thirty in the morning to about three in the afternoon, she bathes, fixes her hair, and dons makeup, but more often than not she remains in the trailer park, waiting for something or someone that never comes.

The trailer park where the family lives is an unpaved slice of land on the outskirts of town. Because most of the trailers are lit so dimly—low-wattage bulbs mean cheaper electric bills—it is almost impossible to tell that there is a community of about two dozen families here. You can drive past it at night and not notice it, the tiny camp lost in the dusty dark.

It is nearly ten o’clock now, bedtime for the Flores family and for most of Mecca. Since they got off of work, they have bathed, cooked, cleaned, watched TV, and chatted quietly on the steps of the trailer. There is nothing more to do, except sleep, and dream.

Mecca was christened either by hopeful pioneers looking to find precious metals in the desert, or by someone with a caustic streak of irony. It is drab and dusty. It’s hard to imagine anyone making any kind of spiritual pilgrimage to this Mecca. Of course there are no mosques. There are not even any New Agers who can be found in abundance in the more picturesque landscapes of the California High Desert, about fifty miles north. For most, Mecca is a way station on the rails of their ambition. Many Mexican migrants begin their lives in the States by picking in the fields; the lucky ones “graduate” to service jobs in the city—in restaurants, hotels, construction, and the garment industry. With a lifetime’s worth of work, some of these urban workers save enough to buy a house, but not in a middle-class neighborhood. With their wages, they can usually only afford a house in the erstwhile middle-class suburbs of cities like Los Angeles, among the rows of one-story stucco homes where mostly white automobile or aerospace workers once carved out their slice of the American dream. After years of deindustrialization, these peripheral cities south and east of downtown came to be known as the “rust belt.” White flight meant lower real-estate values, and the Mexicans arrived.

The Floreses’ pilgrimage to Mecca began about thirteen years ago, when Ventura’s husband Pedro left his family and hometown in Mexico to make his first trip across the river seeking what Mexicans call la vida major (the better life). He roamed the States alone, taking up work in the fields and occasionally in construction. In Spanish, such men are referred
to as solos, solitary ones. In many ways, they resemble the pioneers or Depression-era wayfarers of lore, but they are not regarded as such by most Americans. Theirs is a Kerouacian tale, many of them logging more miles than Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty did in *On the Road*, and yet their travels are not mythologized in American literature, with the exception of a handful of Southwest Mexican-American works. By and large, the Mexicans' journeys go unnoticed. But if you were to board a late-night Greyhound bus traversing the rural counties of North Carolina or the Cascade mountains, barrelig across the oil fields of Texas or the humid plains of the Mississippi River valley, you'd probably wind up sitting next to a quiet, young, brown-skinned man with almond-shaped eyes dressed humbly in T-shirt, jeans, and old sneakers, carrying his belongings in a small vinyl pack. His English would be halting, but he'd smile at everything you say. And if you understood Spanish well enough, he'd probably tell you that he just finished a watermelon harvest in Kentucky and is now moving on to the citrus orchards of Florida. Or that he's heading home to his pueblo after eight months' work in the strawberry fields of northern California, to see his son, who was born while he was on the road. Or that he got tired of working in a restaurant in L.A. for less-than-minimum wage and is striking out for the Midwest to check out reports from fellow migrants that there are higher wages to be had in meatpacking. Or in a chicken ranch . . . or at a lawn-grass farm. The country is vast and its economy as diverse as its landscape and people. To find a job all one has to do is take to the road, and Pedro Flores took to it.

He didn't want to travel alone. Mexicans never quite had the equivalent of the American tradition of macho adventurers or hobos. The Mexican migrant journey, like most Old World journeys of necessity, is not an end unto itself, but rather a means to lift the family out of poverty in the only way the migrants know how: crossing the Rio Grande and staking a claim on the future.

After a few years of following the path of the migrant labor economy to places like Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida, Pedro graduated from the backbreaking, poorly paid work of the fields to a backbreaking, relatively better-paid job in a meatpacking plant in Garden City, Kansas, 1,200 miles from the Floreses’ hometown of Cueramaro, Guanajuato. Pedro spoke no English, carried no “papers”—immigration documents which, in the era of the global, approximate a kind of safe-conduct pass to avoid stepping into the war zone that is much of the 2,000-mile-long border. But lacking papers neither dissuades Mexicans from migrating, nor discourages employers from hiring them. The meatpacking industry has grown in direct proportion to the increase of the population overall; Americans must have their burgers. It has been and continues to be a labor-intensive operation. Technology has transformed many sectors of the American workplace, but there has yet to be a virtual form of killing a 1,000-pound steer, skinning it, quartering it, eviscerating and boning it, washing its gizzards, crushing its bones into meal, and packing its choice cuts off to the wholesaler. Meatpacking, like other industries where the strength of the human body is irreplaceable—say, harvesting strawberries—has become an unpopular job for “native” Americans. The traditional sources of labor dried up: most African Americans and poor whites left rural jobs more than a generation ago. White college kids once worked summers in the fields, but no more: they know that the pay at a restaurant or mall shop is often higher and that those tasks do not take a terrible toll on the body. Visit just about any meatpacking warehouse in this country, and you’ll find a workforce made up of people a lot like Pedro Flores.

As solitary as life can be for a Mexican man on the migrant road, so it is for the family he leaves behind in the pueblo, for the wife without a husband for the better part of the year, for children without their father. For thirteen years, Pedro lived and worked in Garden City the better part of
each year, returning home only for visits of a week or two once every six months.

"I can't even keep track of how long he's been away from us," says Ventura Flores, wiping a tear away. "Imagine adding up all those days, weeks, months, and years! It is surely a long, long time."

As hard as Pedro worked at the meatpacking plant, so too did Ventura, raising six children like a single mother, albeit with the help of her husband's monthly checks from the States. She never left the pueblo during those thirteen years—she had never, ever left the pueblo, in fact—and yet at the end of that time, she was as exhausted as Pedro was, as if she'd logged every mile of road alongside him, matched him hour-for-hour working at the plant.

"I don't want my father to work double shifts anymore," Nora, the Floreses' eldest daughter still at home, says. "I've worked so hard for all of us."

After another stint of several months' work in a Garden City meat plant, Pedro Flores travels back to Cuaramero, Guanajuato. He boards a jet that takes him to the capital of the state, and then a taxi for the ride to the pueblo. It is twilight when he arrives, a scrim of cobalt in the eastern sky sweeping toward the last of the sun's orange-gold fire in the west. The arid plains of Guanajuato, dotted with nopal cactus, make for sunsets not unlike those the Floreses will see from the trailer park in Mecca, but they have no idea that they will be living and working in California a year from now. The migrant road is often an unpredictable path. I've known families who dreamed of living in Los Angeles only to flee the City of Angels for a heartland town when their children were lured into the typical urban ills of gangs and drugs. The economy itself is responsible for much of the migrants' peripatetic life. A downturn on the West Coast leads them to the Midwest; layoffs in the Midwest lead them to the East. Migrant farmworkers, of course, move with the crops: Spring can be a stint in the strawberry fields of Northern California and early summer lettuce in Missouri; late summer brings tobacco in North Carolina or apples in Washington; in wintertime, the perennial citrus groves of Florida and California.

Pedro's homecoming, as always, is a joyous one. Every member of his family rushes him with hugs and kisses as the taxi pulls up at the modest ranch house: his wife, Ventura, his children Nora, Lorena, Juana, Maribel, Pedro Jr., and Juliana, and his father, Bernal, who everyone calls "Papa Berra." Ventura immediately sets to preparing a meal of the kind Pedro hasn't tasted since the last time he was home. It is simple fare of nopalitos (cactus), beans, and tortillas, but to eat at the table surrounded by family immeasurably sweetens the meal.

It's been thirteen years of such homecomings. Pedro's children have grown up mostly in his absence. Nora was five years old when Pedro began his journeys north; she is now seventeen. He has missed her transition from little girl to adolescent to young woman, as he has most of the milestones of his younger children, their first steps and first words, their missing teeth and scraped knees, their ecstatic and painful awakenings to the world.

"It's been a long wait and I'm really tired of being alone," Pedro says. "[Ventura] tells me look, 'We're not happy when you're over there and we're here.' Together even if we only had beans and nopalitos..." It wouldn't matter what was on the table, as long as they were together.

God and the government of the United States of America willing, it won't be much longer till the family is together year-round. Pedro has
secured legal residency in the U.S., and become eligible to apply for visas on behalf of his family, a painfully slow bureaucratic process he began seven years ago. Finally, it appears that almost all is in order. There are only a few more forms to fill out, and an interview with an immigration officer. All so that his wife and children don’t have to cross into America like Pedro did—illegally. Thirteen years of work and separation, all for this one chance at crossing a simple line on a map.

And what complications such lines can cause. Immigration statutes allow Pedro to sponsor only his unmarried children under the age of eighteen, which means they must complete the process in the next few months before Nora’s birthday. His eldest daughter, Herminia, is twenty-three years old and married. For now, she will not be able to join the family in America. Papa Berna is not considered immediate family; he will have to try to secure a visa on his own. The old man is in his eighties now, still in relatively good health, but everyone knows the significance of his failing to get a visa: the likelihood that the family patriarch will die in Mexico, with most of his loved ones more than a thousand miles away.

Papa Berna says he doesn’t want to cause any more bureaucratic headaches for the rest of the clan, but Pedro insists that everyone will remain together. It’s what he’s been working for all these years. “We want you to be there with us,” Pedro tells his father. “I’m not going to leave you behind.”

“I’d be of no use over there,” the old man says.

“What do you mean you’d be of no use?” Pedro replies. “No one is useless! We already agreed, all go or none of us go.”

Papa Berna finally admits to his true desire. “I’ve been sad and lonely since [my wife died]. I’ll be even lonelier when they leave.”

Now Pedro Jr. steps up and emulates his father. “We’re taking you no matter what!”

Few people in the Third World leave their homes on a whim; migration is no American-style joyride. There are dangers on the road to the Promised Land. Unscrupulous smugglers, harrowing illegal journeys through rugged terrain, the trauma of family separation, the sting of discrimination, the bewildering encounter with a foreign tongue and mores, labor conditions ripe for accidents and illness and even death. To leave one’s homeland, there must be an imperative: some force casts you out of Eden: an underdeveloped economy, famine, dictatorship.

The Flores family works a slice of land on an **ejido**, communal property that is the legacy of the Mexican Revolution’s attempt at a redistribution of wealth. But a series of changes, natural and manmade, have dealt a harsh blow to Mexico’s rural economy. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) slashed government subsidies for such staples as corn—the lifeblood of the Mexican small farm. What good is a parcel when there isn’t enough money to buy seeds, fertilizer, and pesticides to avoid a plague that makes an entire year’s work for naught? Water rights in the region have been gradually usurped by large private landholders, leaving the crops at nature’s mercy. Persistent drought conditions over the last several years throughout central and northern Mexico have created nearly dust-bowl conditions. Some sociologists think that the appearance in the mid-1990s of the **chupacabras**, a Big Foot–like bogeyman that mysteriously supposedly attacked farm animals at night, sucking their blood like a vampire, is a sign of a collective rural unconscious terrified by sudden and traumatic change.

One morning Papa Berna and eight-year-old Pedro Jr. take a stroll across the family’s parcel. Grandson rides atop an old nag while grandfather pulls the reins. Papa Berna’s boots and the horse’s hooves crunch...
through a field of brittle, stunted corn. The sky is dusty but cloudless. There is nary a hint of rain on the horizon.

Pedrito asks Papa Berna why the harvest yields so little. Pedro is too young to recall when the wet season brought enough rain to bring the now-fallow land to life, but he’s heard his elders speak of the old days.

Yes, there used to be a grand harvest, grandfather says. The rains came in the summer months. Towering cottony clouds with heavy gray bellies would magically appear and the drops fell, beautiful generous tears from a merciful God. The first rain of the season came down on soil dusty from the long dry season; you’d see puffs of dry earth rise with each drop. Then the dust was gone, drowned by the water that formed rivulets and followed the contours of the furrowed land, soaking the seeds underneath. Such an intoxicating aroma there was then, especially at night, the perfume of moist, newly fertile earth. When the winds blew away the storm, the sky would turn a rich azure. An inch under the ground, the moistened seeds would cook as if in an incubator under the Tropic of Cancer sun. Soon came the morning that the baby shoots sprang forth across the land. The rain and sun alternated this way for the better part of five months, and the men of the fields carefully tended the shoots that became plants and bloomed fruit or grew vegetable roots. Nature and man worked in harmony, and everyone on the ejido would celebrate at harvest, offering God the first of the bounty of beans and corn with fiestas and masses in the church.

But then the rains came later every year and fell less frequently. It reminded Papa Berna of how things were when he was Pedrito’s age. The brutal dictator Porfirio Díaz doggedly held absolute power for thirty years before the Revolution, which ended the year Papa Berna was born, 1917. Under Díaz’s reign, the hacendados, wealthy landowners, controlled every inch of arable land. There was famine then, not from a plague of insects or a crop-killing fungus, but the manmade kind: the nation’s breadbasket fed only the rich and government soldiers or went to export.

Why didn’t the government just give people the food they needed to survive, little Pedro wonders, swaying to the nag’s gentle gait through the field.
Because the government was the *hacendados*, Papa Berna says. People starved to death not because there was no food, but because it wasn’t given to them. The government, *el mal gobierno*, as the Zapatistas and other revolutionaries of the time called it, stole everything. Things got so bad that people died of hunger on the very land they sowed and reaped. Papa Berna remembers the bodies, sacks of bones, being buried almost daily.

"Where, Papa Berna?" Pedro asks.

"Right here," Papa Berna says. "Right here on this land we’re walking on right now. Not so much as a coffin—who could afford one? And no priest to say a prayer. There were simply too many dead; they were buried where they fell. Beneath this land of ours lie the bones of our ancestors, reminding us of the way things once were. They remind us so that it may never happen again."

The dead corn stalks rustle in the breeze. Perhaps, Pedro imagines, it is sound of the bones of the dead chafing together below the earth.

But who knows, Papa Berna says. "Who knows if it’ll happen again. Maybe it’s starting to happen again, right here, right now."

No one knows if and when the rains will return. But one thing is certain: the Mexican and American governments’ promises of prosperity on both sides of the border with the implementation of NAFTA have gone unfulfilled. The rural economy is in free fall, a way of life disappearing. Over the course of four generations, the Flores family will have gone from working land that was once owned by the *hacendados* and then deeded back to them by the Revolution, only to see the parcel go fallow and eventually wind up back in the hands of big landowners, forcing them to abandon their patrimony for the picking fields of California, whose land was once worked by Indians, then Mexicans, then cowboys, and now the faceless multinational corporations that will turn profits on the backs of the Floreses and their cheap labor.

It is time for Pedro to return to Kansas. He prays that it will be the last time he departs this way, alone. Soon, there will be an appointment with American immigration authorities in Juárez, Chihuahua, just across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas. It has taken the family seven years to prepare to cross the line legally. But first, Pedro must go back to work. He cannot afford to be fired for taking too much time off at the meat-packing plant, especially now, when he has to save every penny for the fees that the American authorities charge for processing visa applications—several thousand dollars.

And so comes the *despedida*, the agonizing farewell. A few days earlier, Ventura was unpacking her husband’s small suitcase and now she is filling it again, carefully folding the clothes as she wipes away her tears. Soon, a taxi is waiting in front of the Floreses’ one-room ranch house. Pedro’s wife and children huddle by him, everyone crying softly, except little Pedro, who wails loudly. Father scoops son into his arms. “You behave like a real man,” he tells him. “Don’t start worrying or crying for silly reasons. Right now is no time to cry.”

This macho tack does not alleviate little Pedro’s jags in the least, so Pedro Sr. tries a lighter touch.

“We’re not saying good-bye, we’re saying *hasta luego.*” Now he plays Schwarzenegger: “We’re saying, ‘*hasta la vista, baby.*’ If you’re going to learn English over there, it’s time to start now.”

Pedrito quiets down a bit. But now father must become son before his own father. Pedro approaches Papa Berna. The men, separated by several decades, are cut from the same provincial cloth. Both wear the ubiquitous cowboy hat of the Mexican countryside, jeans and braided belts with big, ornate buckles, and boots. Three generations of Flores men have worked the land of Cueramero. The family’s hold on the land will
end with this generation, its earth and crops and animalitos will soon become a dimming memory for Pedro's children, and exist only as legend for his children's children. Pedro and Papa Berna hesitate before one another, two men at a loss in such emotional encounters. When they finally embrace stiffly—standing side by side, arms clapping each other's shoulders—there is in their contact a century's worth of struggle to retain the family's place in the world, and now the world is undoing their very history, to begin a new one: In the lives of migrants, history tends to erase history. Pedro bows his head before his father. The old man raises his hand and whispers a prayer, blessing his son for a safe and successful journey—one that the patriarch can barely comprehend. Papa Berna was born only a few years after the Wright brothers floated their flying machine for a few precious seconds above the grassy knolls of Kitty Hawk; in a couple of hours, his son will board a Boeing jet and cross the great Mexican desert—interminable by bus or train and unthinkable on horseback. The land will scroll beneath him rapidly, its impoverished ejidos and alluvial fans, the burgeoning industrial towns of the north and the muddy snake called the Rio Grande (known to Mexicans as the Río Bravo, the raging river), and then the analyly planned avenues and redundant suburban tracts of the cities in the States, the dusty, oily flats of Texas, the gleaming towers of emerald cities, the endless furrowed land of the Great Plains.

The ritual done, Pedro turns away from his father, who is trembling with emotion. If it weren't for the tears welling in Pedro's eyes, it would look like there was a frozen half-smile on his face. It's just the muscles of his cheeks trying mightily to hold back his pain.

It is a couple of weeks before Christmas in Ciudad Juárez. In a city that bakes in dusty heat during the summer months, the winds from the north now blow cold. The Flores clan—Pedro, Ventura, Nora, Lorena, Juana, Maribel, Pedro Jr., and Juliana—have made the trek via bus from their pueblo. The only missing members are Papa Berna and daughter Hermina. For the moment, there is no way for either to secure a visa. The bus station is a gleaming citadel under the acrid industrial sky of Juárez. Its ceiling is so high that it is a sky unto itself, the arriving and departing passengers on ground level dwarfed by the mammoth structure. But in Mexico, the postmodern and premodern often occupy the same space. The Floreses, walking together in a tight unit, walk up to a shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's patroness and object of more prayers and petitions than even Jesus Christ. She is encased in glass, haloed with blinking colored lights, fresh flowers at her feet. Pedro doffs his hat and bows his head. The children gaze reverentially at her serene countenance. Dearest little Virgin, we ask you to guide us safely across the border; may the Americans receive us without a hitch. . . .

Now the Floreses stand across a wide boulevard from the American Consulate, a building designed, as all other American consulates around the world, more like a military compound than a diplomatic station. No replica of the Statue of Liberty here, no benevolent greeting to the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free." From the Mexican point of view, the bunker must be bewildering. What do the Americans fear from us, who cross the line merely to work, seeking la vida mayor, the American dream itself?

The brood waits for a break in the torrent of traffic. Juárez—El Paso is one of the busiest international gateways in the world. Under NAFTA, the flow over the bridge that spans the Rio Grande has become a flood. Trucks crammed with goods head both north and south. Raw materials
for appliances, cars, video games, stereo components, toys, clothes cross into Mexico, are assembled into finished products at maquiladoras, and then cross back over into the States. Mexican strawberries head north, American corn—yet another blow to the Mexican small farmer—goes south.

It seems as if the border is no more; wall has become sieve. And yet the border remains very real when it comes to the movement of people over the line. Americans cross easily into Mexico, of course, the immigration officials waving them through toward the dog races, red-light districts, and bars that don’t “card” gringo teens. On the other side, American immigration and customs officials grill every dark-skinned person, poring over their passports and visas and work permits, searching luggage and strip-searching bodies for contraband. It’s not exactly the West Bank, but the line between the U.S. and Mexico is clearly a militarized zone. It is also one of the most absurd borders in the world. Americans hire undocumented Latin American workers in practically every sector of the economy and in every region of the country but then enact public policy that seeks to deport “illegals” and fortify the border to prevent them from crossing the line in the first place. The Flores family has taken all this to heart. They will play by Uncle Sam’s bizarre rules.

The Flores kids are wide-eyed in awe of the Big City. Ventura is wide-eyed, too, but with what looks like sheer terror. Pedro is grim-faced, focused on navigating not just the traffic but also the gauntlet of American visa bureaucracy. Every ounce of energy he’s poured into picking crops, working construction jobs, and mans the boning line at the meatpacking plant in Garden City has come down to this moment.

“What I want to give [my family] is like an inheritance for them,” he says. “I have nothing else to leave them other than these [visas] so that they can cross, so that they’ll be able to say that I left them with something.”

Like so many aspects of the migrant life, applying for visas, even if one is eligible under the law, is a gamble. A simple mistake on one of the endless forms can mean a delay of months, years. Running afoul of the law in the States, even for a minor offense, can disqualify you for visas or residency. It also takes money to play the game, the one thing that most Mexicans don’t have. Pedro calculated the total budget to get the family into the U.S. at $5,000. Bus fare for Pedro to return home to Cuaramero so the entire family could travel together to Juárez: $140. Then $325 for each family member’s Mexican passport, without which they’d be in trouble with both Mexican and American authorities. Identification photos, $28. Medical exams for everyone, another American visa requisite, $460. They must pay $1,820 to the American
When Pedro arrived in Cueramero, he'd saved $2,400 from his earnings in Garden City, $2,600 short of his goal. Americans often wonder how immigrants produce such sums of money—a family member working in the States can't do it on his own, as Pedro's case makes clear. With the state of the Mexican rural economy, there is little or no contribution from work on the other side of the border. And yet an illegal crossing is even more expensive than attempting a legal one—and more Mexicans gain entry to the States via smuggler than with a visa. Smugglers these days charge up to $2,000 a head. If the Floreses were to cross with a "coyote," as the smugglers are called, they'd need around $16,000. And many of Mexico's poorest citizens routinely come up with such sums. The money comes from Mexico, after all, not from a worker's pitiable wages but from moneylenders, an essential black market proletarian niche in the transnational economy.

The Floreses borrowed the balance of their projected budget from a loan shark in Guanajuato. A portion of the principal plus $300 in interest is to be paid back every month—which the Floreses will be able to do, with no little sacrifice, once they establish themselves in the States. When Pedro and Ventura visited the loan shark's house, the old woman counted out about half the sum in American dollars, and then produced a check for the rest. Ventura had never seen so much cash in her life. The sight bothered her so much that she had to turn away as the bills piled up in her husband's hand.

The first order of business is for Pedro to stop by a money-changing office to cash the check from the moneylender in Guanajuato. Ventura is scared that the check, being from the provinces, will not be honored here in the city. Ventura and kids wait across the street while Pedro enters the office. Mom's anxiety passes along to the kids. The longer Pedro is away, the more nervous they become, crossing their fingers, whispering prayers to the Virgin. When he finally appears—his face emotionless—mom and kids hold their breath. The check was cashed. Thank you, little Virgin... .

"We're one step closer to victory!" Pedro exults.

"Give me five, Dad!" says Nora, and they slap hands.

The family stays in a rundown border motel the night before their appointment at the consulate. There are still a few i's to dot and t's to cross in the paperwork. When it comes time for Ventura to sign her name, her pent-up anxieties finally explode. Ventura is illiterate, and Pedro is holding the pen out to her, coaxing her to scribble something, anything, on the form.

"I'm telling you I can't do it!" she snaps at Pedro.

Later, in the hallway outside their room, Pedro tries to give his wife a pep talk. Ventura stands with head bowed and hands folded below her belly. She is ashamed and terrified. She is farther from home than she's ever been in her entire life.

The colors of Christmas flash and blink all over Juárez, in larger-than-life nativities, on trees and buildings festooned with foil and strings of lights. Street vendors offer holiday sweets and beverages and in the colonias, the working-class neighborhoods, residents perform the age-old ritual of the posadas, processions reenacting Joseph and Mary's search for lodging in Bethlehem. Venus hangs low and bright in the desert sky, the evening star leading the pilgrims to the manger. The Floreses do not attend any posadas; they have no relatives here. In fact, they don't know a single person in Juárez. Their version of the posadas is a trip to the American Consulate.
Pedro has all the relevant documents inside a canary yellow plastic folder bound with a drawstring. At the guard gate, he fishes for the appointment pass, and the Marine waves the family in. The Floreces wait in a large hall with perhaps 250 seats, only about a third of which are occupied. Ventura continues to wear her emotions on her sleeve; she sits rigidly, eyes fixed on the windows behind which sit the immigration officers. Even Pedro shows a little of his anxiety now, his cheering banter now quieted. Did he fill out the forms correctly? Will the immigration officer be in a foul mood? Will she speak in English and make things all the harder for him? Dearest Virgin . . .

The Floreces’ name is called out through the loudspeakers.

The immigration officer is neither pleasant nor pissed off, she just is, performing the same task she does every day, poring over the same exact forms, a peasant family waiting expectantly on the other side of the glass. Pedro hands over his paperwork.

“You have only one sponsor for the whole family?” she asks. Pedro nods. The most crucial requisite for the Floreces’ visas is to have an American citizen vouch on their behalf that he will help them get settled in the States and, theoretically, serve as their economic safety net. Pedro’s cousin Ernestino Ortega offered himself up for the role. But there is one problem.

“Mr. Ortega qualifies three people,” the officer says, naming Ventura, Maribel, and Juliana. “We can give them their visas today.”

The crushing news is that the other four—Pedrito, Nora, Lorena, and Juana do not qualify. They will need their own sponsor. Pedro is informed that the Consulate closes for the Christmas holiday in three days. The Floreces have seventy-two hours to find a sponsor—a seemingly impossible task. Ventura’s worst fears are confirmed.

Stunned, the family sits back down in the waiting room.

“My mind is racing now,” Pedro says. “Who could I leave behind? As a last resort I could leave [Pedrito], he’s so young. I could resolve his case later and come back for him.”

Apparently, Pedrito hears something of this comment. Suddenly he bursts into tears.

“Don’t go over there without me,” he sobs. “You’re all going over there and you’re not going to take me.”

“No, no one is going to stay behind,” Pedro Sr. says. “We’re all going to go; don’t cry anymore. We won’t leave you behind. You’ll help me support the family. Do you think I’d leave you behind? Papa Berna will come, too. Dry your eyes. . . .”

Across the street from the consulate, the family works a pay phone. Pedro calls a co-worker, Ventura a relative. Neither can offer themselves as sponsors. Just as it’s looking like all is lost, Pedro rings Bernadina Franco, a co-worker in Kansas. He pleads his case. Bernadina has nothing to gain from offering herself as a sponsor, but she’s seen Pedro tirelessly laboring at the meat plant with only one goal in mind: to reunite his family. She agrees to sponsor the rest of the family.

It is a season of miracles after all.

Ventura did not take well to the relative comfort of life in Kansas. She did not work at the meatpacking plant, and she found herself mostly bored at home, without nearly as many chores as she had back home in the rural setting.

Today, she works alongside her husband at a greenhouse nursery in Mecca and it seems as if a measure of her self-worth has returned. She is working again, her body aching in the early evening as she returns
home and resumes work at home to stand alongside Irma in the kitchen and cook and clean and mind her children. When she finally sits down to watch TV, she is so tired that she begins dozing off almost immediately. She is in bed by ten almost every night, except Saturday, when the adults get off work a little earlier than usual and splurge a bit by eating a choicer cut of meat with their usual dose of beans and tortillas. The mood on Saturday night is festive in the trailer park, the music louder. Some of the men drink a bit and whoop it up. Still, it is a modest fiesta, not at all like back home. Nothing here is like back home, say the adults with a sigh. Nora and Lorena, the teenage children, who emigrated too late to learn English and acculturate fully, tend to agree; sometimes it is harder for a teenage migrant to imagine a future in America than it is for their parents, who are so invested in the goal of la vida mayor for their children. The younger ones can learn the language rapidly. While the adults are in the fields, the kids spend eight hours in a public school where the teachers speak only in English. Theirs will be a Mexican-American existence, roots firmly planted on this side of the border; on journeys back to the pueblo, they will feel out of place as much as the older kids and adults feel at home. The parents themselves usually never get beyond halting English. Pedro, after fifteen years of commuting between the States and Guanajuato, can barely get by, relying on co-workers who speak better English than he. In later years, Pedro and Ventura will speak to their younger children and hear them respond with the sharp consonants of the foreign tongue. There will surely be rows over what is and is not acceptable of the new mores the kids learn—children growing up in the “liberal” north, they will expect to go out at night without chaperones. They may consider leaving home when they turn eighteen. They may talk of going to college. There may be a clash between American individualism and Old World notions of family and community and maybe no way to bridge the divide. There are not a few immigrant parents who after years of hard work and sacrifice wonder if it was all worth it when they can no longer comprehend their children.

It must be the loneliest of feelings for an immigrant parent to watch a child be swallowed up by America. Solo.

By day, Ventura and Pedro work just up the road from the trailer park in the greenhouse nursery. In the summer months, the temperatures in the California desert often rise above 110 degrees and the relative humidity inside the nursery is near 100 percent. Ventura’s sister Irma and her daughter Lorena work the fields. It is hard for outsiders to imagine green orchards surrounding this forlorn town on the edge of the Salton Sea,
which sits some 300 feet below sea level, one of the lowest points in the United States. But there is plenty of water here. The California Aqueduct channels it from the Colorado River, and it streams across the fields of citrus, dates, strawberries, cauliflower, and lettuce. Growing consumer demand, engineering brilliance, and a pliable, low-wage labor force have turned the desert into an oasis.

But it is no paradise in the greenhouse nurseries or in the picking fields. Ventura’s mother and her sister Irma were the first to arrive in Mecca nearly twenty years ago. Irma began working the fields in her teens—she did not finish school—and has remained there ever since. Not surprisingly, she constantly reminds her children that they must be diligent students.

“Only through education will they be able to avoid working like I have all my life,” she says. “I have no choice. How can I get a job that pays well when I speak no English?”

How many times I’ve heard “Americans” complain about people much like Irma. “They come here and just don’t want to learn the language,” they say to me since, I suppose, they consider me a “representative” of “my people.” I am only the son and grandson of immigrants, and so I cannot speak as an immigrant, but this much I know: I’ve never met a migrant who didn’t want to learn English. Some who arrive in this country in later years simply cannot—especially if they never learned to read and write Spanish in the first place (they don’t need English classes—they need a literacy program). Other adult migrants arrive here with a basic level of education, but find themselves so worn down by their jobs and child-rearing responsibilities that they simply don’t have the energy to attend night school. Even those migrants who do have the wherewithal to learn often find public language classes past capacity and cannot afford private tutoring. In this sense, they are no different than the Italians, Jews, and Poles who arrived on American shores a couple of generations ago:

those who arrived as mature adults lived out their lives speaking the maternal tongue, placing their children in the difficult position of interlocutors for even the most basic errands and paperwork, decoding not just language but the norms and mores of their new country.

What is different about Mexicans living and working in the States is that, unique among immigrants in America, their Old World home actually borders the New, adding a layer of suspicion: Can Mexicans really be trusted? The lands of the South have always loomed darkly in the American imagination, what with revolutionaries, Catholicism, and, in recent times, the specter of drug trafficking. And more: the border between the United States and Mexico is, by and large, a porous one. The majority of “illegal” immigrants in this country are from Mexico. There are illegal Irish, Australians, and Brits among us, too, but we don’t rail against them. The Mexicans are the most visible sign that, as the anti-
The immigrant lobby says, our “sovereignty is under attack.” In the post-9/11 world, such ideas carry a much more sinister tone. To make matters worse, many Latin Americans have facial features similar to Arabs—a point of older immigration history in that the Moors conquered Spain in medieval times and thus when the Spaniards arrived in the New World, Arab blood came with them. A young Mexican man was attacked on a California freeway not long after the terror attacks by a crew of whites seeking revenge. He was mistaken for an Arab.

If you sit down with Irma and Ventura and the kids out in the dusty expanse of the California desert, it is impossible to match the paranoid images of Mexican immigrants promoted by xenophobes and fanned by the media. Irma and Ventura just want what every immigrant who’s come to America wants. They are invoking the American creed: that immigrant elders sacrifice their very bodies in labor for the sake of the next generation. And yet if you do get to know this family, it is hard to imagine that the sacrifice will achieve its desired goal. The jobs they hold take too terrible a toll on their bodies, and the slim paychecks do not translate into anything more than subsistence—a life not that much different than what they had back home in Guanajuato. Right now, in the middle of this brutal summer, it is hard to believe that the Floreses will ever find a way out of the desert and leave behind the hell-on-earth that is Mecca.

But I’m an outsider looking in, and I’ve been around immigrants enough to know that I’m probably projecting my own ambitions upon them. The only way for the Floreses to endure is to imagine the future. Even in Mecca, they dream their dreams.