

UNA VIDA MEJOR:

A BETTER LIFE

*They are human capital, ordered like product and shipped in for a season.
A handful of women from a windblown village in Mexico set out for
a better life - una vida mejor - on the back roads of the new world economy.*

By ANNE HULL

PART I:

LEAVING PALOMAS

It was early afternoon when the girl stepped into the shade of Senor Herrera's small store. She unfolded her mother's shopping list and set it on the wooden counter. A hot wind blew outside.

Senor Herrera was cutting down a rope of chorizo for her when the telephone rang. "Ay," he said, wiping his knife.

Senor Herrera owned the only telephone in Palomas. When news came, he would step outside and shout the bulletin through cupped hands, knowing it would be passed from house to house. The priest is delayed. The medicine for the sick horse is coming.

But this time, he leaned on the counter and spoke to the young girl.

Ve dile a las senoras que ya es hora.

Go tell the ladies it is time.

The girl ran into the daylight, past the mesquite fences and the burro braying in the dusty street. She stopped at a blue iron gate, where a woman was pinning laundry to a clothesline.

The girl called out. Senora, senora, telefono.

Juana Cedillo stood in her patio, blown with the powdery shale of the desert highlands. She'd been expecting the message. Now it had arrived. There would be no more waiting with the empty suitcase under the bed.

She went inside and gave her daughter the news.

Ya es hora de irnos.

The hour has come for us to go.

More than 2,600 miles away, on the upper coast of North Carolina, a man slurped down his cereal at the kitchen counter and walked out his back door. By the time he poured a quart of oil into his smoking Johnson outboard, it was 5:30 and already hot.

At 50, Mickey Daniels Jr. was sandy-haired and muscular, with pale blue eyes reddened by the sun. He guided his 21-foot boat out of the harbor.

Along the grassy banks were the rusted-out hulks of trawlers that history had washed aside. Six mornings a week, Mickey Junior passed through the tunnel of dead ships.

He had 140 crab pots sunk in the shallow waters of Roanoke Sound, each marked by a green and white buoy with the name DANIELS. Most seafood operators wore tan slacks to the office. The owner of Daniels Seafood still idled from buoy to buoy himself.

"I s'pose I'm the last of it," he said, without nostalgia.

By midmorning, he'd hauled in 500 pounds of blue crabs. Drenched in sweat, Mickey Junior opened up the throttle and aimed for home. The fishing village of Wanchese lay before him, on the south end of Roanoke Island, just in from North Carolina's Outer Banks.

Unworldly and sheltered, Roanoke Island had been isolated for so long that natives like Mickey Daniels Jr. spoke with a dialect from the English settlers of the 1600s. "I sat down" sounded like "I set doon."

But Mickey Junior was thoroughly modern in one regard.

In early 1998, he telephoned the North Carolina Growers Association and placed an order for 12 women

from Mexico. He needed them for the May start of the 1998 blue crab season. They cost \$ 130 apiece.

As a boy in the 1950s, Mickey Junior saw the old school buses drive past his house each morning carrying black women. They would unload at the doors of the crab houses. Inside, the women took their places at iced metal tables piled with hundreds of pounds of cooked blue crabs.

Using their bare hands and short steel knives, they extracted the precious tablespoons of meat.

At the end of the day, the women were loaded back on the buses and returned to their tilting porches along Good Luck Street in Manteo, on the other end of Roanoke Island.

The pickers had a saying: "Lord, you don't retire. You just die."

Which is what began to happen in the early 1990s. As Mickey Daniels Jr. said, "The blacks was dyin' off and we didn't have no replacements."

Crab picking was a job that Americans on the eve of the 21st century considered too low-paying and foul.

The saviors were across the border.

In 1998, almost 3,000 Mexican women were allowed into the United States as "guest workers" for the annual blue crab season.

Mickey Daniels Jr.'s workers came from a place called Palomas. The details of their lives mattered little to him; it was their speed at the crab picking table that counted. The women raced against the clock like no one he'd ever seen.

They were human capital, ordered like product and shipped in for a season of labor.

When the women of Palomas set out on the back roads of the new global economy, they placed their lives with whoever had bought the rights to their work.

They had a name for the United States. La tortilla grande, they called it, for its spectacular moneymaking opportunities.

They begged and bribed their way into jobs in the crab houses.

With a Greyhound bus ticket and a \$ 145 work visa, a pipeline was laid between a buzzard ranch in central Mexico and a 300-year-old fishing village off the coast of North Carolina.

In the end, the women from Palomas were what allowed the eighth-generation fisherman to keep his world from dying off.

"With the Mexicans, you can get all you want, when you want," Mickey Daniels Jr. said.

But the bargain worked both ways, something Mickey Junior didn't yet understand as he leaned on his dock, calculating the arrival of the women from Palomas.

If America was going to take a piece of them, they were going to take a piece of it.

In the high plains of central Mexico, in the state

of San Luis Potosi, Highway 80 is abandoned for a dirt road. Palomas is reached by hitching a ride in the back of a sagging truck and climbing 9 miles through steep hills.

No one passes through Palomas. One road leads in. Still, a bright sign welcomes visitors. Bienvenido!

On the town square, the evening game of soccer was played with a deflated old ball, amid shouts of "Uncle!" or "Professor!" The field was a swirl of white powder, and the shirtless young men looked as if they had been rolled in flour.

The game was presided over by a bronze statue of Saturnino Cedillo, the rebel general who in the early 1900s established Palomas as an *ejido*, a peasant landholding cooperative. The general built a hacienda with mahogany doors and a vista of the hills. Legend says his wife wanted the house painted white, so it was called *Palomas*, the Spanish word for doves.

The house was now crumbling, the general's bullring overgrown with weeds, his body entombed. But stretching out beneath the old hacienda was a grid of concrete block homes and a few leaning adobes, where 2,100 residents fought the dust and the desolation.

The ranch was camouflaged in brown and gray: the unpainted concrete, the tin roofs, the choke of grit, the mesquite sticks bundled for fences, the wandering packs of burros. Color was saved for the insides of houses. A bowl of limes in a turquoise kitchen. Pomegranates cut open on yellow tile.

There was no government in Palomas. Law and order were upheld by watchful grandmothers and household statues of the Virgin Mary. Wedding parties took place beneath a string of light bulbs on the empty basketball court near Senor Herrera's store.

Economically, Palomas spun on its own forgotten axis. The daily wage for picking corn or tomatoes was 35 pesos, the equivalent of about \$ 4.

In 1992, a woman drove up to Palomas and knocked on the gates of several houses. Her skin was fair, not the burnished copper of the ranchers, and her chestnut hair was fashionably trimmed at the shoulders. She worked for a Texas labor recruiter named Jorge del Alamo.

Close to 20 percent of the men in Palomas were already leaving each spring for agricultural work in the southeastern United States, many brokered through del Alamo.

But the job recruiter who visited Palomas that day wasn't interested in men.

She asked for women.

And when she had their attention - when they'd stopped drying their hands on their aprons and offering their visitor a glass of sweet rice milk - she made an astonishing pitch.

Any woman willing to leave home for six months could earn \$ 6,000 working in a U.S. crab house.

The idea - and the sum of money - were

impossible to grasp. Women were the backbone of domestic life. And now suddenly, a wife or daughter could earn 10 times what the men earned in the fields around Palomas.

A small group left that first year for seafood processing plants in North Carolina, Virginia or Maryland.

The women proved to be excellent savers. The Western Union money orders flowed back to Palomas. Senor Herrera began stocking his shelves with pumpkin bread, sardines, Pantene shampoo.

The warriors returned after six months. Grandmothers held their ears against the high-pitched whir of new electric blenders. Children begged their mothers for TVs to watch Los Simpsons.

The women paid for new roofs on their houses, replacing tin and mud with beams and concrete. The new capitalists carried gold-clasp purses and walked the unpaved streets of Palomas like urban sophisticates.

But the money brought trouble. Husbands and wives may have squabbled in the past, they may have sulked in separate beds, but divorce was unheard of. Men began to complain that financial independence was ruining the women.

When one woman came home from North Carolina wearing pants, her husband stormed out of the house, returning with a new dress.

"Here," he said, demanding she revert to the wife he knew.

In a place that still used roosters for alarm clocks, the feminist revolution had arrived.

By the spring of 1998, nearly 50 women - one in 15 - were leaving for the start of the blue crab season.

Daughters were begging their mothers for permission to go. Some young women would never come home when the crab season ended.

The United States was a thief. It stole. It always had. But it had never taken the women of Palomas before.

Among the last to leave were the 12 bound for Daniels Seafood in North Carolina.

Juana Cedillo woke early and braided her hair. In the kitchen, she lit a breakfast fire. Then the tortillas, slap, slap, slap, the morning music drifting from every open shutter in Palomas. Juana made a stack of 60 and stirred a cup of Sanka.

She was 35, barely 5 feet tall in her sandals. Her pans of tamales had gradually found their way to her hips. For a mother of eight, she was unusually mild-mannered. A hen would fall asleep in her hand as she drew the hatchet back to chop its neck.

Juana Cedillo was the fastest crab picker Daniels Seafood had ever seen. But in the weeks leading up to her departure, her stomach churned. It would be her third season. She began drinking Maalox.

Her L-shaped house in Palomas - the concrete

was still wet from the expansion - was a shrine built by crab money. A new toilet gleamed in the outhouse in the yard. Silver faucets sparkled in the kitchen sink.

"What else do we need?" Juana's husband had asked.

"You never know when the U.S. doesn't want you anymore," Juana said. "We must go while we can."

Construction on the new Catholic church in Palomas had stalled. One more season at Daniels Seafood, Juana reasoned, could finance finishing the church, buying new Bibles and most of all, sending a daughter to high school in a nearby city.

That morning, Alejandro, 8, and Eduardo, 6, slept like fragile soldiers in the bed they shared. Juana implored them with a wake-up call from the kitchen. "Get up, it's time for school," she ordered, as Eduardo covered his head with the sheet.

She never watched them, but she watched them now from the doorway. She would not see them for six months. Did they understand why she was doing this?

The boys pulled on their wrinkled clothes from a pile and stumbled to the small kitchen table. Eduardo pouted over the plate of scrambled eggs and tortillas Juana placed before him. He wanted cornflakes.

"Eat," Juana said.

After breakfast, he sat at the edge of Juana's bed, watching her pack. "Where are my vitamins?" Juana asked. "I must be strong." She wrapped her Bible in plastic, and bundled her passport and identification papers in a rubber band.

The house was emptying out. The children would go next door to Juana's mother. Her husband and oldest son had already left for their \$ 6.50-an-hour spring jobs in Virginia hanging tobacco.

In the bedroom next to Juana's, the last family member to pack her suitcase was Ana Rosa. Juana's 19-year-old daughter was following her mother to Daniels Seafood.

Ana Rosa gathered her nail polish and holy cards. Carefully, she wiped the dust of Palomas from her good leather shoes and wrapped them in plastic so they would arrive in North Carolina clean.

Ana Rosa had studied accounting for 18 months in Mexico City. When her parents could no longer afford the tuition, she returned to Palomas, taking her place at the wash basin. The accounting student finally convinced her parents that an American crab house held more of a future than Palomas.

They agreed to let her work at Daniels Seafood, only because Juana would also be there.

Ana Rosa was pious, shy and beautiful. Carved lips and skin like dark honey. Dutifully, she wrapped her sister's warm lunch in an embroidered cloth and delivered it to the school each noon. She swept and mopped and cooked. Her hazel eyes filled with tears when she prayed.

But Ana Rosa was 19 years old. She packed her best blue jeans for the trip to America.

On her last day, Ana Rosa looked around Palomas and felt not a scrap of regret for wanting to leave.

When electricity came to Palomas in the late 1970s, Ana Rosa's generation was the first to have television. The reception was snowy, and the dented aluminum antennas had to be pointing in the right direction. But what she saw was enough.

Ana Rosa imagined what \$ 6,000 could buy.

She conspired with her 20-year-old cousin, Delia Tovar, who was also going to Daniels Seafood.

On the afternoon before her departure, Delia was in the kitchen, her fingers stained with jalapeno. Delia chopped and fried, sidestepping her sisters in a synchronized ballet over the bare concrete floor. Her older brother, Luis, came in through the screen door and washed his hands in a bucket in the sink. He sat at the table, waiting for his plate. He objected to his sisters' going to work in the States.

"The distance is very hard on families," he said, his wife standing behind his chair while he ate. "When they come back, the families are not as close. Life is not the same. The women come home with ideas."

Delia said nothing.

She had liquid black eyes, watchful and cautious. When she pulled back her hair, lifting it from her delicate neck in the heat, a small gold elephant rode on each of her earlobes. The earrings should have been a warning. Delia Tovar was no pushover.

She had worked at Daniels Seafood the previous year, along with her mother. But this year, she was going with her younger sister, Cecilia.

Ceci, as she was known, was 18, fearless and sharp-witted. But Delia wondered how she could prepare her young sister for what awaited them. Ceci had never even seen a crab before, let alone thousands piled on table tops.

On their last night, the Tovar sisters took their evening baths, and rifled through their closets for pleated skirts and silk blouses. They combed out their hair and arranged plastic patio chairs on the sidewalk. Young men on bicycles positioned themselves outside Senor Herrera's store across the street to watch them. Delia barely glanced their way.

When darkness fell, their mother signaled them inside. Unmarried women on the streets after dark invited gossip.

Just when Delia and Ceci thought they would escape Palomas without a farewell lecture, their mother came into their pink bedroom.

"It's easy to fall in love," Delia's mother said, "but the ground needs to be firm beneath your feet."

Then she put it more bluntly: "I trust you and God that you won't get pregnant and stay in the U.S."

The job recruiter had left specific instructions for the women going to Daniels Seafood: Be at the bus station in Ciudad del Maiz by 6 p.m. on Friday.

Juana spent her last hours baking corn bread in her outdoor kiln. Ana Rosa wrapped warm gorditas in a plastic garbage bag. It would be a long bus ride to North Carolina, and they did not want to go hungry.

Juana's youngest sons, ages 6 and 8, played soccer in the sandy courtyard, unable to bear the sight of their mother's suitcase near the door.

At 4:30, Juana called the children inside. Her long hair was still wet from her shower. The van was due. She asked everyone to kneel.

Ana Rosa knelt on the bare concrete floor and joined hands with her brothers and sisters. The children's voices were high and metallic, but it was Juana who could be heard above all. She asked one favor of God.

"I leave them with you, Lord," she cried, her eyes closed. "Gracias, Senor Jesus, gracias. Gracias, mi padre."

Tears rolled down Ana Rosa's smooth cheeks. The 11-year-old, Claudia, brushed her eyes. Eduardo looked at his bare feet.

When the van honked outside, Juana was the first to stand.

The oldest boy loaded the suitcases. At the patio gate, near her rosebush, Juana hugged the children goodbye, saying each of their names aloud.

"Alejandro."

"Claudia."

"Maria de los Angeles."

"Tomas."

"Lorena."

"Eduardo."

Instinctively, Juana hugged her youngest child once more. As she boarded the van and pulled the door closed, Eduardo's screams shook her. "Mami, mami!" he cried. A burro at the gate began braying, and Eduardo flailed at the animal before throwing himself on the ground, sobbing.

"Hurry!" Juana begged the driver. Juana's shoulders heaved. Someone reached for the roll of toilet paper jammed into the dusty dashboard. Ana Rosa passed it to her mother, but first wiped away her own tears. The van pushed through the streets of Palomas.

Three suitcases were waiting in front of a house across from Senor Herrera's store. As the driver honked, the door opened, and eight family members spilled out into the street in a jumble of hugs and goodbyes. Delia and Ceci Tovar were in the middle.

Their mother hung back. "The rich need the poor and the poor need the rich," she often said, justifying why Mexicans were always saying goodbye in the name of a better life. But she whispered no great words of wisdom into her daughters' ears now. When she held them tightly one last time, tears streamed down her

cheeks.

The van sagged with the weight of 18 passengers. Suitcases were shoved in corners and piled to the ceiling. Just lifting a hand to wipe a brow was impossible. Sweat trickled between breasts. The air was thick and sweet from body odor, hard to breathe.

The dashboard radio was nothing more than a rusted shell of antique parts, but the driver leaned forward and twisted the knobs, desperate to break the silence. No one spoke as the van picked up speed. An accordion cancion played. Delia turned around once, to look back, but Palomas was gone.

In 1998, more than 200 Mexicans died trying to sneak across the 1,951-mile U.S. border. They suffocated in car trunks or died in the desert trying to evade immigration control laws.

But the women from Palomas were golden. They were "guest workers."

Migrant farmworkers had been coming to the States for years under a program called H2A.

The H2B program allowed U.S. employers to hire foreigners for non-agricultural seasonal jobs if Americans were unavailable.

These "guest workers" cleaned motel rooms in South Carolina or processed crawfish in Louisiana. Most were Mexican. When their season of labor ended, they were expected to return home or risk deportation.

In 1992, the U.S. Department of Labor allowed roughly 8,000 H2Bs into the country. By 1997, the number had tripled to 25,250.

Most of the jobs were low-paying, greasy, bloody, grimy and tedious, sometimes hazardous.

In a boom economy, Americans weren't rushing to pluck feathers from electrocuted chickens for \$ 6 an hour.

Poor Mexicans were. For many, one man held the keys: a Texas labor recruiter named Jorge del Alamo.

Del Alamo built a lucrative empire funneling Mexicans to legal contract work in the United States. One of his biggest customers was the North Carolina Growers Association, which brokered labor out to farms, fields and seafood processing plants.

Del Alamo charged each Mexican \$ 85 in recruiting fees. His local recruiters - del Alamo had 12 satellite offices scattered across rural Mexico - charged an additional \$ 35. No small sum to a Mexican whose daily average income was \$ 4.

Cuban-born and courtly, del Alamo looked like a white-haired grandfather as he drove his Volvo to work each morning, on the fifth floor of a bank building with a marble lobby in San Antonio, Texas.

Lawyers at Texas Rural Legal Aid estimated del Alamo moved more than 18,000 Mexicans across the border in 1998, pulling in more than \$ 1.6-million.

Paying del Alamo was just the first cash outlay for the women from Palomas. For work visas, bus tickets

and customs fees, they ended up paying close to \$ 400 for one season of work at Daniels Seafood.

Smugglers were charging up to \$ 1,000 to get Mexicans across the tightened U.S. border.

At \$ 400, del Alamo was a bargain.

All they needed was the visa.

After leaving Palomas, the women waited for several hours in Ciudad del Maiz before catching the 11 p.m. bus to the industrial city of Monterrey.

"Sleep every chance you can," Delia warned her sister, arranging her pillow.

Ana Rosa rested against Juana. The gorditas she'd baked in her kiln in Palomas gave off a floury aroma, the last traces of home.

They arrived at the sprawling Monterrey bus terminal at 6:15 a.m., stiff and dazed from the all-night ride.

When their eyes adjusted to the fluorescent glare, they could see there were hundreds of others like them: exhausted travelers from the interior of Mexico, slumped next to worn suitcases and plastic water jugs.

Jorge del Alamo's labor pipeline was calibrated for efficiency and volume. He could orchestrate the border crossing of a thousand workers in a night. His company, Del Al Associates, kept an office at the Monterrey bus terminal.

Small and windowless, no larger than 8 by 14 feet, the office was a formidable processing center. Visa applications and Mexican passports were stacked on desks.

The process was simple. The U.S. consulate was 3 miles from the bus station. A del Alamo associate would hand-carry the visa applications to the consulate for processing. A few hours later, the associate returned to the bus terminal with a box of visas. The workers would then board buses for the border, 147 miles to the north.

The women from Palomas knew what to do. They found the office, at the end of an underground hallway. Juana was resigned. Her goodbyes had been said. Her Maalox bottle was tucked in her purse. In six months, she would return to Palomas with enough money to finish the church.

The del Alamo representative appeared at the door. In her sleek beige blazer and heels, she towered over the women from Palomas, whose dark clothes had been washed on a stone. Her tone was curt. Something was wrong. She pointed to names on a list.

"You must come back Tuesday for an interview at the consulate," she said.

Juana, Ana Rosa, and three other women from Palomas were told to return for a face-to-face interview at the consulate Tuesday.

It was Saturday morning. They had barely slept. They had traveled all night to reach Monterrey. They had no money for a hotel. But they accepted the news

without protest, with a deep familiarity of accepting someone else's plans.

Juana's slumped. She could not endure another round of goodbyes with her children. And yet the church was counting on her money.

Ana Rosa sat down. Without the visa, she faced a long summer in Palomas.

Two visas had been granted. "Who, who?" the women asked.

They went to Delia and Ceci Tovar.

The Tovar sisters grabbed their suitcases. The bus to the border was waiting. Delia called back to Ana Rosa. "You'll make it in a few days, cousin."

Three hours later, Delia and Ceci reached the Mexican border town of Nuevo Laredo. Delia could see Border Patrol vehicles cruising the fence line in the shimmering bands of heat. Why hadn't the others been granted visas, she wondered. A U.S. helicopter whooshed overhead.

They were dropped off at an old colonial plaza, joined by two other women, both del Alamo recruits also being sent to Daniels Seafood.

Except for Delia, all were first-timers, and the fear showed.

"Andale," Delia said, leading the charge. It was 97 degrees. The streets burned through their shoes. They would cross into Texas by walking across the Rio Grande on International Bridge 1.

Nuevo Laredo was a crush of Americans carrying pinatas and clanking bottles of duty-free tequila. "These Mexicans get you coming and going, don't they?" said a tourist, dropping 35 cents into the turnstiles of the bridge.

Delia and Ceci followed, lugging their suitcases. They were on the bridge. Delia could see the brown bathwater of the Rio Grande rushing below the grates of the steel span. U.S. Border Patrol guards were straight ahead, waiting at the end of the bridge.

At customs, drug-sniffing dogs pulled at short leashes. Ceci's eyes flashed nervously as she dug for her passport. Car trunks were searched as the undersides of vehicles were swept with mirrors. In 1998, U.S. Border Patrol agents apprehended 103,441 illegal migrants in the Laredo sector alone.

Delia gave her younger sister a look. Don't worry, she seemed to say, we have the paperwork.

They crossed.

On the Texas side, they found the Laredo Greyhound station, five blocks from the Rio Grande. They had a seven-hour wait for their bus, passing the time on metal chairs in the glow of the candy machines.

With their \$ 99 tickets to Elizabeth City, N.C., they left on the 11 p.m. coach.

Time becomes liquid on a 2,000-mile bus ride. Fevered hallucinations jolt the body awake in trembling fits. Just as deep sleep seems possible, the mighty

hydraulic brakes of the Greyhound gasp, and the overhead lights blast on for a 3 a.m. bus transfer.

Before dawn, the Greyhound peeled by Waco and its prefab prairie wood structures. The bus was dark and cold as it flew along the interstate like a low bird. To stay warm, Ceci and Delia curled around each other, breathing softly as they slept, folded into the years of familiarity.

In the leaden sky of daybreak, the winged evangelical churches of Dallas appeared like space ships that had landed along the Texas interstate.

From the window, Ceci noticed a Chevrolet dealership. It was larger than Palomas. "Grande," she whispered.

The bus driver's voice crept into the silence, like a lonely night-shift disc jockey. "It's not even right about 7 o'clock, what with the light traffic of Sunday morning, we should be early into Dallas," he announced.

From Interstate 20, Louisiana and its oil refineries rolled past. The road made a tunnel through the green. The noon church bells of downtown Shreveport chimed in the muggy Sunday air.

On the back roads, Vidalia onion stands along the bayous were tended by old men at rickety card tables. The bus tore past them and their forgotten regions.

Somewhere in Mississippi, a man in the 15th row opened a brown paper sack, filling the bus with a smoky-orange smell, the way mesquite smelled when it burned in Palomas. The scent was so familiar that Ceci turned around, only to see a man in a straw hat eating barbecued ribs.

She closed her eyes.

And dreamt. On her last night in Palomas, a young man had called her on the phone at Senor Herrera's store. Goodbye for the summer, Ceci had told him, blowing a kiss into the receiver. They met at high school. Graduation. The diploma. Her parents watching. Her white dress. Sleep. Her bed. The rising noise of the animals each morning: the roosters dropping down from the branches of the mesquite trees, the quarreling burros, the horses that nickered to each other across fences. The smell of the breakfast fire. The sound of cartoons. Her nephew.

Ceci awakened. A sign outside the window said Spartanburg. The bus was gliding through a chute of trees.

Sitting behind her were three Mexican men bound for the tobacco fields of North Carolina. They were fantasizing about food, using tones reserved for a beautiful woman.

Eggs with chorizo, one of the men said, speaking in Spanish.

My mother's tortillas, said another.

Ah, said the third friend, tamales with green sauce.

Delia and Ceci listened, their mouths watering.

As the miles rolled by, the men kept topping each other, until their imaginary banquet in Mexico was spilling over. Then there was silence.

On the third day, they crossed into North Carolina.

Inside the crab picking room at Daniels Seafood, an announcement was made:

"The Spanish ladies are coming."

Mary Tillett's plastic apron was splattered with bits of crab and shell. She'd been expecting the news.

In the spring of 1998, four black women still worked as crab pickers for Daniels Seafood. They were all that remained of the original 13. The youngest was 63.

They sat around a silver-topped table heaped with steamed blue crabs, trading gossip or supermarket prices, pushing their eyeglasses back up their noses with their wrists.

Sometimes, they sang. Highway to Heaven was a favorite.

"It sounds like church in there," a tourist from Michigan said one day, stopping in Daniels Seafood to buy a pound of crab meat. "May I take their picture?"

At 84, Mary Tillett was the oldest. Her hair was the color of metal filings, pressed the old-fashioned way, with an iron she heated on her stove. Her skin was as smooth as pecan shells. Her hands were large and strong.

She started working in a crab house in 1929.

"I'm doing fairly, by and by," she'd say, her tongue engraved with the relic dialect spoken by natives of Roanoke Island.

But lately, her head would drop and her crab knife would go slack in her hand. She'd doze off.

The arrival of the Mexicans brought pressure. The black women stopped taking a lunch break. Instead, they nibbled corn bread or potted meat they brought from home, wrapped in paper towels in their patent leather pocketbooks.

Mary Tillett wasn't even sure where Mexico was, only that it was far.

"Lord knows, they must need it mighty bad to come all this way," she said.

The crab house had been her pitiful domain for so long it never occurred to her that someone else would want it.

PART II

THE SMELL OF MONEY

When Mickey Daniels Jr. ordered his Mexican workers for the blue crab season, he expected a certain type of woman. Humble. Compliant. Focused on supporting her poor family in Mexico. Thrilled by the American dollar. He was right on one count.

Delia Tovar tried to warn her younger sister about the smell.

It would linger on their skin, in defiance of lemon-water baths and rags doused with bleach. It would burn into the shine of their dark hair, inhabit their sheets and seep into their dreams.

Wandering the aisles of the Food-a-Rama, they would stink of crabs. Everyone would know they'd been brought from Mexico to do the work Americans refused.

"Think of it as the smell of money," Delia told her sister.

With the desert sand of Palomas still in the cuffs of their jeans, Delia and Ceci Tovar finally reached North Carolina, exhausted from riding a bus for three days. They were dropped at a darkened gas station in Elizabeth City, and a Daniels Seafood employee drove them another 90 minutes down the wind-swept coast. They reached their trailer at midnight.

Six hours later, they were awakened for their first day of work. The moon was still out. Delia's hands trembled.

When they pushed open the door to Daniels Seafood, hundreds of cooked crabs were heaped on silver tables, waiting for them. The clock above the sink read 6:45 a.m. Delia and Ceci stood on the concrete floor, blinking against the fluorescent lights.

They were issued aprons, hairnets and knives. No gloves. The crabs were so sharp that Latex wouldn't last 10 minutes.

Only Delia had worked at Daniels Seafood the previous season. She knew speed was everything. Slow pickers could be sent back to Mexico, defeated and poor.

A Daniels Seafood employee gathered the newcomers around a table piled with crabs. She swept her arms around to draw them near.

She didn't know Spanish, and they didn't know English.

So she spoke loudly.

"This," she said, "is a crab."

Then she disappeared.

Orientation was over.

The four elderly black women who still picked crabs for Daniels Seafood pretended not to notice. They turned their backs on the Mexican women struggling behind them.

They sat at their own table, turned toward each other, as they had for the last 40 years.

"I saw some pretty hamburger yesterday."

"He had whole chickens for \$ 2."

"I heard about Miss Mollie Fearing died."

All four of the women needed eyeglasses to see. Each used a 6-inch stainless steel knife, its tip bent or bowed to personal preference, its weight and feel unique. Bits of meat and shell flew against the walls in the fury of their butchering.

The awful work of crab picking was woven with

the gossip and the tragedies of Roanoke Island. The women spoke with the peculiar dialect of all Roanoke Islanders. It was a brogue left over from the English settlers of the 1600s, seasoned with black vernacular, and formal flourishes from the King James Bible. Tourists would stop in their tracks when they heard it.

It was their own lost language, from their own lost world.

Roanoke Island was a floating emerald between North Carolina's Outer Banks and the creeping coastline. It was moist and green, with a salty breeze that jiggled the lines of the shrimp trawlers.

Dates here were remembered not by distant events - declarations of war or moon walks - but by hurricanes and nor'easters.

"Wasn't it the Ash Wednesday Storm that Ginny was born?"

"Yes, I believe it was 1962, surely was."

Red-mesh crab pots were stacked in yards, and fishing nets were strung across porches. Anchors were thrown down like gauntlets on lawns, in case anyone wondered.

This place drew its life from the water.

Mary Tillett began working in a crab house in 1929. She was 15, wiry and strong, with a high forehead, the daughter of Ephraim, a fisherman. She'd set out at dawn each morning, walking through the pine and juniper woods of Roanoke Island to reach the crab house.

In 1929, Mary earned 5 cents for every pound of meat she picked. Almost 70 years later, in 1998, Daniels Seafood paid her \$ 1.70 a pound. She was 84 years old.

White women generally did not pick crabs. When an outsider would ask why, the question hung in the air as if it were an unsolvable mystery.

"I don't know why to save my life, I surely don't," Mary Tillett said.

The racial history of coastal North Carolina was different from the rest of the South. Slavery was not as widespread as it was inland, where tobacco plantations had large slave holdings. Freed men and runaway slaves wandered to the water's edge, where all they needed to survive was a net and a boat.

But whites still ruled the local fishing economy, before and after the Civil War.

Black men crewed for white pilots, chasing shad or menhaden. Their wives and daughters took jobs in the fish, oyster and crab houses.

The women spent their days covered in brine and shell. Hemmed in by the water, cut off from major roads and commercial areas, black women at midcentury had few employment choices.

At least crab picking offered freedom from standing over an ironing board in a white woman's house.

But as time passed, hacking away at crabs for pennies seemed like serfdom to a younger generation. By

the late 1980s, the chairs around the crab tables began to empty.

The owners - in a panic over their disappearing labor force - laid the blame in one place.

"We can't compete against the welfare programs of the United States government," said Jimmy Johnson, the president of the National Blue Crab Industry Association.

The truth was not so simple. Growth and development brought new jobs. Even unskilled women were choosing a Burger King heat lamp over a crab knife. Others pursued education. Some did draw welfare.

Even if the crab houses raised their wages, the owners said there was just some work Americans weren't willing to do anymore.

But their theory of higher wages was never tested.

The "labor shortage" allowed them to import poor women from Mexico for the annual crab season. Within three years of their arrival, crab meat production in North Carolina increased by 21 percent, according to the Division of Marine Fisheries.

Daniels Seafood was among the smallest of 31 crab processing plants in North Carolina's \$ 38-million blue crab industry. It was also one of the last - in 1995 - to import Mexican women to pick crab.

The gray building with white trim sat at the edge of Roanoke Sound, just off the Nags Head Causeway. Nothing about the place looked cutthroat.

But it was here, beneath the hand-painted sign that swung in the wind and read "Daniels Crab House," that the whole global marketplace came tumbling together.

The Mexicans had created a grueling standard for themselves. If they didn't work fast enough, they could be returned to the border.

The local black women who'd given half their lives to Daniels Seafood wondered whether they'd be replaced by the newcomers.

And somewhere, someone in New York or Philadelphia was ordering an \$ 8 crab cake, oblivious to the lives behind it.

* * *

That first morning, the Mexican women struggled just to hold their crab knives. They sliced their fingertips. The crabs pierced the soft palms of their hands. Ceci had trouble even grasping the shells. They shot off the table and clattered onto the floor. She tried again. She turned to her sister, her voice breaking. "Like this, Delia, like this?" she asked in Spanish.

Delia tried to remember. Not only was Ceci relying on her, but so were two other Mexican women who were also starting their first day at Daniels Seafood.

Using a paper towel, Delia showed the rookies how to wrap the wet knife handle so it wouldn't slip. "Look," she said, demonstrating. The paper would also

cushion the steel handle.

With two strokes, Delia severed the crab's legs and pried open the body with the tip of her knife. She was rusty and unsure of herself.

In Spanish, she told the new girls, "You learn how to hold them softly so they don't hurt your hands so bad." She grimaced.

Each crab was like a sharp cage, containing barely two or three tablespoons of meat in the hidden compartments.

The first step was scooping out the yellow "mustard" or "butter," the organs and eggs that were thrown into garbage cans.

The premium lump meat was at the base of the crab's swimming legs. A picker had to remove it carefully to preserve the value. The meat in the rest of the body was less delicate and scraped out in flakes. The claws were also shucked.

The average picker went through about 1,000 crabs a day to produce 27 pounds of meat. At \$ 1.70 a pound, her daily gross earnings were about \$ 46.

The Mexican women were annihilating their crabs. What meat they managed to extract was littered with bits of shell.

"This is a mess," said Ruth Daniels, the meat packer and a distant relative of the Daniels Seafood family. "I don't think any of these girls ever seen a crab before."

Daniels Seafood sold half of its meat to local restaurants and distributors; the other half was loaded on overnight trucks to Baltimore, New York and Philadelphia.

The blue crabs were harvested from local waters and delivered live to Daniels Seafood six days a week. A pressure cooker in a back room could steam 1,200 pounds at once.

The crabs kept coming. As soon as the pickers finished one pile, another pile was shoveled on.

"I'm so tired and sore," Delia said to her sister, in Spanish. The floor was littered with shells, claws and orange paste. Bits of shell and meat clung to their cheeks and forearms.

Quitting time was 3:30. They had watched the clock all day. Ceci went to the sink to wash off. Her legs ached. Her back ached. Her neck felt pinched and immovable from bending over the crab table. She let the water run over her hands.

One of the black women came up behind her. It was Annie. She was 77, with gray hair and a spine that curled over like a drooping flower. She reached out for Ceci's arm, her voice tender.

"It's hard work, ain't it, honey?"

The words were foreign, but Ceci understood the tone. She smiled.

Delia tried to exude excitement. She had watched her mother do the same thing the previous

season. Act thrilled by the prospect of the American dollar. Be hungry. Be unstoppable.

She held up her yellow ticket. There in blue pen: 25.3 pounds. "My first day!" she said, in Spanish. "Tomorrow, more!"

The others said nothing, piling into the van that smelled of dead fish. One fell asleep.

It was a custom of Daniels Seafood to provide transportation to the pickers. Ruth Daniels drove.

First on the route were the black women, who all lived in the same neighborhood of shaded streets on Roanoke Island. The van wheeled up to a trailer. Annie slowly stepped down, calling over her shoulder, "We'll see y'all tomorrow then."

Ceci lifted her head. "Manana, Annie."

"Manana, baby," Annie said, as she began her slow gait to her front door.

Ruth stopped at Food-a-Rama so the Mexican women could buy their groceries. Before dropping them at the trailer, she tapped her watch, pointing to the six and moving her finger to half-past. "Six-thirty, six-thirty. Comprendre?"

Delia understood perfectly. Si, si, she said.

For dinner, they warmed store-bought tortillas and made frijoles in a cast-iron skillet. They slumped over their plates.

The crab knives had done their damage. Delia showed the others how to soak their hands in warm water. They wrapped their fingers with surgical tape, like defeated boxers, and then slipped on nightgowns.

* * *

The fastest picker in the history of Daniels Seafood was a woman named Juana Cedillo. On a good day, Juana could shuck 40 pounds. There was just one problem. She was stuck in Mexico.

Of all the women Daniels Seafood had "ordered" from Palomas, a small ranch in Central Mexico, only Delia and Ceci Tovar had been issued the necessary visas to cross the border.

The job recruiter had instructed the other women to report back to the U.S. consulate in Monterrey for interviews.

Juana Cedillo had staked her financial hopes on one more season of work at Daniels Seafood. The 1998 season would have been her third. The decision was wrenching. Juana was a mother of eight.

Every family in Palomas had someone who worked in the States. The coming and going was a part of life, fueling a million Mexican songs about separation and wandering.

But until the crab houses came along, the women in Palomas never left home.

The crab houses were stealing the mothers away from their children, yet the children were wearing new shoes because of the crab money.

When Juana Cedillo had not been immediately

granted a visa in Monterrey, she returned to Palomas, arriving at night, suitcase in hand.

Her youngest son, Eduardo, who was 6, was asleep. Juana sat at the edge of his bed. When he woke and saw his mother, he began to cry. He thought he was dreaming.

Juana made a decision. She told her children the next morning.

"I am not going after all," she announced at breakfast. "I will be here to see you grow."

Juana's instincts were good. The other women from Palomas who made the nine-hour bus ride back to the U.S. consulate in Monterrey were not given the interviews they imagined. They answered questions through a glass window.

All but one were denied visas.

When Mickey Daniels Jr., the owner of Daniels Seafood, learned that his most experienced crab pickers had never made it across the border, a full assault was launched.

There was a reason the crab house van was slapped with a Helms '96 campaign sticker.

"Jesse will straighten this mess out," said Ruth Daniels.

But not even an inquiry from U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms' office in Washington could fix things.

According to an aide in Helms' office, the women from Palomas were denied visas because they didn't show enough proof of their permanent ties to Mexico.

"What do you mean, the consulate needs proof?" Ruth Daniels shouted to the Helms aide.

"Ma'am, they got nine young 'uns apiece in Mexico. What are they s'posed to do, bring 'em all in and line every one of 'em up?"

Mickey Junior stared at the phone. This was a disaster. The crab season was under way.

"We're gonna have to get us some more."

"More," meaning Mexican women.

A single visa had been granted. Ana Rosa, Juana's 19-year-old daughter, was already on a bus for North Carolina.

Juana's parting words to her daughter:

"Read your Bible."

One more thing. The most important thing.

"Remember, you are not an orphan. You have a family in Mexico."

* * *

Three days later, Ana Rosa stepped off the bus in North Carolina with her Bible wrapped in plastic and what was left of the gorditas her mother had sent along. Dark circles shadowed her eyes. The next morning she took her place at the crab table next to her cousins, Delia and Ceci Tovar.

A few days later, three more women from Palomas arrived, including Delia and Ceci's 23-year-old

sister.

Of the newcomers, Ana Rosa was the most valuable addition. She was an excellent cook. With her bandaged hands, she made pork chuletas.

They dubbed themselves Las Chicas Jaibas. The Crab Girls. Their legs ached. Their backs ached. While the black women were allowed to sit in chairs around the crab picking table, the Mexican women were forced to stand.

The concrete was unforgiving during an 8 1/2-hour shift. They devised tricks. They bought padded socks for their sneakers. They shifted their weight from one foot to the other, or leaned their hips into the table. Just squatting, bending the knees briefly, offered relief.

"What do we do, go on strike?" Delia said one night. "He'd just send us back."

Reality set in. What had they gotten themselves into?

As little girls in Palomas, they had walked to school together, carrying their madras book bags as they kicked their way along the dusty grid of streets. They had often imagined America. Everything new, fresh from the assembly line. Large houses with green grass, blonds carrying shopping bags.

A job recruiter in Mexico who sent women to work in the crab houses had even said, seductively, "Maybe you'll get to see New York City."

Here was their America:

Six mornings a week, they stumbled from their trailer at 6:30 with their Eggo waffles or their mugs full of Cocoa Puffs. Ten hours later, the van brought them home.

Their trailer was 7 miles from town, across a 3-mile bridge that separated them from Roanoke Island. The closest store was a marina that sold bait and beer. Rottweilers from the trailer next door prowled the street.

At night, the county mosquito truck released clouds of white fog to ward off the insects that swarmed the wet flats.

Nine women shared the double-wide trailer, furnished with secondhand plaid couches and single beds. A wall-unit air conditioner pumped against the summer heat. One windowless bedroom occupied by a worker named Esmerelda became known as El Horno de Esme. Esmerelda's oven.

For this, the nine women paid Mickey Daniels Jr. \$ 1,080 in rent.

Mickey Junior had the mistaken impression that in Mexico his workers lived in wooden houses or huts with dirt floors. He figured the trailer, which he bought to house his foreign workers, along with the property, was a step up.

To him, charging nine women a total of \$ 1,080 a month didn't seem like gouging. He looked at it this way: weekly rent for each worker was \$ 30, which included transportation to work, the grocery store, the

bank and other errands. It also covered basic phone service, utilities and cable TV, "and me havin' to run over there every time they pour hot grease down the sink and stop up the plumbing."

On weeks when the availability of crabs dipped and the women didn't work every day, he knocked their rent down. If one week they worked only three days, he didn't charge rent.

The women hated the trailer. The smell of crabs came home with them on their hair and clothes. They stuffed their dirty laundry in plastic garbage bags to contain the odor. They used gallons of sweet Pantene shampoo.

They pasted air fresheners to the walls of their bedrooms, six, seven to a room, but nothing worked.

Only one event broke their misery.

Payday.

Ceci brought almost \$ 200 home the first week. Although Daniels Seafood paid by the pound, the Fair Labor Standards Act made sure the women earned the minimum wage of \$ 5.15 an hour.

The money was intoxicating. The women stashed their cash around the trailer, keeping the hiding places secret even from each other. They counted and re-counted it. Sometimes, they took it out just to look. More than anything, they wanted to spend it.

That was the trap.

One of their fathers had warned his daughter against squandering her earnings in the land of temptation.

"They will have your sweat and you will have nothing," he told his daughter.

* * *

Guest worker - which is what the Department of Labor called the 3,000 or so Mexican women who came to work the blue crab season - was a cruelly ironic term.

The guests paid their own way to the United States. They weren't allowed to switch employers once they arrived. Many lived in fenced encampments.

Unlike immigrant farmworkers, these guest workers were prohibited from seeking legal assistance from the federally funded Legal Services Corp.

One final indignity. Social Security taxes were deducted from their paychecks. They would never see a penny of it.

Complaining would only bring a one-way bus ticket back to the border, where thousands of replacements waited.

One North Carolina crab house owner was sued by the American Civil Liberties Union for taking 50 percent of his workers' paychecks for rent. Another owner kept his workers' passports and visas under lock and key, holding them hostage.

Cheating the Mexican women out of overtime pay was common. Most were unfamiliar with the time-

and-a-half formula used to figure overtime pay.

Despite the rip-offs and the captive nature of their employment, the Mexican women still begged and bribed their way into jobs in the crab houses.

But it meant they placed their lives at the mercy of whoever had bought the rights to their work.

* * *

The fate of the women who worked for Daniels Seafood rested with a born-again, anti-government tightwad.

Every decision Mickey Daniels Jr. made was guided by two forces:

What would Jesus do?

How can I increase my profits?

Mickey Daniels Jr. grew up in Wanchese (pronounced WAN-cheez), a 300-year-old fishing village on the south end of Roanoke Island. Since boyhood, he fished, he crabbed, he threw trotlines; anything he could do to relieve the water of its creatures, he did.

But never on Sunday.

The Daniels family were Assembly of God people. No music, no dancing, no movies, no immodesty. Before their church was built in Wanchese, prayer meetings were held in the fish houses, where preachers shouted Scripture from atop crates of frozen flounder.

Mickey Daniels Jr. rose before dawn six days a week, ventured out in his boat alone, diverted from his duties neither by hurricanes nor 102-degree fevers. His sober ways set him apart from other fishermen who celebrated the week with a suitcase of beer down at the dock.

Mickey Junior and his wife had raised their five children in a crowded two-story house with one bathroom. They had no medical insurance. When the children were older, Linda Daniels waited tables to bring in extra money. The family had no pension plan.

"Around here, you work till you drop," Mickey Junior said.

With his tousled hair and faded blue jeans, Mickey Junior looked like a 50-year-old lifeguard. He considered sunglasses an affectation, so his pale blue eyes were constantly red.

He had a slow-drip pattern of speech, and leaned in doorways, his hands jammed in pockets.

One thing that managed to rile him was government regulations. There were wage laws, worker's comp, bans on crabbing in environmentally protected areas, regulations on discarding his bait; he felt there was no limit to the government's squeeze on his business.

In the 1980s, a group of Vietnamese immigrants tried setting up fishing operations in Wanchese. "They got everything free," Mickey Junior said. "The government set them up with (crab) pots and boats. We struggled and strived all our lives and didn't get nothin' free. Some of them would fish our pots. So some of the locals cut their buoys off the ropes. I guess that's

why they moved away."

Mickey Junior took less enjoyment from his work than he used to. He said he wasn't in it for the money, but who could tell? Poor-mouthing was a local hobby. Most of the fishermen drove rusted-out trucks that smelled of wet dog.

Mickey Junior said he was "too private" to discuss his income. "One year you're up, the next you're down," he'd say.

The marketplace was not highly scientific.

Daniels Seafood bought its live crabs from 17 commercial crabbers, including Mickey Daniels Jr. A pound of crab meat costs Daniels Seafood about \$ 5. Add \$ 1.70 to pay the pickers. Daniels Seafood wholesaled its meat for between \$ 7 and \$ 12 a pound, which accounted for 85 percent of its business.

Mickey Junior might be out on his boat when his son would radio him from shore. "Dad, the account's only willing to go \$ 7." To which Mickey Daniels Jr. would mutter, "That's too low." After stewing a few minutes, he'd pick up his radio. "All right, but no more than 40 pounds at \$ 7."

Retail sales accounted for just 15 percent of Daniels Seafood's business, but it was the most profitable. Walk-in customers paid \$ 17.75 for a pound of lump crab meat.

Mickey Daniels Jr. said he was lucky to make 50 cents profit on each pound of meat he sold, after expenses.

His business was vulnerable to weather and the availability of crabs. But the most ferocious threat was foreign competition.

"Our government allows foreign crab meat to come in and be sold way cheaper for what we can sell ours," Mickey Junior said. "And we're supposed to compete with the foreign crab house that pays their workers 20 cents a pound, with no inspections, no Social Security, no workman's comp. That's not fair competition."

Five miles from Daniels Seafood, a supermarket sold pasteurized crab meat from South America. It cost half of what Mickey Junior sold his for.

But that same fierce new global market also allowed Daniels Seafood to hire crab pickers from Mexico.

There was no question that replacing the older women with Mexicans would have increased production. When he watched Mary Tillett, he could see how much she'd slowed down.

His father had hired Mary Tillett in 1958 when he opened Daniels Seafood. Carmichael Daniels had an unusual relationship with his pickers. When one died, he was often the lone white mourner in the brick church.

Years later, when his son took over the business, some in Wanchese would say with bemusement or irritation, "Mickey Junior caters to the

blacks, same way his daddy did."

A final gesture, maybe, Mickey Junior's allowing the older women to stay on.

In the off season, he left fish or collards on their porches, wrapped in newspaper. They had an understanding, welded in history, but fading, almost gone.

"That family's been good to me, sure have," Mary Tillett said.

And yet because three of the women suffered from age-related maladies - diabetes, arthritis - Mickey Junior filed a permit to pay them special handicapped wages, which meant he was exempt from paying them minimum wage.

If Mary Tillett sat at the table for eight hours and picked only 14 pounds, he paid her \$ 24.

"You will always have a place here," he told the older women.

Production at Daniels Seafood was up. Mickey Junior was thinking of expanding to accommodate more pickers.

His decision to make the Mexican women stand at the crab picking table instead of giving them chairs was purely business.

"That way, I can get more around the table," he reasoned.

When Mickey Junior "ordered" his Mexican workers for the 1998 blue crab season, he had a certain type of woman in mind: compliant, focused on earning money for her impoverished family, and ultimately, a temporary figure on the landscape of Roanoke Island.

He was about to learn how wrong he was.

The women from Palomas were young, single, curious, wanting something beyond just money.

One night on an excursion to Kmart in the crab house van, they saw a Ferris wheel twirling in the sky. There was a boardwalk, and colored lights, and calliope music.

They could not take their eyes from it.

* * *

Their revolt began in the smallest of ways. Delia found a Spanish-speaking interpreter. She had a question she wanted to ask Mickey Junior. Why were the black women allowed to sit in chairs?

"When you're their age," he answered, "then you can sit down."

To which Delia replied, in Spanish, "When we are their age, we won't be here."

In late July, Roanoke Island was a summer postcard. Crape myrtles wept their blossoms on smooth bicycle paths. Tourists descended, rubbing their wet hair with white motel towels on the dunes.

Like the black women before them, the Mexican women were separated from this world. They could see it, but they were apart from it.

One afternoon, a salesman appeared at their

trailer. His tipsy truck of merchandise was heaven on wheels: chorizo, corn meal, white queso like Delia's grandmother made fresh from goat's milk in Palomas, and CDs by Mexican heartthrobs in leather pants.

The salesman made his living finding out where Hispanics lived, driving along the swampy reaches of the rural coast. He began making stops at the trailer. He mentioned the Mexican dances being held on weekends in towns like Swanquarter. They would last through tobacco season.

But the women from Palomas had no car. They couldn't drive. They were exiled in their trailer. Trapped.

Their one escape was the grocery store. Mickey Junior was driving them home from the crab house one afternoon when Delia called from the back seat of the van.

"Mickey Junior, Food-a-Rama, Food-a-Rama, five minutes."

He pulled into the parking lot of the grocery store. "All right, all right, but andale," he said, flexing his minuscule Spanish.

He couldn't see that the women had left the grocery store and ducked into Family Dollar, where they peeled through racks of blouses and shoes, leaving him to sweat in the van for 35 minutes.

The language barrier worked both ways. What could he say, when they returned to the van with shopping bags and smiles? He pointed to his watch and said, "Too long." By then they were lost in their fashion show, holding up skirts in the stinking van.

Not long after, they requested a trip to the beach. The beach!

The next Sunday, Mickey Daniels Jr. found himself ankle-deep in the surf of the Atlantic Ocean.

When their mothers had worked for Daniels Seafood - Ana Rosa's mother, and Delia and Ceci's mother - they never saw the open water, though it was less than 2 miles from the crab house. They worked all day and washed out their clothes at night. In the trailer, they hung photos of their children above their beds. One tore pages from a catalog and taped up pictures of microwaves and washing machines.

"But these new ones," Mickey Junior said, shaking his head in frustration.

"This batch seems more American."

PART III

FREEDOM FOUND

Sand dunes, Pizza Hut, dashboard radios, kissing in the dark. All around, summer beckons the women from Palomas.

The young men slipped into a pew at Holy Trinity Catholic Church. Earnest, long-lashed, their goatees trimmed desperado-style, they leafed through

Spanish hymnals, trying to find their place.

But what they really wanted, beyond eternal salvation and God's hand over their families in Mexico, was a better view of the women in the third row.

The women who'd worked at Daniels Seafood the previous season, the mothers with the round shoulders and somber scarves had been replaced by their daughters, this pageant of crushed velvet and gold crucifixes on bare skin.

Ana Rosa and the Tovar sisters sat in the lilac coolness of the church, exhausted from another six-day work week of shucking crabs.

But they summoned every last ounce of energy for church. Holy Trinity held the keys to their freedom. Not in the outstretched arms of the saints, but in the pews of worshippers.

Every Saturday evening, Holy Trinity celebrated a Spanish Mass for migrant workers.

That included young Mexican men with cars.

Ana Rosa had the habit of casting her eyes down, shyly, as if remembering her mother's words: Be humble before God. When the priest nodded, she walked to the altar.

She read the letter from Paul to the Galatians, unaware that a stocky young man was watching her.

His name was Fermin, one of the hundreds of illegal aliens working the construction boom on North Carolina's Outer Banks.

Fermin had left Guadalajara when he was 15, scrambling through the fence in California, and heading east. Now he was 19, earning \$ 15 an hour under the table. Half of his paycheck he wired to his family in Mexico.

With the rest, he gorged himself on expensive sneakers and shimmering sweat suits. A pair of headphones were usually clamped over his ears. He listened to old-fashioned nortenas that were oddly wistful for a man so young.

After church, Fermin approached Ana Rosa.

From that moment, she knew.

Soon, they were taking drives out to the dunes on Nags Head Beach. His 1986 Toyota was so small the women from Palomas dubbed it El Zapato. The Shoe.

Fermin drove cautiously, using his turn signal at all times, even when changing lanes. The other 19-year-olds on the causeway blew by in their fathers' Jeep Cherokees.

A simple traffic stop could have led to his deportation.

Ana Rosa began making Fermin's lunch. Tortillas, carnitas, black beans, butterflied chicken breasts, something different every day. He would come to Daniels Seafood at noon on his break.

Wearing a hairnet, she looked like a senorita from an old bullfight poster, except her skin was flecked with bits of crab.

Fermin got used to the smell.
"There is no shame in work," he told her.

* * *

Employment at Daniels Seafood became a way to fuel their consumer frenzy. They were earning roughly \$ 270 a paycheck and sending almost nothing home. Once a week they were taken to Kmart. They left no aisle unvisited. They were blowing their money like none of this would ever be possible again. Maybe it wouldn't.

Only one woman in the trailer of nine was wiring money back to Mexico. It was Nelida, the slowest picker at Daniels Seafood. "My hands move like turtles," she said.

Still, she managed to send \$ 500 a month to Mexico. Save your money, her father told her, and bring it home where it is most needed. They were building a house with her earnings.

Since arriving from Mexico in May, the women had been exiled in a trailer at the edge of town, filling their nights with TV.

But by late June, they were rescued from the worn radius of Kmart and Family Dollar. The Mass at Holy Trinity had proved fruitful.

Other young suitors were now calling at the trailer, wearing Chicago White Sox ball caps and low-slung jeans. They offered gifts of chorizo, boxes of doughnuts or sacks of Burger King.

Most were undocumented Mexican workers. The young men knew their way around the Outer Banks, and delighted in revealing its secrets: the striped lighthouses, Pizza Hut and the summer carnival at the beach.

"The round wheel?" Guadalupe asked.

The next Friday night, the women scrubbed their skin until the crab smell was gone. They drowned themselves in drugstore perfume and buttoned on their new jeans.

From the road, they could see the twirling colored lights on the beach. It was the summer carnival, the one they'd seen through the windows of the crab house van.

They bought tickets for the Ferris wheel. Up they went, their feet dangling, screaming for the ride operator to slow down. Bajanos, bajanos! they shrieked from the top. Their dark hair flew in the wind. They laughed so hard tears streamed down their cheeks.

The next morning, the crab house van honked at dawn. They were exhausted.

* * *

The four elderly black women who still picked crabs at Daniels Seafood possessed none of the newcomers' exotic mystery. They worked quietly, in a far pasture, while the new low-wage thoroughbreds trotted all around.

Ruth Daniels, the meat packer at Daniels

Seafood, was taking the Mexican women on Friday nights to La Fogata, a Mexican restaurant.

"They's brave, all I got to say," Ruth observed. "The first time they came over, I picked them up at the bus station. They's just as scared as they could be. My heart went out to them."

Whose heart had ever gone out to the black women? They started picking crabs before minimum wage, before overtime. The years melted in their minds as they tried to remember all the crab house bosses they'd answered to.

"What was the name of that Jew man down to Skyco?" Mary Tillett asked her sister.

"I don't rightly know," Annie said. "They had me cooking for him. They'd take me from the factory and have me cook his dinners."

The very presence of the younger Mexican women reminded the black women of their mortality.

The older women found pride in extracting imperial pearls of crab meat, unbroken and beautiful. Their knives worked in intricate patterns, skillfully lifting the lumps from the fluted compartments of the shells.

The Mexican women were faster, but in the name of speed, they threw away crab carcasses still containing the last hard-to-get bits of meat.

"Vamonos Mary," Guadalupe called out, teasing Mary to hurry.

"Yes, Lord, yes," Mary said, smiling, a dimstore barrette in her gray hair.

But it was just a matter of time for the older women.

"I think Mickey Junior's going to have to replace them with Mexicans," Ruth said.

They lived in Manteo, on the north end of Roanoke Island, in a shaded neighborhood populated by deacons, teachers, shrimpers and garbage men. The occasional loose hen walked across the road. If the windows were open on Sundays at Free Grace Church, organ music drifted out into the muggy air.

One drizzly dawn, the Daniels Seafood van rolled up to Mary Tillett's house on Fernando Street to pick her up for work. A straw hat was nailed to the front door. Mary, 84, was a widow, without children.

Ruth gave two short honks. The women from Palomas were in the back seats, spoons clanking as they ate their mugs of yogurt or cereal. Mary was never late.

But this morning, Ruth had to honk again. The rain started coming down harder. Still, no Mary.

Annie, her 77-year-old sister, sat up, holding her patent leather pocketbook. For 39 years, Annie and Mary had worked side by side at the crab picking table.

"Where is she?" Ruth asked, impatient.

"Maybe I should go see about her," Annie said, her eyes fixed on the door. Annie's face was expressionless, but she began to twist the handle on her

pocketbook. Even Delia, who was in the back of the van, took off her headphones and leaned forward to watch the door.

Twelve years earlier, the van had stopped at the home of Mary and Annie's other sister, Esther, who also worked for Daniels Seafood. The van honked and honked. Esther had died in her sleep, her crab knife still in her purse near the door.

Ruth shifted into park and was beginning to climb down from the van when Mary appeared. She was dressed but moving slowly. She wore an orange bandanna and a rain bonnet patched with duct tape. She winced as she pulled herself up into the van. Nothing was said.

At quitting time, Annie carried Mary's crab meat to the scales for her. When she returned, she squeezed Mary's wrist.

"You done real good today," Annie said.

Mary had picked 12.8 pounds, which earned her \$ 21.76 for the day.

Delia had picked 26.4 pounds, earning \$ 44.88. She bought her a \$ 100 pair of Nikes that weekend.

* * *

So intense was the summer sun that Mickey Daniels Jr. was crabbing before dawn with a spotlight to avoid the heat. His eyes were blood shot. His skin stung from the wind and salt. The crab season lasted only six months.

"You got to get all you can, while you can," he said.

Around the fishing village of Wanchese, children watched their fathers fall asleep in their supper. The men tossed at night, wondering where the big schools of fish were running.

One Sunday at church, the preacher beseeched the men in Mickey Junior's congregation.

"All the fish out in the sound are not as important as the fish at home," the pastor reminded.

But Mickey Junior had it right: Nature provided a window of opportunity that opened and closed at will.

One of his sons was urging him to forget fishing and cash in on the tourist boom along the Outer Banks.

"Jet Skis are the future," he told his father.

By the middle of the summer, North Carolina was having a strong blue crab season and would surpass the 1997 catch of 56-million pounds. The crabs were plentiful. Nature's window was wide open.

His work force was the problem.

Five of the 12 Mexican women were still picking less than 24 pounds a day, which meant Mickey Junior had to supplement their pay to meet the minimum wage law. He didn't like this. It worked on him. He felt he was giving his money away.

One of his pickers - a woman from Palomas who'd overstayed her visa from the last season and now lived illegally on Roanoke Island - got pregnant and

began missing work.

"Once they stay," Mickey Junior said, "they become independent, and not as dependable."

He faced a decision. He could send the slowest pickers back to Mexico and order replacements. It would take a month for a new picker to get up to speed. By then it would be August. The season ended in December.

Or he could tough it out and hope his current crew got faster.

Ana Rosa was barely producing 25 pounds a day.

For most women, working six days a week in a crab house sapped every ounce of strength. Ana Rosa had a second job. She was in love.

"She's courtin' pretty heavy," Mickey Junior said. "I don't know if she's staying out half the night or what."

* * *

A letter arrived in Palomas, with a North Carolina postmark. It was from Ana Rosa.

Eagerly, Juana Cedillo opened her daughter's letter.

His name is Fermin. He is from Guadalajara. He was getting ready to leave and then we met. He was all packed. I prayed, "If he is for me, let him stay."

He stayed. He tells me he loves me.

Juana read it again, to make sure she understood the implications.

Juana was the speed king of Daniels Seafood whose visa had been denied for the 1998 blue crab season. Not getting a visa meant more than missing out on \$ 6,000 in potential earnings. It meant her 19-year-old daughter had gone to North Carolina alone. Unguarded.

Juana couldn't get the letter out of her mind. She wanted to talk with Marcos, her husband. But he was 2,500 miles away, working the tobacco harvest in Virginia with their oldest son.

Juana had other worries. Palomas was suffering through a crushing drought. The desert flowers were brown-paper blossoms. Residents lined their roofs with buckets, waiting for rain. The water supply was dangerously low.

Juana sent her 14-year-old son to the communal cistern every few days. The dirt road out to the cistern was a cavalry of wagons and burros lashed with empty containers.

Palomas had a ghostly feeling. Twenty-five percent of the residents were working in the States. To be left behind was a form of financial banishment.

Construction on the new Catholic church in Palomas had come to a halt. It sat in a pit of sand, a half-finished, open-air reminder to Juana. She'd planned on giving her earnings from Daniels Seafood to the church fund.

The existing church was so small and humble that the holy water was kept in a baby food jar.

Juana earned \$ 2 an afternoon wrapping tamales husks for a local factory. The church needed \$ 1,200.

And yet secretly, she felt relief. Daniels Seafood kept her away from her children for six months.

"At first you go because you think you can give them a better life with the money you earn," Juana said. "But then you realize to have a good life, a mother's love is more important than anything money can buy."

One overcast afternoon, an urgent bulletin was passed from house to house: "The Virgin is doing visits."

Suddenly, a large parade rounded a corner. The swaying mass of women and children were led by a barefoot boy carrying a portrait of the Virgin Mary. They were praying for rain.

Early the next morning, Juana was still in bed when she heard the noise. The scent of fresh moisture came off the desert. It was unmistakable. And the sound! Ping, ping, ping as the rain drops pelted the tin roof.

But then it stopped, and the sun rose like a hot coin.

That night, Juana couldn't sleep. Alone in her kitchen, while the children slept, she composed a letter to Ana Rosa.

You are not an orphan. You have a strong family. If he loves you, he should come to Palomas and meet your family.

Juana's family was sprinkled across a map that she couldn't see. The United States had her husband, her oldest son and her oldest daughter.

As Juana finished the letter, the only sound in the kitchen was the hum of the new refrigerator. It was self-defrosting.

* * *

While Palomas thirsted, the labor recruiter Jorge del Alamo was spending the weekend at La Posada, an old colonial hotel in the Texas border town of Laredo.

La Posada was an elegant compound in the clutter and desperation of Laredo. Bougainvillea crawled along from balconies overlooking the pool where del Alamo relaxed.

Just over his shoulder was the Rio Grande and the bridge the women from Palomas had crossed as they lugged their suitcases over the border in May.

That muddy divide was how del Alamo made his money.

His company supplied thousands of Mexicans to seasonal jobs in the States, charging each worker \$ 130. Some used their life savings to pay him.

One of del Alamo's biggest clients was the North Carolina Growers Association, which made money by brokering workers to the fields and seafood processing plants in the Southeast.

Del Alamo was 77, with a Cuban accent that grew thicker when he spoke with a reporter asking questions.

"My English is not so good," he'd say, sheepishly receding into smiles, and then closing the door.

The timing was delicate. While welfare reform was turning out thousands of former recipients into the U.S. job market in the summer of 1998, the North Carolina Growers Association was importing thousands of foreign workers for low-wage work.

At the urging of the Growers Association and other farmers, Congress was also considering an expanded foreign guest worker program. Migrant worker advocates called it a return to peonage.

The business of human capital was ruthless.

In early 1998, three lawyers from the federally-funded Farmworkers Legal Services of North Carolina visited 12 Mexican villages to educate migrant workers about their legal rights in the States. One of the lawyers was secretly videotaped.

The tape found its way to members of Congress, who questioned why U.S. tax dollars were being spent on non-U.S. citizens.

Punishment was swift and harsh.

A few months later, Farmworkers Legal Services of North Carolina lost its entire funding.

* * *

And in North Carolina, one 19-year-old temporary foreign guest worker sat on the couch in her trailer and studied a calendar.

For Ana Rosa, time was running out. Her visa expired in December. She would have to return to Mexico.

If Fermin went back to Mexico with Ana Rosa, he risked losing his stake in the U.S. economy. He was making good money. His construction boss liked him. If he returned to Mexico, there was no assurance he could later re-enter the States without Immigration catching him.

Ana Rosa and Fermin were only sure of their love, not their future.

She liked his gentleness, his broad shoulders, his backward baseball cap. One night in the trailer, he painted her toenails. A machismo man from Palomas would never do such a thing.

Fermin proposed marriage. Ana Rosa said yes, a thousand times.

Not long after, Juana called from Palomas to speak with Fermin.

"If you want to build the road the right way, you will come here and meet your new family," Juana said.

Fermin had been wandering since he was 15. He wanted to build the road the right way.

* * *

In late August, Hurricane Bonnie was aiming for the coast of North Carolina at 115 miles per hour. The chop of the sound pushed foamy water across the causeway. Roads were closing. Dare County was under

mandatory evacuation.

Emergency trucks crawled along streets, using a bullhorn to tell residents to leave.

The wind battered the trailer where the women from Palomas lived. In the high plains of Mexico, they hardly saw raindrops. Now it was coming sideways. Their tin can groaned. Branches dropped on the roof. Television stations were keeping round-the-clock hurricane watch, but the women couldn't understand a word of it.

Their boyfriends called. Come with us, they said, we'll get a motel.

Delia and Ceci would have rather washed out to sea than to tell their parents they went to a motel with men.

Delia expected to hear from Mickey Junior. He was out in Roanoke Sound, furiously pulling up all 140 of his crab pots.

There were many things the women from Palomas liked about their boss. He went to church regularly. He treated his wife well. Most of all, he'd decided not to send the slower pickers back to Mexico, as he could have.

But a Category Three Hurricane was bearing down on them.

"In America, I guess it's every man for himself," Delia said. A Hispanic family she knew from church called, offering a ride to a hotel.

Hurricane Bonnie wobbled along the coast, waterlogging towns, but not destroying them. After three days, the women returned to the trailer. The yard was trashed. They had no electricity, no water. Their food was spoiled.

"It doesn't matter if my house floats away as long as I have my little knife," Ceci said, referring to her crab knife.

There was a man waiting for Delia on the steps of the trailer. It was Danny. He was 20, a Mexican James Dean, with a delicate stone earring.

When Delia fell into his arms, she was no longer Delia the labor leader fighting Daniels Seafood.

She picked up the phone to call Palomas to tell her mother they'd survived the hurricane. She raised a finger to her lips.

Callate, she told Danny. Be quiet.

It was her parents' worst fear that she or sister Ceci would make a mistake with a man.

In Palomas, they weren't even allowed out after dark.

In North Carolina, Danny was teaching Delia to drive.

* * *

As the weeks passed, the leaves began to drop from the trees on Roanoke Island. Sweaters were purchased. Cold weather was usually a signal that the crab season was coming to an end. Some crab

house owners said the Mexicans got itchy feet when the weather turned cold.

By November, women began to vanish from the Daniels Seafood crew.

One left for Mexico because she was homesick and missed her children.

Another set out for Houston. It was Esmerelda. Her wit had kept everyone going when they'd first arrived. On a covert mission, she once switched the Christian radio station in the crab house to disco, breaking into a vamy lip-sync, using her crab knife for a microphone.

She left in the middle of the night.

Mickey Junior referred to them as "runaways."

* * *

Their last day of work was a day of pale winter sunshine, 58 degrees and mixed emotions. They were escaping the work they hated, and yet they were leaving the freedom it bought them.

In the afternoon, Mickey Daniels Jr. stuck his head into the crab picking room. "Hola," he said. "Happy or sad?"

"Happy, Meeky Yoon-yer," said Guadalupe, who had long since replaced her hairnet with a black Nike cap.

Daniels Seafood kept a Spanish-English dictionary near the cash register, but Mickey Junior rarely cracked it.

"Are your boyfriends sad?" he asked, leaning in the doorway.

Delia understood and smiled. Si.

Mickey Junior handed each woman her bonus: a \$ 59 bus ticket to Laredo.

Whatever complicated feelings they had toward their boss had been resolved. They'd heard stories about other crab houses. They considered themselves lucky.

Ana Rosa insisted they inscribe their crab knives before they were stored for the season. She wrapped white adhesive tape around the steel handles and wrote their names with a felt-tip pen, spelling her own name in what she thought was English, with an extra "N."

The act had nothing to do with sentimentality; the names would help Mickey Junior remember who to ask for when he ordered his Mexican workers again.

As the women from Palomas stood around the crab table that last day, they sang a traditional Mexican song called Las Golondrinas. The Swallows.

Their voices were high and delicate as they sang in Spanish.

Where will they go
swiftly and tired
the swallows who leave from here?
Will they find themselves
lost in the sky
seeking shelter

but never finding it?

The black women put down their knives and clapped. They understood none of the words. But they recognized the plaintive tune. They had watched the women from Palomas stuff their shopping bags with shoes and clothes and can openers.

"They ain't got much over there, do they?" Mary said, watching them bring their meat to the scales for the last time.

Pressed against the windows of the crab house van, the women from Palomas bid farewell to everything and everyone on their ride back to the trailer.

Adios, hombre.

Adios, bicicleta.

Adios, policia.

Adios, Santa.

Adios, Wanchese.

Adios, Mary.

"Okay then baby, take care," Mary said, squeezing Ceci's hand. "Y'all young 'uns be good, hear?"

They stripped down the Christmas lights they had strung on the porch. They packed their boxes until the cardboard ripped at the seams. They played Los Temerarios on the stereo and kissed their boyfriends goodbye.

On the ride to the bus station at 4 the next morning, Ceci shivered in the freezing December weather. She wore a new London Fog coat she bought at an outlet mall. The van stunk of crabs.

Along the coast, the moon shone over the water. It was dark, just as it had been when they first arrived in May, when Ruth picked them up from the bus station in Elizabeth City. Now it was December.

Ruth turned up the radio. Doris Day was singing *Silver Bells* in amber tones. Then the disc jockey's voice.

"The 1950s were the happiest times the U.S. will ever know."

* * *

The bus again. Charlotte, New Orleans, Houston, Laredo.

On the fourth day, the frayed edges of the highway crumbled off into the darkened Sierra Madre. Lone figures of cactus were outlined by thin moonlight. The Mexican city of Matehuala passed on the west, barely visible, and beyond it, the deserted silver mines in the high canyons. They knew they were home.

When they finally reached Palomas at 3 o'clock on a Friday afternoon, Guadalupe ceremoniously removed her new Nike sneakers before stepping into the dust-filled streets.

A cloud of Calvin Klein perfume drifted over the ears of the burros. Families poured out of their concrete houses to greet the returning voyagers. It was Dec. 18. They had been gone almost seven months.

Ana Rosa's father, Marcos, had picked them up from the side of the highway, where a Mexican bus

dropped them and their mountain of suitcases and ripped boxes, all 32 pieces.

Marcos himself had just arrived home from the tobacco harvest in Virginia. Greeting his daughter, he shook her hand, formally and gently.

Juana was waiting outside the patio gate. Quenched by rain, her small garden was a tangle of rose bushes and guavas. Like the garden, the house was alive. The men were home. And now Ana Rosa was home.

Her brothers and sister were taller. "They grew because I stayed," Juana said.

In the kitchen, Juana dished up a bowl of chicken soup with limes, and a stack of fresh tortillas.

Ana Rosa smiled. No hay nada como aqui, she said.

There's no place like here.

The children begged Ana Rosa to open her boxes. They crammed into her small bedroom, with Juana watching from the door. There were sneakers, nightgowns, bedspreads, sandals, an electric mixer, snow globes, jeans, rugby shirts, toys, towels, backpacks, Hershey's Kisses, curtains, leotards and satin dresses, all smelling slightly of crabs.

The excess embarrassed Juana. All the hours at the crab table had been converted to this.

"Did you leave anything for the people in the States?" Juana asked. "Is Bill Clinton in there, too?"

Ana Rosa produced a gift set of Obsession cologne. "This is for Papi."

Next she held up a long gown for Juana. "You will look just like the lady in the soap opera."

Ana Rosa had saved only \$ 300 from her entire season.

Juana's earnings from Daniels Seafood one year paid for two new rooms on the house.

For six months of labor, her daughter had only clothes and good times.

Early the next morning, before the house was awake, Juana and Marcos could be heard talking from their bedroom. There were yawns and laughs, and the sound of a belt buckling, and then Marcos went out and started the truck.

Both were thinking about this man whom their daughter said she was going to marry.

Fermin had boarded the Trailways bus with Ana Rosa and the other crew from Palomas, riding all the way back to the border with them. After crossing into Mexico, they split up.

With a \$ 600 Sony stereo and a Kennex tennis racket under his arm - the gifts he would present to his family he hadn't seen in four years - Fermin continued on to Guadalajara.

He promised to return to Palomas to marry Ana Rosa.

* * *

The next Saturday night, the houses across Palomas were dark and empty. Even Senor Herrera's store was closed. A stray vulture circled in the black sky.

Everyone was somewhere. It was the basketball court. There was a wedding party.

The band Los Nomadas del Norte were pumping pearl-plated accordions under a string of light bulbs. Tottering little cook shacks sold fried pig skin or elote, roasted corn on sticks. All of Palomas was here.

The bride and groom were taking the customary first dance on the basketball court. One by one, well-wishers approached to pin pesos to the bride's veil.

From the fence, Ana Rosa watched the newlyweds. Seeing the couple only made her miss Fermin. She was ready to be the bride. Soon, she told herself. He will be here soon.

Chicas, Ana Rosa called. In the hundreds of people, the young women from Daniels Seafood found each other. They huddled together, shouting above the music.

"Girls, they almost kept my stereo at the border. I said, "No, please, I worked so hard for it."

"We waited in Laredo for 20 hours."

"Where is Fermin?"

"I am not dancing with anyone from here tonight."

Their Spanish was rapid-fire, their sophistication undeniable. They were glamorous outsiders now, with glossy gel in their hair. Other young women eyed them with suspicion.

Juana made her way through the crowd to find her friend, who was selling tamale to raise money for their church. Both women had worked at Daniels Seafood in previous seasons.

Standing at the tamales booth now, Juana and her friend saw Ana Rosa, Delia, Ceci and the other swallows.

It made them consider the future. They were both mothers. The 1999 crab season was not far off.

"I liked North Carolina," her friend said. "It was like our own little world. The work? Well, don't think about the work. I want to go next year. I want my house to be bigger. I want to buy a car. If it's a new car, that would be excellent. A Nissan truck!"

Juana saw Ana Rosa dancing with her father. They danced traditionally, hands clasped, hips never touching.

"I don't really miss it," Juana said. "I just remember it."

* * *

Palomas was quiet the next morning. A burro stood near the basketball court. A man was asleep under a mesquite tree, still holding a beer bottle. Grease-stained paper plates tumbled down the desolate street.

At the Tovars' house, an ever-expanding compound of bedrooms, Delia Tovar sat in a rocking chair. She was holding her brother's new baby. She wore her mother's old-fashioned apron. Delia could have been from a painting a hundred years ago.

"When I am here, it's hard to imagine I was ever there," she said.

But it is there she will return.

Once, Delia thought she would be an accountant. Now, her sights were set on quick cash.

* * *

A damp Christmas cold had settled over the coast of North Carolina. Mickey Daniels Jr. was waiting on the couch for the doorbell to ring. The table was set with china and silver. Prime rib was in the oven.

Bejeweled and bewigged, the guests arrived at 6 sharp. Mary Tillett wore a dress and a holiday scarf.

When Mary was younger, she would ride by this house in a school bus that brought the women to the crab house. Now she was sitting in a living room aromatic with cinnamon and meat drippings, waiting to be served.

It was Linda Daniels who'd told her husband it was time to pay tribute to the women who'd stuck with Daniels Seafood for three generations.

When everyone was seated at the table, Mickey Junior bowed his head. "Lord, thank you for allowing us to be able to work together, and strengthen and nourish us as we do your work."

"Oh, Jesus," Mary said, her eyes closed. "Jesus, yes."

Mickey Junior was looking down the table at his own life. He was 10 when his father hired Mary. Now he was 50, and the world had changed so much he didn't recognize it any more. Few things still anchored him. These old women did.

He'd once made the observation that his crabbing and their picking were becoming obsolete. Education was everything these days. A book. A formula. "We are the last of it," he said.

Later that night, in her cramped house on Fernando Street, Mary Tillett took off her plastic pearl earrings and set them on her dresser for church.

From her doorstep, she fed the cat a bite of leftovers from dinner.

She pulled the door shut against the cold, and retreated into the dim familiarity of her living room. She walked down the hallway, past the bookshelf, where a ceramic bell painted with the American flag was next to the "I Have a Dream" speech, still wrapped in its original plastic.

EPILOGUE

In January, Fermin drove up the long dirt road that led to Palomas. "You are from here?" he whispered to Ana Rosa. They were married in a Catholic church in Ciudad del Maiz. Juana cooked for three days. The reception was held in their courtyard in Palomas.

"If she loves him, then we will love him," Juana said.

Their plan was to return to North Carolina. Fermin would pay a smuggler to get across the border. Ana Rosa would ask Mickey Daniels Jr. to "order" her for the 1999 blue crab season, and hope that she'd be issued a visa by the U.S. Consulate.

Delia Tovar was also married. She wed Danny in late January, in Guadalajara, with her family present. Delia and Danny formed the same shaky plan as Ana Rosa and Fermin. They would journey separately to North Carolina and meet there.

As spring settled in Palomas, the sunflowers came up in the fields. That meant the workers would start leaving for the States again. Ana Rosa's father and brother left for Virginia. Her uncle was sidelined, after he come home last year vomiting blood from agricultural pesticides.

Two weeks ago, the phone rang in Senor Herrera's store. Once again, Senor Herrera sent word to the 12 women going to Daniels Seafood that it was time.

Three days later, all 12 stepped from the Trailways bus in North Carolina.

There was Ana Rosa, who was two months pregnant. Delia. Ceci. The others from last year.

And best of all, from Mickey Junior's standpoint, the speed king of Daniels Seafood had decided to return for the 1999 crab season. Juana was back.

Juana's church still needed a roof. A daughter needed money for high school tuition. "All of the needs don't make the pain of leaving your children any softer," Juana said, from North Carolina.

Mary Tillett was suffering from severe arthritis in her hands, unsure she'd be able to pick crabs this season. "If the good Lord's willing," she said.

* * *

After working all week at Daniels Seafood, the women attend Saturday night Spanish Mass at Holy Trinity Catholic Church. They were spiritual, but they were also strategic. The church service was a magnet for the spring influx of Hispanics, which included eligible young Mexican men. Above, Ana Rosa, Ceci and Guadalupe pray.

"If you want to build the road the right way, you will come here and meet your new family," Ana Rosa's mother told her daughter's fiance. But returning to Mexico meant that Fermin, a 19-year-old construction worker, risked losing his job. He was in the United States

illegally.

The women brought cameras on their last day of work and requested a farewell group photo. From left to right: Delia, Nelida, Ana Rosa, Olga, Alma. (Not pictured are Ceci and Guadalupe.) Mickey Daniels Jr. is surrounded by his sons, Mickey T. and Miles, and on the far right, his nephew, Gary Beacham.

"In Palomas, there are bad people, but for some reason, you don't see them as vividly as you see them in the U.S., where your eyes are open to the badness," Delia said. She was sure she'd found goodness in Danny, her boyfriend, who teaches her to drive.

They bought a CD player with one of their first paychecks. Ceci plays music by pop star Alejandro Fernandez.

"I just thank the good Lord I still got the strength to work," Mary Tillett, 84, said.

The Tovar sisters - Ceci, Delia and Guadalupe - wait on the side of a Mexican highway with their suitcases and boxes. Ana Rosa's father drives everyone home in his truck, which sways like a parade float back to Palomas.

Platform sandals and velvet are not made for the unpaved streets of Palomas, but Ana Rosa is determined to wear her new fashions from North Carolina. She and her sister Lorena have just come from church.

Linda Daniels, Mickey Junior's wife, serves dinner to the local women who work at Daniels Seafood. "When Mickey brought the Mexicans in, I felt like the black women were slighted," she said. "I set my table with my best dishes. They wear their Sunday best."

The women thought that if they inscribed their names on their crab knives, Mickey Junior would know which workers to order next season.