

GEOG 107

STRANGERS AMONG US



How Latino Immigration
Is Transforming America

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least bit cold. Asked why she was leaving if she was so afraid, she said, "If I was not meant to die tonight, I won't. Death on land, death on sea—it's the same. I must go."

The dream of bright lights draws people north. Their homelands push them out. The bold set out on journeys, as they always have before. Laws and barbed wire do not deter the most determined. Not even the danger of death stops the boldest.

The woman and her husband and the other travelers climbed onto the raft, and several of their companions waded into the water to help them push off. The men started rowing. Beyond them, there was nothing but darkness and the sound of waves.

C H A P T E R 3



From One Man, a Channel

One morning in September 1978, Juan L. Chanax set out alone from the Guatemalan highlands of Totonicapán on a voyage of unimaginable consequences. A weaver's son and a good weaver himself, Juan made one of the few decisions allowed to ordinary men that has the power to change nations. He decided to move.

Juan and his people have lived in the valleys and hillsides of Totonicapán for more than two thousand years. They created Mayan civilization, saw it disappear, and abided the turmoil of modern Guatemala, escaping relatively untouched from the political violence that visited grief on other Mayan communities at various times in the twentieth century. They raised grains in terraced fields. The most adventurous made trips to southern Mexico or El Salvador to sell weavings.

By the time Juan was a young man, there was talk in Totonicapán

of people who had gone to the United States and found jobs that paid a lot of money, but Juan never met anyone who had actually made the trip. In 1978, he decided to go north, traveling alone. He ended up in Houston, mopping a supermarket floor. He was not alone for long. His hometown, San Cristóbal, and the villages that surround it had a population of about four thousand people when he left. Within fifteen years, some two thousand of them had joined him in Texas.

"First my relatives came," said Juan, "and then my friends came, and then the friends of my relatives and then the relatives of my friends and then the friends of my friends' relatives came. And now those who remained in Totonicapán are sending their children."

He described the chain of immigration with no irony or pride. With a broad, flat face, huge eyes, and a soft, high-pitched voice, Juan always seemed earnest. He could have been reading a phone book or reciting a biblical genealogy. Juan was the first to move, but all it took was one man to establish a link between two worlds. Over time, his haphazard trail north has become a deep, broad channel that carries human traffic steadily in both directions. People come north to work, to visit, to stay. People go south to rest, to open businesses, to retire. After spending more than a thousand years in the Sierra de Totonicapán, fixed and immobile, the Maya of San Cristóbal no longer have a permanent address. They travel the channel comfortably, because at one end they have the mountain towns and villages that sustained them for centuries, and at the other end lies a Mayan immigrant society etched into Houston's urban landscape. The link between them has changed both Houston and Totonicapán, and the travel has changed the people, as well.

When Maya from San Cristóbal arrived in Houston, Juan helped them find work with Randall's, the supermarket chain where he was employed. At the beginning, blacks and Mexican-Americans did most of the janitorial work, but Randall's was expanding rapidly when Juan's people came to Houston. The Maya helped one another capture the new jobs, until about one thousand of them cleaned floors in more than thirty Randall's stores. At those supermarkets, doing maintenance became a Mayan job. Others need not apply.

Floralinda, Juan's wife, began working as a maid and baby-sitter as soon as she joined him in Houston two years after he first arrived. Most of the other Mayan women did the same. They arrived during

an epochal change in the U.S. labor market as middle-class American women streamed into the workforce. The short, dark women of San Cristóbal helped raise an entire generation of blond, blue-eyed youngsters, shaping their tastes in food, teaching them a bit of Spanish, and changing the norms of suburban child rearing. The Mayan women changed, too. "Back in San Cristóbal, women work, but only within the family, never outside, never for money," said Floralinda. "Here my life has been very different. I go out every day and I get paid for what I do and I have money in my pocket. For me, this is normal now, just like it is normal for the American women to work."

The Maya of San Cristóbal are devout evangelical Christians who strictly abstain from liquor. They did not like Magnolia and the other old barrios in Houston, which are overwhelmingly Catholic, Mexican, and notoriously rowdy, with their dance halls and numerous cantinas. So the Maya headed for the suburbs, which is where the new jobs were opening up anyway. Out amid the freeways and strip malls, a cluster of faux Georgian low-rise apartment houses became a Mayan village of sorts. The Maya found a welcoming church, filled the pews, and eventually hired their own minister. As their numbers grew, they claimed two more churches. After services on Sundays, they gathered in a nearby park. The men played soccer while the women sat under the trees in tight clusters. Eventually, Juan and his friends organized a team they called San Cristóbal, after their hometown, and began playing against teams put together by other recently arrived Central American immigrants. Ultimately, they formed a league that grew to twenty-six teams, with Juan serving as president for many years. Like many other immigrant groups, the Houston Maya staked out their own territory, defining a space for themselves and erecting their own landmarks in the sprawl.

The landscape also changed back in Totonicapán. Big new houses appeared in San Cristóbal and the hillsides around it as the Houston Maya built homes intended for vacations and eventual retirement. Meanwhile, many of the old adobe houses began to look like miniature Kmart's. Cabinets sagged under the tape recorders, food processors, hair dryers, and other booty brought back from Texas as gifts to those who had remained behind.

Every July for many years, the Maya of Totonicapán have cele-

brated a weeklong fiesta in the narrow streets of San Cristóbal. And every year, dozens, sometimes hundreds, of the Houston expatriates have made a point of coming home on vacation at that time of year. These return trips have become ritualized, a part of the fiesta itself, and the migration north is commemorated along with the harvests, the old saints, and timely weather. On the last day of the fiesta, the entire town gathers to watch a soccer game between a team of Houston Maya and the hometown all-stars. And each year when the festivities end, the channel between Texas and Totonicapán has become busier and more efficient.

"When we go back, people see that our clothes are a little bit nicer than theirs, that we bring back as presents things that would be difficult to buy there," Juan said. "They see these things and ask about life here, and even if you tell them it's hard, they see these things and they want to come. From there to here is not such a long trip anymore."

Migration carries risks, of course: the costs of travel, the dangers of the unknown, fear of failure, the loss of income while looking for a new job in a new land, and the simple separation from loved ones. At both ends of the migration channel, kinfolk and hometown friends can greatly minimize those risks by providing loans, safe havens, and information. These family networks function as the brokerage houses of migration. They raise capital, vouchsafe the investment's legitimacy, and, when it produces a profit, they distribute dividends in the form of remittances sent home by the migrant. Not surprisingly, surveys of Mexican communities with well-established immigration channels show that upward of 90 percent of the people considering a trip north say they are aiming for destinations in the United States where relatives are already living. Almost everyone leaving San Cristóbal landed at the home of a relative who could provide room and board for a while. Instead of struggling alone to learn the ropes in an alien city, newly arrived Maya were surrounded by compatriots who showed them how to get around town, where to find work, and how to begin unraveling the mysteries of American society.

When the human flow through such a channel acquires a certain momentum, it seems, like a siphon, to defy the laws of nature, or the laws of the marketplace, lifting people up and over barriers, carrying them into jobs even when unemployment is high. These chan-

nels have also allowed millions of Latino immigrants to defy the laws of the United States by entering the country illegally and working here without proper authorization.

Crossing the Rio Grande was a frightful adventure for Juan the first time, but it soon became a routine voyage for the thousands who followed from San Cristóbal, because they departed knowing exactly where to go on the border, which smugglers to employ for the crossing, and what transportation would carry them most safely to Houston. Juan remembers a scare going through Houston's Latino community in 1986 when Congress enacted sanctions against the employers of illegal immigrants. Even before the law was fully spelled out, the Maya decided they should prepare themselves for whatever was coming, and as usual, they mastered the challenge by working together.

"I saw a Mexican I knew one day and asked him about buying *papeles chuecos* [counterfeit papers], and he told me the price and showed me a sample. That night, several of us met to talk about it, and the next day I told the Mexican I would buy the papers. He thought they were only for me. When I told him we would start by buying twenty Social Security cards and twenty driver's licenses, he almost fell down."

As it turned out, most of the Maya did not need the phony documents because they qualified for the amnesties enacted along with employer sanctions. What had begun as a substantially illegal flow matured into a highly efficient mix of legal and illegal. Among the Houston Maya, and in many other Latino communities, the typical household now includes at least one or two people who are legal immigrants or naturalized U.S. citizens and can sign leases and conduct all other dealings with official bodies. Usually, there are also children who are native-born U.S. citizens and thus entitled to welfare and other government programs. All this makes life much easier for those who are either illegal (usually the most recently arrived) or in various stages of becoming legal. Moreover, the base population of legal immigrants and U.S. citizens provides a means for others to obtain legal status, because U.S. immigration law puts a priority on family visas.

Over time, the net flow of people outward is matched by a steady flow of money coming back from the United States. Both kinds of traffic are necessary to keep the circuit alive. Remittances are more

than just a family tithe sent back to the home country as an act of charity or as a means of assuaging guilt among those who bailed out and moved off. The sheer volume of money suggests that more is at stake. By 1992, immigrant remittances worldwide constituted an international monetary flow second in size only to the oil trade, according to World Bank calculations. The money sent home by Mexican workers in the United States totaled between \$2.5 and \$3.9 billion in 1995, according to estimates by a team of U.S. and Mexican scholars. At those levels, remittances equal about half the value of all foreign direct investment in the country. These remarkable sums offer tangible evidence that an immigration channel forms a bond between sending and receiving communities rather than just a mode of transportation carrying people primarily in one direction. And it is this connection between a person's old home and his new one, between past and future, that gives meaning to the migrant's voyage.

"I remember at first when I was here alone working, it felt very good to get paid, but it felt even better when I went to Western Union to send money home," Juan said. "Then I could say to myself, 'I have done something.'"

The size and importance of remittance flows is an enduring characteristic of immigration. During the second half of the nineteenth century, annual remittances from Irish immigrants in the United States occasionally exceeded \$8 million. Considering those sums, the historian Patrick J. Blessing concluded, "large-scale Irish peasant movement to the New World, therefore, was not a mindless flight from intolerable conditions, but, within the limited range of alternatives, a deliberate departure of generally literate individuals who were very much concerned with the survival and well-being of family and friends remaining at home." Typically, individual remittances were largest soon after people emigrated, and if they remained abroad, the money dropped off as they became more preoccupied with new lives. Then families often sent off another emigrant to make up for the loss, and the more experienced voyager acted as host to ensure the newcomer's success.

The same model applies to the Houston Maya and other Latino immigrants. Theirs is not a mindless flight, and they, too, are always looking back to the home country. If anything, the links are stronger today because distances are shorter and the transportation

is easier than it was for the Irish and other Europeans. And, as before, there are selfish interests in the migrant's connection to home. The story of Juan and the Houston Maya shows that emigration is not a means of breaking bonds to family and home country but, rather, of transforming them. Juan found satisfaction in going back and forth between two places and using the north to solve the problems of the south. In transforming his relationship to his past, he invented his future.

I first met Juan on a balmy spring evening and soon realized that there are several different ways to measure the distances that an immigrant travels. I was out with Nestor Rodríguez, a friend and valued interlocutor who is a sociologist at the University of Houston. He has been studying the Maya to understand how recent Latino immigrants are breaking well-established patterns, creating new kinds of barrios, taking new kinds of jobs. In a city where the word *Latino* always used to mean Mexican and blue collar, Nestor's was among the first important voices calling attention to the changes occurring in the 1980s. Unlike many academics who write about Latinos purely on the basis of survey data or census counts, Nestor actually got to know his subjects firsthand. He spent so much time with the Maya that he became a kind of unofficial adviser when they set up their soccer league, helping negotiate the use of playing fields with the parks department. One Saturday night, I accompanied Nestor to the league's weekly business meeting.

We drove into the heart of the suburban Central American barrio, past apartment complexes with names like Pelican Pointe, Maple Tree Gardens, and Napoleon Square. Down a side street we reached one that seemed a little more dilapidated than the rest. A sign painted on a sheet of plywood announced that it was called Las Américas, just in case anyone forgot that there was more than one America and that several could coexist in the same place. On a warm evening, apartment doors were open on the exterior hallways of the two-story buildings and adults mingled on the breezeways that overlooked parking lots. Teenagers clustered around cars with booming sound systems, and children played on the sidewalks and the staircases. The architecture was halfhearted faux New Orleans. The ambience resembled the dingiest quarters of that city in ways the builders of Las Américas could never have imagined when it

was new and still had a town-and-country name and rented out to secretaries and salesmen.

This part of southwest Houston, known generally as Gulfton, was built up during the 1970s oil boom as a giant dormitory and playground for young, single office workers. In an area of a little more than three square miles, there were 90 apartment complexes with 19,000 units but only 300 detached houses—plenty of bars and discos but hardly any schools or green spaces. Dozens of the developments, built by speculators and financed by savings and loans, crashed along with the oil prices in the 1980s. The yuppie tenants departed for more prosperous climes. Banks and federal agencies got stuck with the apartments, but these institutions proved to be grimly disinterested landlords. They simply lowered the rents until they found a new clientele. The Central Americans paid enough to service the loans while bailouts were arranged for the financier, but the rent did not pay for much maintenance. The buildings fell apart; the neighborhood duly rotted. By 1990, some 40,000 people inhabited Gulfton, about two-thirds of them Latinos, mostly immigrants of the 1980s, and among them were more than 11,000 young people with nowhere to go but the streets. Cops and social workers call it the “Gulfton Gang Factory.”

On the Saturday night that Nestor and I went to Las Américas, there seemed to be noises coming from every direction. A conversation leapt from one iron railing to another. A TV show leaked from a window. Spanish rap erupted from a boom box; salsa came out of a car radio. Scattered around the parking lot were a couple of cars and a pickup truck either being loaded or unloaded with stacks of cheap suitcases and cardboard boxes. San Salvador, where there is a big neighborhood called Las Américas, might just as well have been a few exits down the interstate given all the people who were coming and going.

We walked beyond the main cluster of buildings, back past a pool drained of water for so long that the pale blue concrete was full of cracks, as if it were parched mud. There was a small building to one side that was shedding chunks of stucco. Up on the second floor, the officers of the soccer league met in an activity room half-filled with discarded furniture. Over to one side, Juan sat behind a long folding table. Bright neon lights overhead cast a glow on his long forehead and accentuated the chiseled flare of his nostrils. Slowly gesturing with his small hands, Juan patiently explained to

a pair of team managers how they should fill out some forms. They were Salvadorans, men of average height, light-skinned, with curly dark hair. They would certainly call themselves *blancos* (whites), if asked, even though they were probably of a little mixed blood.

Juan, a copper-skinned Maya, sat. The whites stood. That would not have happened in Guatemala. He held pieces of paper in his hand, read from them, and instructed others what to do with them. The Indian spoke. The whites listened. It was a role reversal that revolutionaries and liberation philosophers could only dream about, and it was happening in Las Américas, Houston, Texas. Five centuries after Europeans crossed the Atlantic to claim this hemisphere as their own, an Indian made the rules and whites listened. When Juan finished, he handed the white men his business card, which identified him as the league president.

These things marked the length of Juan's trip far more than the mileage between Totonicapán and Houston. By moving north, Juan did not simply escape a system of caste and class as old as the Spanish conquest. Rather, he brought it with him. And here, on new, more favorable terrain, he surmounted barriers that seem permanent and irreducible in Totonicapán. For Juan and millions of others who have come north in the Latino migration, the United States has been the place to accomplish goals defined in terms of what they meant back home.

After that first encounter, I spent many afternoons and evenings over the next year talking with Juan in his living room. When his wife, Floralinda, was home, she would bring us fruit drinks and sometimes pause to listen, but only rarely did she enter the conversation. Juan never stopped addressing me with the formal pronoun, *usted*, and so I never used the familiar form with him. He was comfortable with silences and spoke only in response to questions. But he willingly looked back at his life and told me what he remembered. After much listening I realized he was disposed to speak of his voyage because he was trying to decide for himself how far he had come.

The trip north to Houston was not Juan's first move. Like so many other migrants from so many other places, Juan's initial move covered much more distance in his psyche than it did on the ground.

“My life was very different from most people's in ways that

always obliged me to open paths. My father died when I was three years of age and my mother left me with my grandparents to go to the capital. She sent me clothes for every holiday, but I did not actually see her again until I was fourteen. I was very alone and I had to dress myself and work from a very young age, and that made me harder and more mature. It prepared me to open paths."

By the time he had reached his early twenties, Juan had a pair of hand looms and some small plots of land that together produced a fair living for him and his family. Then an American corporation opened a factory in the town of Quezaltenango, about ten miles from San Cristóbal. It was a plant employing some three hundred people who assembled and stitched sweaters. One of Juan's uncles went to work there. He told Juan that someone good at handling yarn could make more than the men who worked hard all day outside, fixing roads, building houses, or doing other work for wages.

The factory in Quezaltenango became a meeting place for technologies, capital, raw materials, and design ideas from many different countries. On the work floor, the Maya applied their traditional skills, willingly working for wages that would never be accepted in the United States or Western Europe. The sweaters produced there were shipped back north for sale. It was a glancing blow with another world that would change the mountains forever. The factory had left the United States for the Mayan highlands in search of cheap labor. Like a returning echo, the Maya went from the highlands to Houston in search of better jobs.

"When there is nothing very new around you," said Juan, "it is easy to fear everything that is new. But after the first time you go into a place you have never been before, you begin to lose that fear. Going with my uncle to the factory in Quezaltenango was like that for me."

Juan lost fear of the unknown, and he gained information. He learned how to leave his home to find a job and how to work with others as part of an enterprise. He learned about steady income. At the end of every day, he knew exactly how much he had earned and did not have to worry about the rain, the price of corn, or the cost of yarn. Almost everything at the factory was predictable and regular, which was never the case for Juan as a farmer or a weaver.

Juan also learned about the United States. He had seen American tourists when he went to the old cities of Guatemala to sell his weav-

ings. He had seen pictures of astronauts and big buildings. Images of affluence and order had been laid one upon another, but they had always belonged to a place that was remote and inaccessible. Then at the factory, he heard men talk about people who had gone north, ordinary people like himself, some of whom had become rich doing a poor man's work.

"When I told my in-laws and my mother about what I had heard, they imagined things for themselves very negatively. They said, 'All you will eat there will come out of metal cans and the only job they will give you is sweeping trash.' But I understood already that I was the kind of person who had to learn the truth of things for myself."

About this time, Juan's eldest child, Marco, became sick, and although the diagnosis was indefinite, it pointed to leukemia. Bills for doctors, laboratory exams, and medicine amounted to a financial threat very quickly, and Juan remembered the tempting stories he had heard about the United States. He decided to go, and in the mythology of the Houston Maya, their migration began because Juan needed to buy medicine for Marco.

Illness was as much a part of the Mayan landscape as the steep volcanic hills. Death from illness was something that had always been accepted. Deciding not to accept the unfortunate and the inevitable involved much more than a financial calculus to go live in a land of higher wages.

"It was a sad moment, a hard moment, when I spoke to my wife about what I was thinking of doing," said Juan. "She asked if I had really thought about it seriously and she reminded me that I had never even been as far from home as the border of Guatemala and Mexico, and that it would be a long way to the United States, and that it would be a foreign country. But I told her I was thinking two things. First, I didn't want to fight anymore with this problem of my son's medicine, and to fulfill my obligation to my son, I had to go north to where there was money. Second, I had to do something more with my life than was possible there at home. If I was going to be something different and solve this problem with my boy, I told her, I was going to have to leave the country. Nothing was going to happen if I remained. I told her that if I left, even for just a while, I could try to *sobresalir*; I could try to *superarme*."

Juan often used those same two words when talking about why he migrated. *Sobresalir* means "to excel; to surpass," and *superarme*

means "to improve myself; to surpass myself." They are bold words for anyone who is poor in Latin America, especially anyone who is a full-blooded Indian and whose first language is not Spanish. Juan's unspoken goal was to overcome a social system that sets insuperable barriers in front of people. It is a culture of injustice that has survived political upheavals and economic transformations and that has achieved a hard permanence in Guatemala and in most of Latin America.

When Juan decided to move, there was only one possible destination. The United States broadcasts the ideal of opportunity to Latin America today just as it did to Europe at the turn of the century. This ideal is not simply the Horatio Alger one—virtue and hard work will be rewarded—that native-born Americans hold dear. Instead, ever since Thomas Paine's day, the United States has offered foreigners the opportunity to circumvent social and economic systems that block individual mobility in their homelands.

"I am not ashamed of who I am or of my ancestry, but it is a fact that people come to the United States because those things are less important here," says Juan. "There in San Cristóbal everybody knows everyone else and you cannot hide who you are and you cannot change it. Here, no one knows what family you came from and nobody cares. Here, you can be all new or at least make yourself think you are all new."

By coming to Houston, Juan accomplished something that would have been impossible if he had remained in Totonicapán, but his accomplishment became tangible only when he traveled the channel in reverse and went back home for visits.

"Before, the rich people were the only ones who had nice houses and drove around in cars, and they were very few and very respected. When I went back with a Bronco one summer, no one there had ever had a car like that before. People looked at it and could see that we who were once at a lower level had now come to a higher level. Now all the people who go back from Houston can go around town and know that there is no one superior to them. Now it is us from Houston who are building nice houses and driving big cars."

When Juan spoke of what he had accomplished, he sat on a brown plaid couch in a living room with a vaulted ceiling, fireplace, overhead fan, and entertainment center, and told of overturning a

social order five hundred years old from the vantage point of his ranch-style house in a subdivision called Pheasant Run. Juan was no guerrilla fighter or leftist ideologue. He was not driven by a need to attack the system that keeps most Maya poor in Guatemala. Others took up arms in the Mayan highlands and fought Central America's longest, bloodiest civil war. Juan migrated instead, yet his act was no less revolutionary. The difference is that Juan succeeded.

"On the day before I left home, my son was sick, and I had nothing to help him with," Juan continued. "In the afternoon, I told my wife what I had decided, and I asked her to pack this small valise I had in the closet. I told her to pack it with two pairs of pants and two pairs of underwear and a shirt, because I was going to the United States."

That evening, Juan informed his wife's parents that he would be leaving on a bus that departed San Cristóbal at 5:00 a.m. His father-in-law offered to wake him and when he went to Juan's room in the early hours, the older man was crying. Then his brother-in-law came, too, and he also began to cry. They walked in the dark together to the bus station.

"I told them I had no alternative," said Juan. "With little land and little education and little money, I had no chance to *sobresalir* there at home. But the United States was a place where people could work and make their own lives."

He left before dawn, was robbed along the way, and had adventures on the Rio Grande, where the Border Patrol nabbed him a couple of times before he made it through. When he had finished telling the story of that first trip north, I asked Juan whether he had ever worried that in a big, complex country like United States his lack of education and other resources could be more of a handicap than they had been in Guatemala.

"I never thought about it that way," he replied. "Yes, it is a contradiction. It should have been harder for me here than it was in San Cristóbal, but that is not the way it turned out and that's not the way I saw it when I got started." Juan was quiet for a few moments. Then he said, "When you see problems every day, they look very large and you stop in front of them. When you don't know what lies ahead, you walk on because you have hopes."

The sense of the unknown, the unexplored frontier, has always

contributed to America's liberating powers. Voyagers like Juan are drawn by the very newness of it all. But as I listened to Juan describe how he and the other Maya made their lives in Houston, I began to see the flip side of this allure. Immigrants are attractive to Americans because as newcomers they seem unsullied by familiar conflicts, especially the conflict between native-born blacks and whites. That apparent freshness helps explain why Latino immigrants prove so appealing to some Americans, who see them as the embodiment of old virtues such as strong families and hard work. Immigrants can be a forever-expanding frontier that defines a re-invented America.

The story of how Juan and the Maya found a place in America and how they came to fill a need here has been told and retold by Juan and his compatriots, and for them it has become the creation myth of the Houston Maya.

According to the legend, Juan left home with no more of a destination than a Houston phone number. He had been told it belonged to two sisters from San Cristóbal who had left town many years earlier and had worked as maids in Guatemala City, where they had been employed by a rich American family who eventually took them to Houston. Neither Juan nor anyone in his family had ever met these women, but he believed they would have heard of his father or grandfather and know them to be good men.

Juan found the women, and they helped him get settled. Eventually, they put him in touch with another Guatemalan, a man who had also lived in the United States for several years and who worked at a supermarket, part of the locally owned Randall's chain. He was not a Maya or particularly friendly, but when Juan went to see him, the man said there was a job opening at his store.

"It was just one of those things of life," said Juan. "Some *morenos* had been working maintenance at the Randall's, and the manager went to them to complain that they were not working hard enough. The *morenos* got angry and debated it, to the point that they wanted to fight with the manager, and then one of them took his mop out of his bucket and threw it at the manager's face, and then the *morenos* took off their aprons and walked away. Soon after this happened, the manager asked the Guatemalan if he knew anyone who could do the work, and I just happened to be around."

At the beginning, Juan worked on a maintenance crew that began

its shift before dawn, and then he worked on through another shift, sacking groceries and loading them into cars. His salary was little more than three dollars an hour.

"Maintenance, I have always said, is a matter of being very patient, so that when you clean, you clean everything. With sacking, you can be clever about how you pack the food to get more in the bag and do it quickly, but the most important thing with sacking is that you must treat people in the correct way. That's what makes the difference between the workers who make good tips and those who don't."

Juan sent as much as one hundred dollars a week back to Totonicapán, which was twice as much as most people earned there. The money paid to have the house repainted and the dining room redone. His son went to Guatemala City to see the best doctors.

"It didn't take many dollars from here to make a difference there, and when people noticed, they began to think of what I had done differently."

About nine months after he began working at the supermarket, the manager said there would be openings and asked Juan if he knew anybody looking for a job. Within days, a brother-in-law and an uncle were on their way to Houston.

It was 1979, and the Houston oil boom was nearing its gaudy zenith. The Randall's where Juan worked served the newly rich and the very newly rich, who came to buy groceries in Jaguars and lavishly customized Suburbans. Juan's store became the model as the chain began building huge, high-quality, high-priced food stores. Service became the keynote. Valet-parking attendants greeted the women in Jags, and off-duty Houston police directed traffic on a major thoroughfare so everyone could get in and out of the parking lot hassle-free. All the regular employees wore uniforms that would have passed muster at a prep school. The cilantro was always misted.

During the boom, Randall's expanded along with Houston's suburbs as middle- and upper-class whites moved progressively farther from the city center. Along the way, the chain continually improved the quality of its service. On the one hand, it rode a fundamental demographic trend. On the other, it helped lead a shift toward customer-oriented, upscale retailing. As the chain expanded and perfected its act, Randall's hired more than one thousand Maya from Totonicapán.

"At a certain point, I believe the owners must have decided that they wanted all Guatemalans to do the maintenance and not have any *morenos* doing that work anymore," said Juan. "I believe that because, when they were preparing for a grand opening, they would say to us, 'We need so many people for maintenance to be ready for such and such a date,' and when it came time, we would have everybody ready. We'd have the whole department organized, enough people for all shifts for all twenty-four hours, seven days. From the start, they guaranteed us those jobs, even though they were getting hundreds of applications. Why else would they do this except for the fact that they wanted Guatemalans and nobody else?"

I tried to get Randall's executives to talk about their personnel policies, but they never responded to my requests. I did, however, find a pretty clear statement of those policies in an interview with the chain's founder, namesake, and chief pitchman, Robert Randall Onstead. In 1987, he told the *Houston Business Journal*, "We hire people who are interested in people, people who are cheerful servants." Randall's was by no means alone in seeking that kind of employee.

In his 1991 book, *The Work of Nations*, Robert B. Reich, then still a Harvard professor and soon to become secretary of labor in the Clinton administration, described a category of workers he called "in-person servers," people whose essential qualification is "a pleasant demeanor." By his account, more than 3 million new jobs for such workers were created in the 1980s in fast-food outlets, bars, and restaurants, which was more than the number of routine production jobs still existing by the end of the decade in the automobile, steel, and textile industries combined.

"They must smile and exude confidence and good cheer even when they feel morose," Reich said. "They must be courteous and helpful even to the most obnoxious of patrons. Above all, they must make others feel happy and at ease."

Even a casual survey of the people busing tables, making hotel beds, and unpacking produce in any large American city leaves no doubt that huge numbers of recent Latino immigrants are employed in these kinds of service jobs. They were the fastest-growing supply of adult low-wage workers when such were among the fastest-growing segments of the workforce. But simple availability does not

explain the extent to which these newcomers ended up in the niche.

As American metropolitan areas expanded relentlessly into the exurbs, spatial segregation of the races became ever more profound, and the greatest distances developed between affluent whites, who generated low-wage service jobs in their new towns, and poverty-level blacks, who in the absence of immigration might have been candidates for those jobs. Latino immigrants, however, found residential niches in suburbs. In places like Pacoima, in the San Fernando Valley, or Rockville, in Montgomery County, Maryland, or in Houston's Gulfton neighborhood, they took over older, cheaper, less attractive housing by crowding three or four wage earners into every dwelling.

In the new towns, Latinos were neither rejected nor feared, the way poor blacks would have been. The whites, who fled the cities to escape their dread of crime and racial confrontation, generally accepted Latino immigrants as an unobtrusive appendage to their new suburban culture throughout most of the 1980s and early 1990s. Resentment against the newcomers has developed only where Latinos have become a conspicuously large presence.

Juan is convinced that the Guatemalans' behavior was a major factor in their winning acceptance; not their behavior alone, but how it compared to the African-Americans' and Mexican-Americans' who were their prime competitors for the bottom-rung jobs at Randall's.

"I think the managers had seen from their own experience that there are other nationalities that are a little more aggressive than we are, and that has recommended us to them," he said. "This is not to say we are better than others. No, far from it. In fact, we come with real weaknesses, like lack of education and lack of language, but the managers have been able to see in the way we comport ourselves that we do not argue with people, we do not fight even among ourselves, and we do not make demands. It was the only thing we had to offer."

But the Maya had more to offer as well. They had the workings of a migratory channel that not only ensured a supply of ready workers but also guaranteed their performance as cheerful servants.

"Several of us would have long talks with anyone starting at Randall's. We told them the only reason for leaving home was to work, and so there would be no skipping days or arriving late because

you felt lazy. Second, we said that even though none of us had much schooling, our parents had educated us to respect others and behave correctly. So at work, there would never be any yelling or name-calling and you would always have good manners and show the Americans you were not a ruffian."

Over time, as more and more workers learned enough English to get along, this coaching became less necessary. Like Juan, many of the Maya became department managers or assistant managers, and they were able to supervise the newcomers directly.

"When they hired somebody new for maintenance, they would spend two weeks with me at my store learning how to run the cleaning machines and how to do the work, and when they were ready, I would send them on. And we always made sure that our new people went to work for our own foremen. That way, if there was any problem, if a man was sick or had to leave work early or anything, we would solve it among ourselves. We would tell the new men, 'If any of the Americans has a complaint or gives you an order, just listen carefully and nod your head and then come to one of us and we'll tell you what to do.'"

Getting jobs at Randall's has become more difficult in recent years because the company has become strict about demanding proof of legal work status. Juan insists he would not send anyone to the corporate personnel office to apply unless the person had valid documents, because otherwise it would damage Juan's reputation.

"Two or three times in the last few years, managers have come to me and said they needed workers, and I had to tell them that we did not have any who were ready."

Now, the newly arrived typically spend a couple of years or so working as busboys or day laborers while they try to get legal status one way or another. Many are disappointed. "We have young boys, seventeen, eighteen year olds, coming now with the idea that they are going to get rich, and no matter how much you tell them that it will be hard for them here, they still come."

Since Juan first pushed a mop, the Mayan workforce has participated in the creation of a new culture out along the freeways. Like other immigrants who deliver pizzas, wash dishes, clean houses, do construction work, or take care of children and old people, the Guatemalans are among the great unseen facilitators of the two-income, cul-de-sac lifestyle so favored by white baby boomers with children.

In Houston, the availability of a low-wage workforce helped speed the growth of a new suburban economy of service and convenience and that, in turn, created greater demand for immigrant workers. In Totonicapán, emigration also became part of a process of change. Remittances and displays of affluence by returning expatriates created new expectations that could only be fulfilled by leaving. The changes at both ends of the migrant channel ensure that the movement between them will be self-perpetuating, unless even intervene to break the momentum.

"When I came, the path was unknown and difficult," said Juan. "Now I see young people coming who were just little children when I left. They have grown up with the idea that coming to Houston is the way to improve your life. To them, it seems natural and easy. Soon now a whole new generation is coming, and that is why I think we are not yet at the middle of what is going to happen."

When Juan was born in 1956 in the village of Xesuc, just outside San Cristóbal, most everybody spoke to one another in Quiché, the indigenous language of the Maya. By the time Juan married, when he was twenty years old, it seemed natural for him and Floralinda to speak Spanish to each other. Now, Juan's two daughters, one a native-born American and the elder having left Totonicapán as a toddler, speak English to each other and to their friends, and when they became teenagers, they increasingly use the new language with their parents, who understand a good deal but are uncomfortable speaking it.

In just three decades, Juan's household went from Xesuc to Houston, from dirt paths worn smooth to concrete cloverleaves, from his parents' Quiché to his children's English. Juan's Spanish turned out to be no more than a vehicle necessary for the journey. So too, Juan proved to be a transitional figure.

One recent evening, I went to see Juan and found him sleep-eyed, just getting up from a nap. He was putting in as much overtime as he could get, even if it meant cleaning floors and putting in sixteen-hour days. All of the money he could muster was going back to Totonicapán, where he was accelerating construction on the house he was building in San Cristóbal. It had gotten to be an even bigger project. "Now it has three bathrooms, more than we have here, and I want to see it finished soon," Juan told me.

But there was more bothering him, as well. Griselda Soledad, his

eldest daughter, had been running with the wrong crowd at school, gang kids. Her high school was a prime recruiting ground for the Southwest Cholos, a street gang that rapidly graduated from graffiti to drive-by shootings. It appeared that Central American youths in Houston had learned how to become gang bangers from their Mexican and Mexican-American neighbors who had been at it for a long time, but the newcomers had developed an exceptionally predatory and self-destructive form of gang culture. It was evident in the violence they inflicted on their own communities and in the name they chose for themselves. *Cholo* (half-breed) is a derogatory term, almost as ugly as the word *nigger* in English. It is often thrown at poor, dark-skinned people in Latin America by those who feel superior to them. In Houston, Juan was baffled that Latino teenagers spray-painted it everywhere as a sign of pride.

My friend Nestor, the sociologist, was busy doing what he could with community groups to help stem what seemed an insanely fast escalation of gang membership and violence. It struck particularly hard among the Salvadorans in Houston. They were the largest Central American community, and since most came after the cutoff dates for the 1986 amnesty, a greater number of them were still illegal and working in the worst-paying jobs. "They came here to escape death squads, and now they live in fear of death squads made up of their own children," Nestor said.

Seeing the amazing things that Juan and his colleagues had accomplished, and seeing what was happening to their children, I had to wonder whether the energy generated by the first wave of migrants was necessarily finite and not transferable to their children. It was as if some tragic laws of thermodynamics applied to immigration. Perpetual motion is disallowed, and entropy is inevitable. It seems so often that the resolute striving, the creativity, and hard work so evident among the immigrant generation dissipate among its children.

Studies of European immigrants and their children in the first half of this century produced the conventional wisdom that assimilation proceeded on a straight line. The second generation picked up where the first left off, producing a continuity of adaptation and a steadily increasing prosperity. Some prominent social scientists recently have argued that a different process—some call it "bumpy-line" assimilation—is developing among current immigrants. Some

children are now racing ahead of their parents in absorbing American ways but are turning into unemployable delinquents as a result. In a 1992 article entitled "Second Generation Decline," Herbert Gans argued that immigrant children who hold fast to their parents' ethnic communities may do better than those who assimilate rapidly and adopt the American culture that they see all around them, including cynical attitudes toward school and a rejection of low-wage labor.

The leading theoretician of the sociology of contemporary immigration, Johns Hopkins professor Alejandro Portes, reached similar conclusions after working with a variety of collaborators on extensive surveys of immigrant communities around the country. He finds that the chances for downward mobility are greatest for second-generation youth who live in close proximity to American minorities, who are poor to start with, and who are themselves victims of racial or ethnic discrimination. Portes also worries that these youth adopt the thinking of American minority groups in a way that becomes "a ticket to permanent subordination and disadvantage." When "children's acculturation leaps ahead of their parents'," he warns, there is "more a danger signal than a first step toward successful adaptation."

The new patterns of assimilation identified by Gans, Portes, and others point to another important distinction: Building a successful immigrant channel involves different skills and motivations than building a permanent community. The first to arrive are consumed with the logistics of creating a beachhead in the new land. Then they find fulfillment by sending remittances home and achieving a better standard of living compared to that of those who remained behind. None of that necessarily requires enabling their children to enter the most stable and upwardly mobile sectors of American society. Many current immigrants, especially among some Asian nationalities, emphasize education as a surefire way to launch the second generation, but most of those newcomers, as I've said, arrive with much more education themselves than is common among Latinos. In the barrios, it is easy to find people who are successful immigrants but failures as the parents of American children. This distinction seems more significant among poor Latinos today than among Asians or the European immigrants of an earlier era. People who have traveled most of the way around the world set different goals for

themselves than do Latinos who have not traveled very far and are constantly going home. Juan was driven to overcome the limits he faced in Guatemala, but until there was a crisis with his daughter, he paid little attention to the limits his children faced in the United States.

The mere hint of delinquency in their teenage daughter caught Juan and Floralinda as a devastating surprise. Their son, their eldest child, the one whose illness gave Juan the immediate impetus to migrate, had died of leukemia in Houston several years earlier, despite the best efforts of American medicine. Like any parents who have lost a child, they were exceptionally protective of the ones who remained.

Floralinda seemed remorseful: "What we realized is that we did not have much communication with the children because we are both so concentrated on work. We do that work so that we can give them what they want, but the result was that we let them get too far away from us. This would never have happened back home; it would never have happened."

Juan, ever the organizer, was more resolute. "We are dealing with this like it was a war, being constantly alert and attacking from several directions. We went to her schoolteachers, to the parents of her friends, to the people in her church group. It is not nice to say to your child that she can only see these people and not these others. It is not nice to listen in on other people's phone conversations, but those are the things you have to do."

A few weeks later on a Sunday afternoon, I went to see Juan's soccer-league matches. It was late October and the Houston summer heat was finally fading. Hundreds of people had come out to cheer games being played on four adjoining soccer fields. Hard by the sidelines, young men in tight jeans and long curly hair cheered their pals. A bit away from the action, families sat on the grass with coolers and picnics. Little boys in matching short and shirts were just starting to get rumpled as they played with their own little soccer balls. Girls in church clothes were kept close to their mothers.

Five young men strode through the middle of the crowd, heading in my direction and they immediately stood out from the rest: big black sneakers, laces untied; baggy shorts; large, untucked T-shirts; hair cut short on the sides and worn in long ponytails down the back. They sported the uniform of the Southwest Cholos. Three in

the back, two in the front, they marched through the crowd, wearing aviator sunglasses. They didn't move in that big-strided walk most common among black gangs. But there was still something familiar about the way they moved. It was an imperious kind of walk. They exuded a particular subspecies of macho that has a very sharp edge to it. It conveys a kind of meanness that isn't there with the Latin men who think themselves peacocks or the sullen ones who drink too much and then explode. When they got closer, I looked a little too hard and the two in front focused their aviators on me as if they were taking aim. It occurred to me that they were just in the wrong uniforms. I had seen that same look and the same walk on men who carried guns and wore uniforms all over Latin America. Even the sunglasses were the same. It was the look of soldiers and policemen who know they can't be touched, of men who hit people they know will not fight back.

A while later, Juan arrived. He had been working since before dawn, had missed church, but now he was talking with team managers, clipboard in hand, supervising, giving instructions. We watched part of a match together, and after we had talked for a while, he confided that things were better at home. He felt that they had intervened early enough with his daughter to head off any serious problems and that she was accepting close supervision. I kept my doubts about his optimistic assessment to myself. Things were fine at his house, Juan insisted, but among other Mayan families, the gang problems were getting worse.

"Some people say there are no problems, that everything is fine with their children, but they are the very ones that are getting into the worst trouble. It is not something anyone wants to talk about outside their own homes. If you have a child who gets in trouble with the police, it is a disgrace for the family, and if you talk about it, people get on the phone and the whole community knows in three or four hours."

The Mayan channel that had carried two thousand people from Totonicapán to Texas was finally confronted with a challenge it was ill-equipped to handle. Crossing the border illegally, finding jobs and housing, dealing with changes in immigration laws, organizing a soccer league—all these things had been done expeditiously. But confronted with the Southwest Cholos, the Maya were giving up.

"I have three friends," said Juan, "men who came here at the

beginning, who have sent their wives and children back to San Cristóbal in the past few weeks. They have some kids in trouble already and they have other younger ones and they worry what will happen to them. One of them said to me, 'It would have been better if we had never brought our families to Houston. My boys have been ruined here.' There is a lot of talk now about going back and people are speaking of their regrets."

Before, whenever Juan had talked about going back himself, it was always in the distant future, "when the girls are young ladies and ready to be on their own," and the youngest was only eleven years old then. I asked him if he was thinking of changing his plans and whether that was why he was speeding up construction on his house in San Cristóbal.

"Now it has come to a moment of thinking that things are changing very much and that all of us have to go back to where we came from. It is in the minds of many of us, especially those of us who came when I did and brought our families here."

It was getting to be dusk and most of the matches had ended, but on one field, teams were just warming up. A crude set of lights atop telephone poles began to glow and steadily grew brighter. A little cheer went up from the players. Being able to play beyond the blaze of the Houston sun was no small thing. The lights were one of Juan's proudest achievements, the result of long negotiations with the parks department and a rugby club that had the original rights to the field.

Juan watched impassively from a distance.

"I don't know if I ever told you," he said, "but I feel that the central reason for doing all this, the whole purpose that started it . . . that I failed. I came here to save my little boy and I wasn't able to do that, and for me that means that everything that has happened since I came, that all of it, will always be a failure in some way."

Juan seemed to settle on the image of his son's death because he was trying to find a frame of reference. After almost two decades in the United States, it was no longer so easy to measure the success of his migration by looking back to Guatemala and priding himself on how much more he had become than if he had never left. His daughter's crisis and the ongoing problems among the other Mayan children demanded that he look at his life in the United States from a different perspective. Juan had made the channel his home, allow-

ing his psyche to transit perpetually back and forth between Texas and Totonicapán. Now events obliged him to root himself in his new life and judge its worth solely in terms of what he had accomplished here. The shift did not come easily for Juan. He resisted it, preferring to fix his gaze on the past and assess the value of his enterprise in terms of the child who had died rather than the one with an uncertain future.

Some Latinos come to the United States and resolutely address themselves to making a new life here. Juan represents the more typical case, especially among those who arrive poor and with little education: For them, everything earned by hard work here acquires a greater value when it is held up to old-country comparisons. For them, the barrios are the irresistible links to the south, not just convenient havens from English-speaking America. Their channels are highly efficient and self-perpetuating but are designed for limited goals. These Latinos do not measure success in terms of how well they have adapted to the United States, how much of the language and the culture they have assimilated, or whether they have built communities that can withstand the dangers presented by life in American cities. Often, when they seem to be doing well—bringing ever larger numbers of family and friends into the country, getting jobs, and taking over neighborhoods—they are at a crossroads and deeply vulnerable.