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NOBODIES: Does slavery exist in America?

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Some forty miles inland from the coastal resorts of Fort Myers Beach and Sanibel Island, the town of Immokalee sits at the bottom of a string of remote agricultural outposts extending through the South Florida interior. The swampy terrain seems an unlikely choice for farmland, but over the past sixty years it has been transformed by canals, pumps, and fertilizer; today, the area is a major source of winter produce sold in the United States.

Three stoplights long, Immokalee (which rhymes with "broccoli" and means "my home" in Seminole) is bordered on the south by the Big Cypress swamp, and surrounded on all other sides by citrus groves and tomato fields. The town's official population is about twenty thousand, but during the growing season, between November and May, it increases to nearly twice that. The town looks more like a work camp than like an American community. Municipal authorities provide little in the way of public services; for several days recently, on Main Street, visitors entering town passed a decapitated black dog, left to rot on the median strip across from a new Walgreen's. In 2001, a county sheriff's deputy was sentenced to fourteen years in prison for dealing crack and shaking down local drug dealers.

Forty years ago, Immokalee's population consisted largely of poor whites, African-Americans, and Puerto Ricans. In the eighties, Haitians arrived, and a little later Guatemalans began to trickle in. Today, some Haitians, whites, and African-Americans remain, but the business district is overwhelmingly oriented toward Mexican and Central American migrants.

Between four-thirty and five o'clock every morning, a convoy of crudely painted red and blue school buses arrives at a parking lot on South Third Street, a block from Main Street, to carry workers to the fields. In the afternoon, the buses return, and the sidewalks fill with weary men, many wearing muddy rubber boots, their shirts and pants stained deep green from the juice of tomato leaves. (Ninety per cent of the town's migrant population are men.) In the evening, workers wear tucked-in Western shirts, baseball caps or cowboy hats, and Reebok knockoffs. Some stay home to wash their few items of clothing or cook dinner; those with time left on their phone cards line up in parking lots and on street corners before seemingly innumerable pay phones (a staple of migrant towns) to call Chiapas, Oaxaca, Huehuetenango.

In many parts of the Southeast, agricultural workers are quartered in trailer camps miles from town; Immokalee's pickers, as citrus and tomato workers are often called, live in plain sight, densely concentrated between First and Ninth Streets, close to the South Third Street pickup spot. Those who don't live there are forced either to walk a great distance twice a day or to pay extra for a ride to work. As a result, rents near the parking lot are high. The town's largest landlord, a family named Blocker, owns several hundred old shacks and mobile homes, many rusting and mildew-stained, which can rent for upward of two hundred dollars a week, a square-footage rate approaching Manhattan's. (Heat and phone service are not provided.) It isn't unusual for twelve workers to share a trailer.

Immokalee's tomato pickers are paid as little as forty cents per bucket. A filled bucket weighs thirty-two pounds. To earn fifty dollars in a day, an Immokalee picker must harvest two tons of tomatoes, or a hundred and twenty-five buckets.

Orange- and grapefruit-picking pay slightly better, but the hours are longer. To get to the fruit, pickers must climb twelve-to-eighteen-foot-high ladders, propped on soggy soil, then reach deep into thorny branches, thrusting both hands among pesticide-coated leaves before twisting the fruit from its stem and rapidly stuffing it into a shoulder-slung moral, or pick sack. (Grove owners post guards in their fields to make sure that the workers do not harm the trees.) A full sack weighs about a hundred pounds; it takes ten sacks-about two thousand oranges-to fill a

bano, a bin the size of a large wading pool. Each bin earns the worker a ficha, or token, redeemable for about seven dollars. An average worker in a decent field can fill six, seven, maybe eight bins a day. After a rain, though, or in an aging field with overgrown trees, the same picker might work an entire day and fill only three bins.

Migrant workers are usually employed by labor contractors, who provide crews to tend and harvest crops for local farmers, or growers, as they're more commonly known. Contractors oversee workers in groups ranging in size from a dozen to many hundreds, and accompany the workers as they travel with the seasons. They can exert near-absolute control over their workers' lives; besides handling the payroll and deducting taxes, they are frequently the sole source of the workers' food and housing, which, in addition to the ride to and from the fields, they provide for a fee.

About ninety per cent of South Florida's laborers are new each season. Recently arrived pickers are often mystified by American culture, unsure of their rights (or the idea of rights in general), and unlikely to speak English. Workers coming from the highlands of southern Mexico and Guatemala speak dozens of languages, including Zapotecan, Mam, Kanjobal, Tzotzil, and Mixteca, and often cannot communicate with each other. In the post-pastoral fields of industrialized modern agriculture, quaint notions of worker solidarity are unrealistic. A former tomato picker named Francisca Cortes told me that workers begin their mornings in the fields by elbowing one another aside as they scramble for positions close to the collection area, each gradient of productivity worth another quarter, another dollar. Under these circumstances, Cortes said, "It's just a bunch of men and some women. You don't know them. You're not there to say, 'What's your name? How are you? How long have you been here?' There just isn't any time for that."

Workers are reluctant to discuss abusive situations with employers, much less with bolillos, or white Americans, for fear of losing their jobs and being labelled troublemakers. Those workers without papers live under the constant threat of being seized by la migra-the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Some labor contractors use this implicit threat of exposure to keep them in line. Workers often borrow money to travel north from loan sharks back home at interest rates as high as twenty-five per cent per month. If they are deported, the loan is foreclosed. Frequently, homes are put up as collateral, so deportation can be a financial calamity for an entire family.

All these factors combine to create, in South Florida, what a Justice Department official calls "ground zero for modern slavery." The area has seen six cases of involuntary servitude successfully prosecuted in the past six years. Describing local migrant-contractor power dynamics, Michael Baron, an agent with the U.S. Border Patrol who knows Florida well, told me, "Most of the time, these workers are housed miles from civilization, with no telephones or cars. They're controllable. There's no escape. If you do escape, what are you gonna do? Run seventeen miles to the nearest town, when you don't even know where it is? And, if you have a brother or a cousin in the group, are you gonna leave them behind? You gonna escape with seventeen people? You'll make tracks like a herd of elephants. Whoever's got you, they'll find you. And heaven help you when they do."

In February of 2001, Adan Ortiz decided to leave his home in the Mexican state of Campeche, on the Yucatan Peninsula, where he lived with his wife and six children in a one-room straw hut, to look for a job in the United States. Since the age of nine, he had worked with a machete and an axe, clearing brush for local ranchers or harvesting sugarcane.

Ortiz gets along in Spanish, but his first language is Mixe, a Mayan language spoken by the Mixe Indians, in southern Mexico. He is short (about five-two) and stocky, with a mustache and soft brown eyes, and looks younger than his thirty-eight years. He has an earnestness about him, and speaks with a studied reserve. When he was asked recently if he had ever owned any land, he almost laughed. "I don't even own the dirt under my fingernails!"

Farmwork in Mexico pays about five or six dollars a day-when it's available. Ortiz considered himself lucky to find work two or three days a week near his home. The only way to bring in more income was to bum around the countryside, looking for work, and there was seldom enough to maintain a family. "People use the term 'provide for' just to refer to a plate of beans and salsa and some tortillas," Ortiz explained. "I think for a family you've got to have milk. Right?"

Ortiz left Mexico with two friends. (The three men are referred to in federal documents only by their initials, and I have changed their names.) None of them had gone to school beyond sixth grade. The youngest, eighteen-year-

old Rafael Solis Hernandez, lived in his mother's house with his wife and baby. Mario Sanchez, the father of six children, lived in a house built of cardboard. At forty-three, he had difficulty recalling his birthday. He explained, "It's never been celebrated, so I don't even concern myself with it." To travel north, Sanchez brought what money remained from a crop of peppers he'd managed to grow the year before. Ortiz borrowed twenty-five hundred pesos (about two hundred and fifty dollars) from a man he occasionally worked for, and Hernandez borrowed the money from his mother.

They crossed the border with a large group in early March, in the care of a "coyote," or smuggler, and found themselves in the town of Marana, Arizona. None of them had any money left, but the coyote introduced them to a man they nicknamed El Chaparro (Shorty), who gave them permission to sleep in an abandoned trailer home. Thirty-five of them did so for about a week. Then El Chaparro offered to drive them to a place where they could get jobs picking oranges. Terms were never discussed.

Ortiz, Hernandez, and about a dozen others were packed into El Chaparro's rickety van, and the group set forth, accompanied by a car carrying five more passengers, including Sanchez. The trip lasted three days. El Chaparro stopped once for an hour or two to sleep, but passengers were forbidden to get out, even to relieve themselves. For that purpose, a jug was passed around. When asked whether they ate during this time, Ortiz shrugged, and answered, "We didn't have money."

On March 13th, more than three weeks after leaving home, the men reached their destination: Lake Placid, a low-lying town in the swamps of South Florida, about sixty miles north of Immokalee. The van stopped in front of a Mexican grocery store named La Guadalupana, and the passengers were ordered to stay put while El Chaparro got out and talked to two labor contractors, who were later identified to the migrants by their nicknames, Nino and El Diablo.

El Diablo, whose real name is Ramiro Ramos, is a short, solidly built man with close-cropped, graying hair, an impassive manner, and bloodshot eyes. Born in Guanajuato, Mexico, he arrived in this country as an orange picker in the early eighties. He became a tigre, or super-picker, whose output was legendary. By the end of the decade, he had worked his way up to contracting. He developed a reputation as the kind of boss who seemed friendly at first, a man "who'd give you your first meal free," a former employee recalled, but who became menacing if angered. He also had a history of threatening his workers with violence. Ramos had married a Mexican-American named Alicia Barajas, whose family runs several sizable labor-contracting operations. "You have to be careful with the Barajas," Baron said. "Their name comes up a lot in law enforcement."

Ramiro Ramos, his brother, Juan Ramos (Nino), and a loose network of cousins and in-laws employed thousands of migrant workers, from South Florida to North Carolina. Records from one of their companies, R & A Harvesting, indicate that between 2000 and 2002 it employed several hundred workers.

Ortiz recalls that when he and his friends first met the new bosses "Senor Nino asked if we had someone to pay El Chaparro for our ride." Ortiz says that Nino shoved a phone in his face, knowing, of course, that the new arrivals had no one to call. Then, according to Ortiz, Nino said, "Well, O.K., we'll pay for you." The workers saw Nino write out a check to El Chaparro. They were told that the bosses had paid a thousand dollars for each of them.

Nino has the same short, solid build as his brother but comes across as less threatening. His belly protrudes over his belt, and his hair, regardless of grooming, consistently looks windblown. (One of his acquaintances told me, "Nino always looks like he's just come from a party.") Nino didn't make anyone sign a contract. Instead, he simply warned his new recruits, "You'll have to pay us back. And the work is very hard." Nino then added a final detail, according to Ortiz: "He told us that if anyone took off before paying he'd beat the fuck out of us. He didn't say it like he was joking." At that point, seeking another job wasn't an option. As Ortiz explained, "I couldn't have gone elsewhere. I owed the money to them. If I refused, what was I going to do?"

El Diablo took the new arrivals to their lodgings, a former bar known as La Pinita, which had been converted into a filthy, crowded, dormitory-style barracks where workers slept six to a room on stained bare mattresses on the floor. While the men were being shown to their places, Hernandez, a soccer fan, noticed a small television set in

one room. When he asked if he could perhaps arrange to have a set for his room as well, he recalled, El Diablo said angrily, "If you keep up with this kind of attitude, I'll pump you full of lead."

Ortiz, Hernandez, and Sanchez spent the next month working for the Ramoses, eight to twelve hours a day, six or seven days a week. Every Friday after work, Nino or El Diablo would pull up to the groves or in front of La Guadalupana (which was owned by Alicia Barajas) in a Ford F-250 pickup truck, holding a large sack full of money. After charging workers a check-cashing fee, the brothers then garnisheed for rent, food, work equipment, the ride from Arizona, and daily transportation to and from the fields. Whatever remained was usually spent on food at La Guadalupana. The three friends and their fellow-laborers barely broke even.

They were also under constant surveillance. La Pinita was only a few yards away from Highway 27, which runs through the citrus belt west of Lake Okeechobee. One day, when Hernandez and another worker tried to telephone their wives from a nearby Kash n' Karry convenience store, El Diablo pulled up behind them, asked whom they were calling, and pointedly offered them a ride home. When the Ramos brothers weren't around, workers were watched by relatives and supervisors carrying cell phones who lived in the barracks and patrolled the surrounding area. Ortiz recalled being told by one supervisor, "If you want to leave, go ahead. But I'll call the bosses, and they'll feed you to the alligators." The supervisor pointed to a lake behind La Pinita and said, "They haven't eaten for awhile." For the newcomers, life in the United States wasn't quite what they had expected. Sanchez later recalled, "All of a sudden, you realize you're completely in their pockets."

There are more than a million migrant workers living in the United States, about half of them illegally. They plant, tend, and harvest most agricultural commodities, including oranges, grapefruits, cherries, peaches, apples, watermelons, tomatoes, onions, eggplant, peppers, squash, cucumbers, mushrooms, cotton, tobacco, and Christmas trees.

As in other sectors of the food economy, the production and distribution of South Florida's tomato crop has become increasingly concentrated. A handful of private firms like Six L's Packing Company, Gargiulo, Inc., and Pacific Tomato Growers supply millions of pounds of tomatoes, either directly or indirectly, to supermarkets and corporations such as Taco Bell, Wendy's, Burger King, McDonald's, and Carnival Cruise Lines.

Ownership and distribution is even more tightly controlled in the citrus industry. Lykes Brothers is a billion-dollar conglomerate with holdings in insurance, real estate, and cattle as well as citrus. Larger still is Consolidated Citrus, which owns fifty-five thousand acres in Florida alone. A majority of the state's crop, in the form of either fruit, juice, or concentrate, goes to three final buyers: Cargill, a fifty-one-billion-dollar commodities giant and one of the largest privately owned companies in the world, with operations in fifty-nine countries; Tropicana, which is owned by Pepsico; and Minute Maid, owned by Coca-Cola. These companies are quick to point out that they don't actually own the groves or harvest the fruit themselves. They merely employ supervisors who test for quality and sugar content, coordinate prices on world commodities markets, and, ultimately, control the harvest.

In the past two decades, according to the United States Department of Labor, farm receipts from fruit and vegetable sales have nearly doubled. Between 1989 and 1998, however, wages paid to farmworkers declined, dropping from \$6.89 to \$6.18 per hour. The national median annual income for farmworkers is \$7,500. A University of Florida survey found that the average income for Immokalee farmworkers is even lower—in 1998, just \$6,574.

According to the Department of Justice, the number of prosecutions of human-trafficking cases throughout the country has tripled in the past three years; there are currently a hundred and twenty-five investigations of such cases under way. Typically, these cases take years to pursue, and convictions with meaningful sentences are difficult to obtain. An often insuperable obstacle is the agricultural workers' mistrust of enforcement agents. Michael Baron, of the Border Patrol, says, "Workers see us and think we're here to pick them up and deport them. They don't give us the time of day." Prosecutors cite an additional hurdle: witnesses travelling from state to state without telephones are difficult to reach, much less schedule for depositions and trials.

For this reason, the Justice Department has been relying on an advocacy group called the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. The coalition has been instrumental in five of South Florida's slavery prosecutions, uncovering and investigating abusive employers, locating transient witnesses, and encouraging them to overcome their fears of

testifying against former captors. While other farmworkers'-rights organizations offer health care or legal representation, the coalition holds weekly meetings, conducts weekend "leadership trainings," makes outreach trips throughout the southeastern states, stages hunger strikes, and has launched a boycott of Taco Bell, in an effort to raise wages for tomato pickers working in what it calls "sweatshop-like conditions."

The organization has more than two thousand members. (It costs five dollars to join.) Most members move on after a year or two in Immokalee to other cities and states, but enough of them stay in touch to create a network that keeps the group informed about working conditions throughout the country.

Lucas Benitez, a twenty-seven-year-old former tomato picker from Mexico with silver teeth (the signature of Central American dentistry), explains the coalition's focus on worker awareness. "If you want true change, it won't come from Washington, or from the lawyers," he says. "It will come from the people in the field." Benitez, one of the coalition's seven elected representatives, sat in his office with his feet up on his desk. Despite his youth and a playful attitude, he is a powerful speaker. "If you win a case or get a judgment, the problems of slavery, of abuses, still remain," he said. "If you change people's consciousness, the people themselves take care of it." When asked about the government's role, he shrugged. "Who cares what happens to a bunch of pelagatos -a bunch of nobodies?"

The group's headquarters is a dilapidated storefront on South Third Street, next to the pickup spot where the workers congregate each morning. The paint is peeling off the walls and the carpet is ripped and threadbare. The principal furnishings include a lumpy old couch, two desks, a few dozen metal folding chairs, and a large papier-mache replica of the Statue of Liberty, holding a tomato bucket. The walls are adorned with photographs of protest marches, cartoons depicting labor relations between bosses and workers, and newspaper articles in Spanish, English, and Creole. Migrant workers stream through all day and into the evening, buying tortillas, Jarritos soft drinks, and mole-sauce mix at the coalition's co-op grocery store. The place has a feel somewhere between a college social club and a Third World political-party branch office.

The group's representatives come from Haiti, Mexico, Guatemala, and the United States. They are paid two hundred and seventy-seven dollars a week—slightly more than a farmworker earning minimum wage for a forty-hour week. They live in trailers and shacks, and work seven days a week, and their conversations seldom stray from the subject of workers' rights. There is a familial esprit de corps among the leadership, but it's not hard to offend them.

Greg Asbed and Laura Germino, a couple now in their late thirties, who met at Brown University, helped start the coalition, in the mid-nineties, while working for Florida Rural Legal Services. Germino is an intense, graceful woman whose family has been in Florida for six generations. She drives a silver 1970 Malibu—her "muscle car," as she calls it—but she wouldn't seem out of place at a country club. Asbed is a handsome, athletic man with stubbled cheeks who favors old T-shirts and worn jeans; he spends three months a year harvesting watermelons with other coalition members.

Before coming to Florida, Germino volunteered with the Peace Corps in Burkina Faso, and Asbed worked for a community-development organization in rural Haiti. Asbed says that, even after working in Haiti, he was appalled to learn what went on in South Florida. "I mean, it's this hidden aspect of life in the country that you wouldn't expect existed," he said. "Until you actually hook up with it and get an in-depth, insider's tour of the world, it's incredible. You don't know what's out there." The couple was inspired by local Haitian, Mexican, and Central American activists who were beginning to organize workers, and, after launching a general strike of more than three thousand migrants, the coalition began to hold regular meetings.

Both Germino and Asbed are reluctant to discuss their own lives. When I asked Germino whether her upbringing had anything to do with her choices, she said only, "I was raised to think that people should be treated justly and that you're supposed to live free and that every human being should be treated as such. I mean, those are pretty basic." She laughed. "Everybody should at least have that kind of consciousness!" When I pressed for more, she answered abruptly, laughing again, but with finality, "This has nothing to do with your story! Don't make me be the story. The workers are the heroes!"

According to Germino, modern slavery exists not because today's workers are immigrants or because some of them don't have papers but because agriculture has always managed to sidestep the labor rules that are imposed upon other industries. When the federal minimum-wage law was enacted, in 1938, farmworkers were excluded from its provisions, and remained so for nearly thirty years. Even today, farmworkers, unlike other hourly workers, are denied the right to overtime pay. In many states, they're excluded from workers' compensation and unemployment benefits. Farmworkers receive no medical insurance or sick leave, and are denied the right to organize. Germino said, "There's no other industry in America where employers have as much power over their employees."

Five of South Florida's six recent slavery cases involve workers picking tomatoes or citrus. Taco Bell buys millions of pounds of tomatoes each year through local packing companies. According to Jonathan Blum, vice-president for public relations of YUM, the parent of Taco Bell, the company does not divulge the names of its suppliers, and has refused requests from the coalition for help in negotiating with local growers for better pay and conditions. "It's a labor dispute between a company that's unrelated to Taco Bell and its workers," Blum told me. "We don't believe it's our place to get involved in another company's labor dispute involving its employees." As for the relation between slavery in South Florida and his company's chalupas, Blum said, "My gosh, I'm sorry, it's heinous, but I don't think it has anything to do with us."

Citrus-industry representatives similarly maintain that because they don't own or operate the groves the problem of slavery is not their responsibility. A spokesperson for Tropicana, one of whose largest suppliers employed the Ramoses, assured me, "We do our very best to make sure our growers operate at the highest ethical standards. If labor abuses came to our attention, we would terminate our contract with that grower." When I asked her if that had ever occurred, she checked and reported back that, as it happened, no contract had ever been terminated.

The State Department estimates that every year smugglers bring into this country illegally some fifty thousand women and children, either involuntarily or under false pretenses. In 2000, the department, alarmed by the increase in human trafficking, worked with allies in Congress to pass the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. Essentially, it proposed a federal felony charge for involuntary servitude, updating the Thirteenth Amendment's prohibition of slavery to take into account the forms of debt peonage and psychological coercion that characterize modern slavery. Early drafts of the bill provided a prison sentence for any person who profits, "knowing, or having reason to know," that a worker will be subject to involuntary servitude. According to people involved in the process, by the time the bill left Congress the provisions regarding "knowing, or having reason to know" had been stripped, largely at the insistence of Senator Orrin Hatch, of Utah, who threatened to hold up the bill in committee indefinitely. As a result, the penalties for involuntary servitude apply virtually only to labor contractors-the lowest rung of employers in the long chain that brings produce from the field to the table.

In one of the most vicious operations uncovered thus far by the coalition, Miguel Flores, of La Belle, Florida, and Sebastian Gomez, of Immokalee, were arrested seven years ago on charges of extortion and slavery. Flores, a contractor, controlled hundreds of workers in agricultural camps between Florida and North Carolina, and charged his laborers exorbitant prices for food, insuring continued indebtedness. Workers were forced to work six days a week, netting at most fifteen dollars a day. According to one Flores victim, female camp residents were raped, and gunfire was often used by guards to keep order. Flores warned his workers that if they ever spoke about their experiences he would cut out their tongues. The coalition, however, located a dozen witnesses, and, working with Michael Baron and other officials, encouraged them to testify. Flores and Gomez are now spending fifteen years in a federal prison.

In April of 1998, Rogerio Cadena and fifteen others, including several relatives, were charged with smuggling twenty women and girls, some as young as fourteen, into the United States from Mexico with promises of jobs in housekeeping, landscaping, and child care. The women were made to pay a smuggling fee of more than two thousand dollars each and held in sexual slavery in trailer-home brothels in South Florida and the Carolinas.

Federal officials said the brothels' clients were usually agricultural workers, who were charged twenty dollars by the brothel operators, or ticketeros. The women were required to perform between fifteen and twenty-five sexual acts per day, and received three dollars for each one. The women were told that they would be free to go once they paid off their debts, but those debts never seemed to decrease. "At the end of the night, I turned in the condom wrappers," one woman testified in a Senate hearing. "Each wrapper represented a supposed deduction from my

smuggling fee. We tried to keep our own records, but the bosses destroyed them. We were never sure what we owed."

Beatings and threats of reprisals against their families in Mexico were used to keep the women in line. Several who attempted to escape were hunted down and returned to the brothels, and were punished with rape and further confinement. Victims who became pregnant were forced to have abortions and to return to work within weeks; the cost of the abortion was added to their debt. Although six of Cadena's accomplices pleaded guilty in the case, nine others managed to run away and slip back across the border. The victims were worried about the risks of testifying until Julia Gabriel, a witness in the Flores case who later became a coalition member, met with them and urged them to stand up for themselves.

According to Leon Rodriguez, a former prosecutor with the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division who helped prosecute the Flores case, the number of women in sexual-slavery rings around the country is not in the hundreds but in the thousands. "You can't just look at these as isolated labor violations or sex crimes," he said. "What you get with agriculture is a pattern of exploitation that can be understood only as a system of human-rights abuses."

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers initially learned about the Ramoses' slavery operation through its worker network. Germino recalled, "We had this one woman who sells cassettes out of her van, a peddler. She came into the office out of the blue and said, 'You guys really need to go look at what's going on up there in Lake Placid.' This is like in '99 or something. She left a number. Eventually, we called her, but her number was out of order. Then we heard something from a van driver." Servicios de transporte serve the migrant community throughout the country; tickets are sold primarily through grocery and drygoods stores that cater to workers. According to Germino, the van driver, a coalition member, told her, "They've got some deal going on up there in Lake Placid, where it's pretty out of control. They're buying and selling people, and people aren't free to leave."

In May of 2000, an Immokalee servicio owner named Jose Martinez was called to make a pickup at El Mercadito, a Mexican store on Highway 27 in Lake Placid. There was nothing unusual about the call; the citrus season was ending, and pickers were heading north to work elsewhere. At approximately 11:30 p.m., however, while Martinez's drivers and four vanloads of workers were preparing to leave, two pickup trucks pulled up. Six or seven armed men jumped out and began to attack the drivers. While one group of attackers held the forty or so passengers at gunpoint and smashed the vans' windows, others demanded to know who the boss was. When they found Martinez, several attackers surrounded him and pistol-whipped him with a Llama .38, splitting his forehead open. When Martinez tried to call 911 on his cell phone, his assailants kicked the phone from his hand and continued beating him until he collapsed in the dust, unconscious, his face and shirt covered with blood. During the melee, the passengers fled. One of them called the police. Another called the coalition.

Germino and Benitez arrived around midnight. At least three of the attackers had managed to escape, but police had arrested Juan and Ramiro Ramos, along with a cousin, Jose Luis Ramos, who had a gun. Germino recalls that one of the cops at the crime scene shook his head, saying, "It's the same guys who did this three years ago. Only last time they killed the guy."

The coalition learned that Ramiro Ramos had been questioned by the Highland County sheriff's office about the 1997 murder of Ariosto Roblero, a van driver who had been shot in the head, execution style, next to his vehicle, in circumstances strikingly similar to the attack on Martinez. A subsequent search of Ramos's house by federal agents and local police had produced an arsenal of weapons not normally associated with labor management, including a Savage 7-mm. rifle, an AK-47, a semi-automatic rifle, a Browning 9-mm. semi-automatic pistol, and a Remington 700 7-mm. mag. rifle. In the end, however, no charges were brought, and the murder of Roblero was never solved.

To the coalition, the attacks on van drivers were a strong indication of involuntary servitude. "These incidents are like a canary in a coal mine," Germino said. "Cutting off people's escape routes is the same as locking them behind a fence or holding guns to their heads. There's no difference." Local prosecutors were less alarmed. A state assault charge against the Ramoses was plea-bargained to a year's probation and restitution for Martinez's damaged vans and cell phone.

When the coalition presented its suspicions about the Ramoses to the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, however, the initial response was tepid. According to a Justice Department official, the case was hampered partly by procedural issues: since the state had already charged the Ramoses with assault, investigation and prosecution by the Feds could raise double-jeopardy issues. A case simply couldn't be built yet-especially since there were no witnesses.

To find out more about the Ramoses' operation, a nineteen-year-old Guatemalan coalition member named Romeo Ramirez volunteered to go undercover. He approached the Ramoses, asked for a job, and worked for them, observing firsthand the conditions in the fields and at La Pinita, where Mario Sanchez, Adan Ortiz, and Rafael Solis Hernandez were being held against their will.

What Ramirez reported confirmed the rumors of involuntary servitude, and on Palm Sunday, 2001, several coalition members visited the workers at La Pinita and asked about their situation: Did they know that in America even debtors can work anywhere they wish? Were they free to come and go as they pleased? Open conversation was impossible, because of the guards, but a worker whispered to Germino, "We're not free here. We can't go anywhere we want because we're not free to leave." Germino slipped him a card with the coalition's phone number.

The following Saturday, Hernandez sneaked out of the barracks to the Kash n' Karry and called the coalition. An escape plan was set for later that evening. Around midday, though, Nino showed up at La Pinita in a rage. A worker had escaped the night before. Nino swore and shouted at the remaining workers that if anyone else left he would hunt them down and kill them.

For the three friends, it was too late to change their plan. Ortiz recalled his feelings about entrusting his safety to the strangers who had promised to help him. "We were shivering," he said. "We were shaking. Because we thought maybe they are his people, too, and they might kill us. But then we thought, Oh, well. If we're going to die anyway, better to die trying to escape." As a final precaution, Ortiz tucked a pair of scissors into his boots. Then the three men went into the yard outside the barracks, trying to act as if they were simply passing the time.

Around sunset, a white Mercury Grand Marquis with tinted windows pulled off Highway 27, a short distance from La Pinita. Lucas Benitez emerged and raised the hood, as if checking an overheated radiator. From the balcony of a nearby hotel, Asbed and Germino signalled that the coast was clear.

Ortiz, Sanchez, and Hernandez sat on a railroad tie at the camp's edge, near the highway, debating what they were about to do. Then, leaving all their belongings, including their Mexican documents, behind, they walked slowly toward the roadside. As they neared the Grand Marquis, they suddenly began sprinting, and jumped into the back seat as Benitez slammed the hood closed, got behind the wheel, and gunned the car down the road. The passengers kept their heads out of view until they were twenty miles away.

Now that witnesses were available, the government finally became involved. Two days after the escape, F.B.I. agents interviewed the freed workers. The Ramoses, along with their cousin Jose Luis, were arrested and eventually charged with conspiracy, extortion, and possession of firearms.

The Ramos trial took place in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Florida, in Fort Pierce, a hundred miles up the coast from Miami, and lasted three weeks. Of the three attorneys defending the Ramoses, the lead strategist was Joaquin Perez, a handsome Miami Cuban in his fifties with thoughtful eyes, a full head of lightly gelled black hair, and a flair for stylish suits. Perez, who has represented Carlos Castano, the head of the Colombian paramilitaries, spends most of his time defending high-level drug cases. He told me that he wouldn't make as much money representing Ramiro Ramos as he normally made, but he found the case engaging anyway. "I mean, slavery-it 's exciting, right? It's sort of sensational."

Perez's defense argument was simple: Florida agriculture is an unsavory world. Why should the Ramoses be the only ones on the stand? What about the companies that hired them? The case would never even have come to trial, he said, if not for the Feds' need to seem proactive, the coalition's desire to make a name for itself, and the pickers' desperation for working papers, which they would receive in return for testifying.

The prosecution presented testimony from Department of Labor and Social Security Administration employees confirming that, of six hundred and eighty Social Security numbers used by the Ramoses for payroll, only ten were legitimate. Jose Martinez, the van-service owner, described being pistol-whipped by the Ramoses the night of the van attack-use of a deadly weapon and interference with interstate commerce. Ortiz, Hernandez, and Sanchez testified that they had been held and forced to work against their will.

Toward the end of the defense's case, Perez called Jack Mendiburo to the stand. Mendiburo, a tall, stalwart man, is the safety, labor, and environmental-compliance manager for Consolidated Citrus, one of Tropicana's largest suppliers. The Ramoses had worked for the company for years.

Perez asked Mendiburo to describe how pickers were paid. Mendiburo explained that checks were made out to the workers themselves, but only after passing through an account held by the Ramoses. The Ramoses, however, were legally and technically unable to access the account. Nevertheless, Mendiburo emphasized that his company was not the employer of the pickers. When Perez asked to what extent the company felt responsible for the workers, Mendiburo answered that Consolidated was reluctant even to use terms like "co-employer" when referring to its relationship with orange pickers. "It would bring to our company certain dynamics that we do not want."

In a sidebar, the defense approached the bench and asked the judge, K. Michael Moore, to dismiss the charges, on the ground that the prosecution of the Ramoses was selective and arbitrary. Perez asked, "Do you not think for one moment, you know, that the growers don't know what's going on? . . . Everyone knows that somebody has to buffer them."

The Judge answered, "That's the way the whole system works. I'm not defending it. You come up with proof of that, and maybe you can talk to the U.S. Attorney's office about it and expose the whole system for what it's about."

After a day and a half of deliberation, the jury found the Ramoses guilty. On November 20th, Juan and Ramiro were sentenced to twelve years; their cousin Jose Luis was sentenced to ten. At the sentencing, Judge Moore, without excusing the Ramoses' actions, gently admonished the prosecutors not to devote the lion's share of their resources to the "occasional case that we see from time to time that this case represents" but, rather, to recognize that "others at a higher level of the fruit picking industry seem complicit in one way or another with how these activities occur."

Since leaving the Ramoses' employ, Ortiz, Hernandez, and Sanchez have worked in Georgia, South Carolina, Missouri, Indiana, and Kentucky. Today, they live together in Florida, in a working-class neighborhood lined with palm trees and live oaks, sharing a tidy one-bedroom apartment with no phone. Inside the doorway are several pairs of cowboy boots, polished and standing in a row. A lime-green stuffed dog sits on top of the TV, between the rabbit ears. In the corner are a set of keyboards and a guitar. On the stove are pots and pans filled with Mexican, Chinese, and Italian food, the result of a foray into international cuisine.

Ortiz, Hernandez, and Sanchez work in a furniture warehouse. (They received papers allowing them to work in the United States for at least another year in exchange for cooperating with the Ramos prosecution.) Ortiz says that he likes his job. He has learned to drive a forklift, which he enjoys, and his bosses never tell him to run or hurry up. "I work like a normal person, and they treat me like a normal person." He works from two in the afternoon until eleven or midnight, and is earning enough to call home frequently and send money to his family to buy food and medicine for his son, who has leukemia.

Hanging from a mirror is a commemorative I.D. pass that Ortiz wore at a recent march with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. He's been to several protests, including a recent road trip to Taco Bell headquarters, in Irvine, California. "I get to talk to people who've been through what we went through," he said of the coalition marchers. "You know, thank God. Because if they hadn't done anything we wouldn't be free right now, and we wouldn't be here." Ortiz, Sanchez, and Hernandez hope to become more involved with the coalition, but how they'll do so depends on money and work opportunities. Most likely, they'll follow the summer watermelon harvest through Florida, Georgia, and Missouri, then return to Florida.

The men are reluctant to talk about the Ramoses, fearing that it might be taken as a provocation. Hernandez said, "You know, I'm a pretty cocky guy. I like to joke around a lot. But I'm scared. I'm still having nightmares about guys coming after me with machetes and stuff."

Ortiz said, "When you're in the kind of situation we were in, you feel like the world has ended. And once you're back here on the outside-it's hard to explain. We feel a little strange still, because when you get out of something like this you feel a little nervous, a little mixed up. Everything's different now. Just imagine if you were reborn. That's what it's like."

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