By Diane Solomon
Illustration by Shout

The Devil's Fruit

IF YOU ATE A STRAWBERRY RECENTLY, it very likely came from the central coast of California. This is where 88 percent of the nation's crop comes from. *Los freseros* (the strawberry pickers) are primarily undocumented Latino immigrants, and they have a name for the berry. They call it *la fruta del Diablo* (the fruit of the devil), since the workers spend ten to twelve hours a day in the hot sun, bent at the waist, picking.

Roberto and Juana Flores came from Jalisco to live in Watsonville. Roberto starts work at 5:30 a.m. and Juana starts at 7 a.m. Juana suffers from chronic back pain from all the picking. Roberto's a *ponchadoro*. Twelve hours a day he inspects the strawberries the pickers bring him and tallies workers' filled cases. They think that this is a lucky job because he gets to stand upright. But he's at risk of hurting his back lifting cases up onto the trucks that take the berries away from the fields.

Some *Freseros* can choose to be paid $7 per hour or by contract at $5 an hour plus seventy-five cents for each case of twelve baskets they fill. Roberto says if the harvest is good and you can pick fast you can earn more by contract. During the harvest, *freseros* earn $350 to $450 a week before taxes. The average annual income is $12,000.

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The Floreses say they came for a better future for their six children, but they'd rather be working back home because they miss their relatives. They worry about being in public where they could run into police who could deport them. "We have to give money for rent, buy food for the kids, and send money to our family, so life here is still a struggle," says Roberto.

Juana and Roberto Flores are soft-spoken people in their thirties. (Because they're undocumented, I'm using pseudonyms.) They pay $800 a month to live with their children in a dilapidated building next to the fields. It has a big cement sink, cement floors, a washing machine, a stove, a refrigerator, and no insulation or heating system. Roberto says they've been here since they arrived from Mexico five months ago and that all their furnishings—a table, a couch, a rug, and two beds—are borrowed. Like millions of other undocumented workers in the United States, the Floreses are here as a family. They came with just the ragged clothes on their backs after a horrific crossing into El Centro, California.

They used to be corn farmers but when prices plummeted in Mexico, Roberto took an extra job fumigating and picking tomatoes and squash at a large industrial farm. "I still wasn't making enough, so I went to work at a factory making furniture," he says. "We would have died of hunger if we stayed because everything was too expensive to live. You could work a whole day and still not have enough to eat." He turned to his brother for help to get them up north. His brother knew of a good *coyote* in Mexicali who arranged their passage.

Juana still says *Gracias a Dios* when she recalls it. The *coyote* led her from Mexicali, where she climbed up a metal pole and then jumped over a wall into Calexico, where she nervously waited for the *coyote* to drive the three youngest children, two, six, and ten years old, across the border four hours later.

During the month it took for Roberto and the three oldest children—twelve, fourteen, and sixteen years old—to cross, the *coyote* hid Juana and the three youngest in a hotel and kept them in contact by phone until they were reunited in El Centro.

"First, we tried to walk through the border with false passports, but they wouldn't let us through," says Roberto. "Then, we left at four in the afternoon with thirty others and got caught in the desert by *la migra*. Ten of us tried a third time at night taking an inflatable raft down an irrigation canal, but we were caught and sent back."

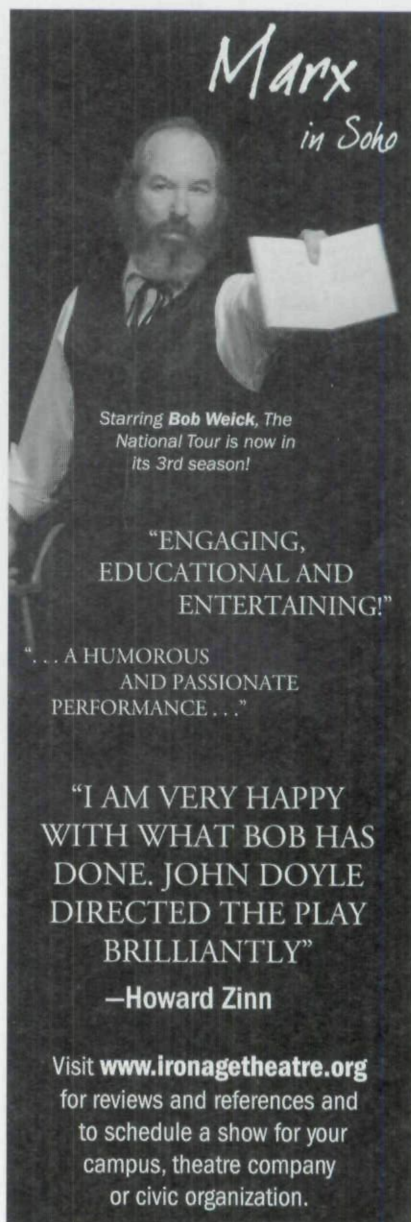
On the fourth try, the *coyote* led them to El Centro. "We spent all night walking through a desert," Roberto says. "Everyone had one container of water. All we could do that night was hide when we saw the *migra's* searchlights, the helicopters, planes, and trucks. There were no trees, lots of rocks, small hills, and sand. We didn't know if there were animals or the *migra* out there. Any time we were scared, we'd fall to the ground and wait. We got there at 8 or 9 in the morning."

The *coyote* was partially paid when he delivered the Floreses to Roberto's brother. They will attempt to pay the rest of the $15,000 debt over the next two years. "We want to pay off this awful debt as fast as we can," says Roberto.

After Roberto's brother brought them to Watsonville, they waited fifteen days before starting work, and they've been working six days a week ever since.

Amelia and Armando Romero also came from Mexico to work in the strawberry fields. (I've changed their names to protect them.) After fifteen years here, life is still a struggle for their family of five. "I work from 6:00 a.m. until 5:30 in the afternoon in the fields, then I return to my home to take care of the children, serve them dinner, bathe them, make the next day's breakfasts and lunches, and take care of their clothes," Amelia says. "I don't get to bed until 10:30 at night and then I have to be ready to do it again by 5:00 a.m. the next morning. My work is hard in the strawberries because the foremen don't treat us very well. If they treated us better, it wouldn't be as hard."

Amelia told of a recent incident where her foreman pushed workers so hard to weed strawberry rows that she and two others injured themselves. "I was the first to fall, then a lady from Jalisco, and then a gentleman from Oaxaca," she says. "The



foreman acted like nothing happened. I've already had one accident that gave me two herniated disks, and here I've fallen again and I have to keep working in the fields to help my husband take care of our family. These accidents weren't reported to anyone, and we went on as if nothing happened, but we were hurt. My husband and the foreman almost got into a fight over this."

Armando says they work their best, but no matter how hard they work, their foreman makes them work harder and faster, which puts them at risk for injury. "He calls us *cochinos*, filthy pigs," Armando says. "We have to live with this in order to make a living."

Armando says it's like this the entire ten-to-twelve hours a day they work. "People who own private ranches are much harder to work with and are much more abusive," Armando says. "We're drinking the water in the field, which has pesticides and dirt in it. We'll go many days without clean bathrooms. We always hope that some agency will come and see how horrible the conditions are and do something."

Ann Aurelia López, research associate at the Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems at U.C. Santa Cruz, spent ten years studying thirty-three immigrant families here and their family members on twenty-two farms in Mexico. Her research, now published in her book, *The Farmworkers' Journey*, proves that the great numbers of undocumented Mexican immigrants working in U.S. fields are NAFTA's collateral damage.

Under NAFTA, U.S. corn producers flooded Mexican markets, while Mexico simultaneously ended subsidies to subsistence corn farmers. "NAFTA's architects predicted that a million Mexicans would be forced off of their land every year because of NAFTA," says López. "Where did they expect them to go?"

Like 75 percent of the undocumented workers López studied, the Romeros say they'd rather be in Mexico, but they can't earn a living there. "You can earn as much in one hour here as you'd make in one day there," says Armando. "If there wasn't work in this country, you too would have to go someplace else and find work."

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Someplace else for the majority of dispossessed Mexican farmers is California. Its growing fields produce more than half of the nation's fruits, nuts, and vegetables, raking in $27 billion to $30 billion a year. Based on low-paid and unorganized workers, California's agribusiness model hasn't changed since Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Sergio Guzman, the United Farm Workers' Central Coast regional director, says that the UFW has contracts with just two out of 250 strawberry growers in the region because owners tell workers not to organize or they'll lose their jobs or, worse, be deported. "Even though it's illegal, the companies threaten workers," he says. "It's difficult to find workers who will organize because they want to work and don't want to get in trouble."

He says their main issues are low wages and being harassed to work harder, which causes a high rate of serious untreated worksite injuries. *Freseros* suffer from musculoskeletal problems, disabling accidents, and pesticide poisoning. With rents near the strawberry fields among the highest in the country, averaging $1,200 per month, Guzman says in order for most workers to have an apartment they must share with two or three families. "With low wages, high rent, and sending money back home," Guzman says, "most of the time they only get money to survive and pay the rent."

Since Congress has let decades go by without legislating immigration reform, López started the Center for Farmworker Families to initiate reform on the Mexican side of the border. "If we are serious about reducing illegal immigration we can do it for a fraction of the cost of paramilitarizing the border by implementing rural development programs in the three Mexican states that provide the most immigrants: Jalisco, Michoacán, and Oaxaca," she says. "Then people can stay home because they can make a living."

López thinks immigration raids, employer sanctions, and the construction of walls along the Mexican border won't stop illegal immigration because decision makers don't recognize Mexico's and California's functional interdependence. "California agriculture is completely dependent upon Mexican labor while poor Mexican families are dependent upon the remittances California workers send home," she says. "Until NAFTA becomes part of the immigration reform debate in Congress, we won't ever have an immigration policy that works. Instead of terrorizing people who have no choice but to come here to keep from starving, we need to look at the trade policies that are forcing people out of their country."◆

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