

ALSO BY GABRIEL THOMPSON

There's No José Here
Calling All Radicals

**WORKING
IN THE
SHADOWS**

A Year of Doing the Jobs
(Most) Americans Won't Do

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New York



Part Three

FLOWERS AND FOOD

October–December, New York, New York

GETTING THE JOB

In October I'm ready to begin searching for work in my place of residence, New York City. Yuma and Russellville made the selection of work easy: Each had one major industry in town, and I just hoped they'd hire me. Here, one of my difficulties is deciding what type of work to seek out. New York is a city of immigrants: They clean our clothes and care for our children; build our homes and vacuum our offices; drive the taxis we hail; and cook the food we order. With 36 percent of New York City's residents foreign-born, one would be hard-pressed to find an industry that wasn't in some way dependent on their labor. So what should I aim for?

This question is tied up with another challenge of my project's new locale: Many low-wage immigrants find work in the city's sprawling underground economy. Here, employers are generally much smaller than Dole or Pilgrim's Pride—they might be a one-man construction company or a single, non-chain restaurant. Almost none of the dozens of undocumented immigrants I've known, either through my organizing work or as a journalist, had what we would call a traditional work arrangement. Instead, they are paid off the books, usually in cash, with no overtime and frequently earning less than the minimum wage. Many find jobs through informal references—someone tells a boss that their sister needs work—or unlicensed labor agencies. Manual laborers gather on corners hoping to be picked up for a day's work. I don't stand a chance on the corners, I'm likely to elicit suspicion if I entered a labor agency in an immigrant neighborhood, and I don't have any Mexican siblings to vouch for my dependability to their boss.

The third complication is that many workplaces are segregated by ethnicity. A construction foreman might want only Mexican workers; the head of a dry cleaner could prefer Chinese employees. At root, the informal referral systems and segregated workforces are a direct result of an employer's preference for a docile workforce. The bosses are breaking the law, day after day after day. They hope to find undocumented workers that they can exploit by paying sub-minimum wages and avoiding overtime.* "How do

* In response, some immigrants who are legally authorized to work instead present their employer with obviously forged immigration papers they have purchased on the black market. Because they know that the boss prefers to hire undocumented workers, their status as a legal immigrant, in such situations, becomes a guarded secret.

you plan on getting someone to hire you?" one of my friends asks, to which I have no real answer.

I'M PUZZLING OVER this riddle in my study when I hear snippets of Spanish. I prop open a window and lean out from the fourth floor. A crew of Ecuadorian workers, installing new windows, is perched precariously on wooden scaffolding held up by a primitive-looking system of ropes and pulleys. I ask about work and they tell me to speak to their Indian boss, who can be found at a midtown Manhattan worksite early each weekday morning. He pays cash, \$100 a day.

I'm not able to track down the boss, but while cycling through Manhattan I nearly collide with a restaurant delivery worker who is blasting down Sixth Avenue against traffic. He apologizes to me for nearly ending my life, but the episode, and the sheer number of immigrant delivery workers I encounter on the street, leads me to spend the next week trying for a restaurant job, especially as I have read several stories about construction work drying up with the downswing in the economy. Without being able to think of a better strategy, I spend my days pedaling up to delivery workers to ask if they know whether their restaurant is hiring, explaining that I'm hoping for a job in dishwashing or delivery. This tactic surprises a few people; one older man, when I turn to ask my question as we're coasting up Eighth Avenue, flinches so dramatically that he nearly falls over. I decide to approach people at red lights.

A handful of men tell me that their restaurants are short delivery workers. When I show up, however, the bosses—who thus far are white, Latino, or Asian—look at me skeptically and tell me the position has just been filled. I don't believe them. I finally come close to being hired at a trendy Asian fusion restaurant near Union

Square, after spending ten minutes doing my best to convince a young Thai manager that I can handle delivery.

"But it's very, very hard," he says, arguing that I should consider a waiter position instead. "The Mexicans do the delivery, and you're not Mexican."

This is hard to refute. He finally hands me a card and tells me to stop by the next week. "Maybe the Mexicans will say yes, we'll see," he says, as if the delivery workers make the hiring decisions.

I inquire about jobs at twenty or so other restaurants over the next two days, without success. One morning, as I'm biking up a busy avenue in Chelsea to check out a few eateries near Central Park, I'm forced to slam on my brakes. A virtual forest has been planted in the bike lane. Hundreds of long branches, tied together with twine, are leaning against each other. Next to the branches are buckets of colorful flowers, and next to the flowers are potted plants that are overflowing into the traffic.

Cars are zipping by on my right at thirty miles per hour. As I'm standing over my bike, impatiently waiting for traffic to thin, I notice that two Latino men are frantically tossing bales of branches into the back of a large white commercial truck. Three other men, who are speaking Spanish to each other, come out of a storefront and join in. It slowly dawns on me that I've just entered New York's flower district.

"¿Su jefe necesita gente? Estoy buscando trabajo." I ask the men if their boss needs any help.

One of them turns toward me; he is wearing a Guns 'N Roses *Appetite for Destruction* T-shirt. I take this as a good omen. "I don't know. You should go talk to the Greek inside."

I lock up my bike and walk into a storefront jammed with plants and trees. I squeeze through a narrow pathway to the back, where I find the "Greek," a man named Tony, sitting on a wooden stool and talking rapidly into a telephone. He is wearing jeans and a

stained short-sleeve shirt with a drooping collar, and while his gray hair is thinning on the top, there is still enough on the sides to be unruly, giving the impression that he recently rolled out of bed. "Yes, beautiful maple, sir, best maple you can find," he says. "Come pick it up. Yes, sir, yes . . . okay." He hangs up.

"How can I help you, young man?"

"I'm looking for work."

"What kind of work?"

"Anything."

"Good, that's good, young man," he says approvingly; I almost expect him to pat me on the head. He writes down my name and phone number and sticks it on the wall. "The woman is out right now but I'll talk to her. Come back tomorrow. Maybe we can get you something." This feels very old-school, very mom-and-pop. It could provide a nice contrast to my last two jobs, both within multinational corporations.

"I have a really good feeling about the job," I tell my partner, Daniella, that night. "For some reason it feels like home to me."

I stop by the following day, but "the woman" is still out. "Come back tomorrow, young man," Tony tells me between phone calls. While I observe him during these brief interactions, he strikes me as the quintessential New Yorker: fast-moving, gruff, no-nonsense. Outside the shop I chat with one of the workers, Lucas, who keeps his long black hair in a ponytail and is wearing a blue tank top that reveals powerful arms. He's confused when I explain that I'm looking for work, thinking instead that I'm searching for a certain kind of plant.

"Oh, if you want a job, he [Tony] won't help you. He doesn't make any decisions. The real person in charge is Helen."

"That's what Tony told me. He said to come back tomorrow."

"But you don't want a job here."

"Sure I do. Why not? At least I can practice my Spanish."

"Well, maybe. But I don't think you'll like it."

"Is it that hard?" I ask.

"A little," is what I think I hear him say. Later I'll wonder about that, because *un poco* (a little) sounds similar to *es loco* (it's crazy).

I MAKE TWO more trips to the shop until I finally meet "the woman." Helen appears to be in her fifties and has blond hair; when she looks me over, her face—already tense—becomes even more pinched and pointed. I'm guessing it's been a long time since she's taken a deep breath.

"Where are you working now?" she asks. I tell her I'm unemployed.

"Where have you worked before?"

"I've done a lot of work. I've cut lettuce, construction, delivered pizzas—"

"What's the problem, you can't keep a job?"

"A lot of the jobs are seasonal, like lettuce. So they have work for only a few months."

"Where do you live?"

"Crown Heights, Brooklyn."

"Do you have a car?"

"No."

"How much rent do you pay?" A weird question, but I tell her.

"Who do you live with?"

There is no way this can be a legal question to ask a potential employee. Still, I comply: I want the job.

"What does your girlfriend do?"

A few more questions like this and she finally focuses her glare on something other than my face. She shrugs at Tony. "Okay, come by tomorrow at five in the morning. We'll see how you work."

"Before I leave, could you tell me, like, what I'll be doing or how much you pay?"

"You do whatever Tony tells you to do," she snaps. "I can't tell you money. We'll try you for a week and see what we think, then we talk about money."

CHAPTER 11

My alarm wakes me at 3:45 a.m. Thirty minutes and a shot of espresso later, I'm out the door. New York City at this hour is a magical place: deserted, quiet, manageable. It feels like my private metropolis as I cruise through downtown Brooklyn and across the Manhattan Bridge.

Lucas is in the shop with a white woman I haven't yet met; she writes up a time card for me and tells me to do whatever Lucas does. "The first thing we do is move all this stuff outside," he says. The storefront is even more claustrophobic than I remember, and as I follow Lucas deeper into the store, we have to push our way through branches as if we're bushwhacking. We spend the first fifteen minutes carrying bales of oak and maple branches outside, leaning them against the store's front window. Several other immigrant workers sleepily punch in and join us.

It's a pretty calm work environment until Tony arrives. I'm in the process of dragging two bales of birch through the front door.

"Morning," I say.

"Look at all those leaves, mister." I turn in the direction he is pointing, my early-morning brain still foggy. Leaves are strewn around the sidewalk. "Clean that up, mister. Get string and tie it up. Throw it away!" He dashes into the store.

It's not clear what I'm supposed to do. Tie up leaves with string? I tell Lucas, who is rushing past with a large plant, what Tony has said. "*Su abuelito es loco*," he replies. He's saying that Tony, whom he's calling my grandfather evidently because we're both white, is crazy.

After a few minutes of searching I finally come across a ball of twine and scissors. Tony is on the phone taking an order, so I don't bother him with questions. I cut several sections of twine and head back outside. As I'm looking at the leaves, still trying to formulate a plan, Tony rushes up to me.

"Mister!" he yells into my face. He hasn't brushed his teeth. "Mister, take the pear and put it in the corner." He points north, in the general direction of a white truck, and is off.

I stick the twine in my pocket, wondering what the branches of a pear tree might look like. Have I missed some sort of orientation? By now there are dozens of bales leaning against the storefront window. I stare at them for several seconds, until another worker passes by and points out the pear. I pick up the bale and hoist it over my right shoulder. "Put it in the corner," Tony has told me. I assume he means in the corner of the truck. I walk to the truck and am about to heave it in when I decide that it wouldn't hurt to double-check. I turn back and see Tony standing outside the store, staring at me.

"You want it in the corner of the truck?" I yell. He doesn't respond. "You want it here, in the corner of the truck?" Again, nothing. I'm sure he can hear me. Okay. I toss the pear bale in the truck. Tony walks over quickly.

"Mister, what are you doing? Mister, why didn't you listen to me? I said put it *in the corner*." I look at him blankly.

"Forget it. Hand it to me." I step inside the truck and pass him the branches. "In the corner, in the corner. That's what I told you, mister. You need to use common sense." He mutters to himself as he carries the branches up the street to the corner, dumping them in the middle of the sidewalk. Apparently someone is coming to pick them up. "Common sense, mister," he tells me when he returns. "In. The. Corner."

I WILL FOREVER remember the next five hours as being one of the most stressful periods in my life. If there is a system to the organization of the shop, I can't discern it. Tony paces back and forth, his faded jeans drooping low and the grimace on his face indicating the likelihood of cardiac arrest. His managerial style combines maximum intensity—just being in his presence causes my shirt to become soaked in sweat—with a reliance on enigmatic instructions. There is nothing here that should be so difficult: We are moving bales of branches outside, arranging plant and flower displays on the sidewalk for customers to peruse, and loading and unloading trucks. But with Tony as my boss, even the simplest task becomes damn near impossible to understand.

"We're looking sloppy out there!" he shouts in my face as I'm carrying two bales of oak, one over each shoulder. I nod. We cross paths again. This time, I'm lugging a massive pumpkin, which must weigh at least sixty pounds. Halloween is approaching. "Mister, we're looking really sloppy out there!" I have absolutely no idea what he is talking about.

Seeing my confusion, Lucas explains that when Tony shouts, "We're looking really sloppy out there!" he is actually instructing me to grab a broom and sweep the sidewalk. My task explained, I dig out a broom that is wedged between bales of magnolia. As I'm sweeping the leaves into a pile, Tony shouts from behind, "Wake up!" I turn around just in time to prevent a bale of branches from falling on me. "Wake up, mister! Put these in the

truck. Gotta stay awake." I grab the branches, which have red berries hanging from them, to discover they are covered in thorns. (Later in the day I ask Lucas about gloves. "If you want them you have to buy them," he explains.)

Within an hour I'm alternating between waves of paranoia and fury. No matter what activity I am engaged in, Tony finds time to come up and make comments like, "Mister, what are you *doing*?" Often I am doing exactly what he had instructed me to do not five minutes earlier. I come to realize, after this happens a dozen times within twenty minutes, that he doesn't even seem aware that he is asking a question. Instead, he has developed two verbal tics. The first is to address everyone, incessantly, as mister. This is maddening enough; it is made worse by the fact that some of the other workers have picked up the habit. The second is that anytime he comes across workers—a frequent occurrence, as we are in a tight space—he automatically asks us what we're doing. As the boss, it would appear, his job is to accuse.

"You can't let your grandfather bother you," Lucas tells me at 9:00 a.m. We're standing behind the truck stripping leaves from birch branches, out of Tony's line of sight. "He's always like this. No one knows what he's talking about."

A tall white guy, who apparently knows Lucas, shouts out, "You've got a new guy!" Lucas nods.

"Just started," I say.

"Welcome to the jungle!" the man yells. "You learn quick enough it's crazy here."

As the morning wears on, I am relieved to see that Tony isn't singling me out; it's a jungle for everyone. By now I am working with four others, all immigrants: Lucas, Israel, and Carlos, in their late thirties or early forties, are from southern Mexico; and Antonio, a powerfully built twenty-seven-year-old, is from Honduras. None is safe from Tony's tirades, but though they make faces to each other when Tony isn't looking, they seem to be taking it in stride.

They have grown accustomed to a workday in which nothing is ever sufficiently explained, in which they are expected to jump from one random activity to another whenever Tony opens his mouth. I realize that I'm going to need to develop thick skin, and quickly.

"Right now it's good, because he can't see us," Lucas says as we continue to pull leaves from birch branches. "But the secret is to stay busy. Don't forget—they are always watching." He opens his eyes wide and moves his head back and forth, mimicking Big Brother. "If you don't know what to do, grab the broom. If they see that you are a good worker," he flexes his large right bicep, "then you shouldn't have any problems."

"Any idea how much money they will pay me?"

When he started, Lucas explains, he made between \$300 and \$350 a week for sixty hours of work—Sunday is the only day off. That comes to about \$5 an hour. "But like I said, if they see you're a good worker they might pay more." At home that night I do the calculations. New York's minimum wage is \$7.15 an hour. Factor in twenty hours of overtime, and an employer like Tony—if he's interested in complying with U.S. labor laws—owes each worker \$500 before taxes.

As I'm moving goods back and forth between the store and the sidewalk, customers browse through our selection. It doesn't take long to learn to identify the basic branches: oak, maple, curly willow, birch, pear, and magnolia. My least favorite is the Washington hawthorn, with its red berries and sharp thorns. The customers, who seem mostly to be interior decorators, are of the sleek and skinny sort with spiked hair and too-tan skin; they could have walked directly into the shop from an MTV set. Some are quite nice, but a few are pushy and whiny and make no effort to get out of our way when we're balancing heavy loads. Twice I spin ever so slightly after passing customers of this type, giving a gentle tap to their heads with the back end of whatever I'm carrying over my shoulder.

The pay? - Like walmart.

RELIEF FINALLY COMES at 1:00 p.m., when Tony tells me to hop in a truck to make deliveries. The driver, Hector, is from Puerto Rico and has been working for the company for years. "How's it going, Junior?" he asks as we pull away. "This is your first day, right?"

"Yeah. This place is a little crazy."

"Don't worry about it. You can't let Tony bother you—he's always like this."

Over the next ninety minutes we make a half-dozen deliveries. Several smaller loads are for boutique flower shops; the others are large deliveries of branches for private parties (\$750, for example, for magnolia and maple branches for the Union Club on the Upper East Side). The final stop is a residence near the Museum of Modern Art, where I use three different service elevators to bring a bale of pear and magnolia to an apartment on the forty-sixth floor. I'm in and out in a hurry but glimpse enough of a massive living room with a sweeping view to realize I am bringing branches to a very wealthy man (I later see a listing for a three-bedroom apartment in the building for \$8.9 million).

As we're driving back to the shop, I ask Hector about the origin of the branches. He tells me that Tony has land in New Jersey where many of the trees are grown, and that a group of workers are responsible for cutting and loading the branches each day. Like lettuce, a bale of branches begins to die immediately after being cut, and so the product must be moved quickly in order to arrive looking like something you'd want to gaze on as you're sipping wine and discussing the most recent issue of the *New Yorker*.

"You getting hungry?" Hector asks.

"Yeah, was thinking about taking my break when we get back." I've been going nonstop for nearly nine hours now.

"Break?" He laughs. "They don't give you any breaks here, Junior. But if you're doing a delivery, you can grab something. Just

make sure to finish it before we get back." We stop at a pizza joint and I gobble up two slices. It's 2:30 p.m. by the time we arrive back at the shop and the day is winding down—the flower district opens very early and is largely shuttered by the afternoon. After an hour of moving branches inside and sweeping up, I'm dismissed.

THE NEXT DAY I spend most of the morning hours making deliveries around the flower district—one dozen bales of various branches to G. Page Wholesale Flowers, a large shop located in the heart of the district on Twenty-eighth Street; large pumpkins to an advertising agency on Twenty-sixth Street; a collection of flowers for a nearby floral stylist.

I was too busy yesterday to get much of a sense of the flower district, though I had done some reading overnight and learned that the once sprawling region has been shrinking. In the 1960s the district was home to more than a hundred wholesalers, but today there are only about two dozen running along Twenty-eighth Street from Seventh Avenue to Broadway. (When it was formed in the mid-1890s, the district's borders went from Twenty-sixth Street to Twenty-ninth). Still, these two blocks are unlike anywhere else in the city; the urban bustle remains, but pedestrians pass beneath archways of ferns, forming single-file lines as they snake through endless rows of cut flowers and potted plants.

The main threat to the flower district has been real estate, especially since the 1990s, when the area was rezoned to make it easier to build residential buildings. As luxury buildings and hotels have displaced merchants, some advocated relocating the district to a cheaper neighborhood. A couple of years ago, the Flower Market Association—headed by Gary Page of G. Page Wholesale Flowers—believed they had enough support to move to Queens,

but some merchants refused, forcing the association to scuttle the plan. As a result, Chelsea still has a couple of blocks left that remain interesting and eccentric, a reminder of what the city was like before the proliferation of generic luxury developments.

When I make my first delivery to G. Page Wholesale Flowers, it's not yet 6:00 a.m., but already dozens of Latino workers—mostly men—are frantically arranging bouquets and wrapping up flowers for customers. I make my way toward the rear with two bales of maple, passing rows of flowers bursting with color. (I am not a flower person, but I later log on to the G. Page Web site, which testifies to the global economy of cut flowers: They sell hydrangeas from Colombia, echeveria from New Zealand, roses from Ecuador, and orchids from Vietnam and Malaysia. The workforce is also geographically diverse: I speak briefly with men from Mexico, Ecuador, and Guatemala.)

Once I've completed the deliveries it's back to the same routine of trying to decipher Tony's orders. Around 10:00 a.m. one of the commercial trucks pulls in, driven by Helen, who shouts at Lucas and me to begin unloading. I walk to the back with Lucas, who pulls the rear door open. "Stay here and I'll hand the bales to you," he says.

Five seconds later, as Lucas is climbing into the truck, Helen rushes up. "What are you doing?" she shrieks at me. "Grab these, grab these!" She pulls out two bales, nearly tripping up Lucas, who is now standing in the truck, and slams them over my shoulder. "Go! Go!" I turn around and notice a black man standing several feet from me, waiting to cross the street.

"Whoa," he says softly. "What's up with her?"

I wonder the same question the rest of the day. As tiresome as Tony can be, he is no match for the sheer meanness of Helen. After we've unloaded the truck as quickly as humanly possible, I carry two bales of maple into the walk-in cooler in the back of the store.

"You need to take the trash out of the cooler," she orders as I pass.

I drop the maple in the cooler, step into the very back—and into three inches of icy water—and grab two soaked bags of trash. As I'm carrying the bags to the front, Carlos, who is standing on one of the wooden tables to my right, asks me to take a bale of magnolia that he is holding.

I place the bags of trash to my side so I don't completely block the only pathway through the store, a movement that takes anywhere from one to two seconds. I mention the elapsed time because such details are necessary to appreciate the extent to which Helen monitors our activity. "Wake up and help!" she yells, upset at the fraction of a second that I needed to position the heavy bags of sopping trash. As I'm carrying the magnolia out I hear her repeat the call for me to "wake up!" I wonder if she is on speed.

In the afternoon I feel fortunate when Helen orders me to accompany Lucas on a large walking delivery to a store on Twenty-eighth Street. The delivery includes boxes of lemon leaves and moss and bales of magnolia, which we place on a large dolly. The dolly, however, keeps wanting to swerve right—into oncoming traffic—so we have to walk slowly, and when we arrive at the building we're forced to wait several minutes for the service elevator.

As we're walking back we find Helen angrily pacing toward us. "Where have you been?" she roars, coming at us with frightening speed. I half expect her to clock Lucas and me in the face. "It took you thirty minutes to make a delivery!" It hasn't been anywhere near thirty minutes. I could also mention the broken dolly and the elevator delay, but instead follow Lucas's lead and stay silent. She turns and, now nearly running, heads back to the store. Lucas curses her in Spanish.

"He's crazy . . . she's crazy. I don't know why you want to work here. If I was an American—if I had papers—I would

move on to something else." He's been at the shop for several years and, like the other Latino workers, he is undocumented.

I have to admit that the possibility of a quick exit has already entered my mind. Yesterday evening, as I lay exhausted on the couch and recounted the day, Daniella said that she didn't see how I'd last one month—much less the two months I set as my goal for each occupation. I was starting to wonder that myself. By now I knew that I could handle hard physical labor and had learned to put my head down and grit through tough shifts. But what I wasn't accustomed to was the relentless verbal harassment *while* I worked. This was an entirely new experience, and it left me drained and feeling defeated.

BY 4:00 P.M. the store is closed and the workers have gathered inside, drinking Coronas and trying to figure out what to do on this Friday afternoon. After an eleven-hour day without a break I'm exhausted and ready to head home, but I'm waiting in the doorway of the office. Helen is sitting in the cramped space with another woman, evidently the bookkeeper. At Helen's desk is a checkbook, in her hand a pen. "I'm having a problem because we didn't decide on how much to pay you." She sighs, grimaces, and sighs again, as if this is a burden I ungraciously placed on her shoulders. I've been standing in the doorway for at least two minutes, watching her agonize over my payment.

"A lot of the time you look lost, like you don't know what to do." She continues to finger the checkbook. Finally she writes out \$150 for my 21.5 hours. That's less than \$7 an hour; minimum wage in New York is \$7.15. "Maybe if it was the summertime . . ."

I start to realize that I'm being fired. "I'm all set to come in tomorrow, just tell me what time," I say, trying to change the direction of the dialogue. "I'm still learning, but I'm getting it."

"But I can tell that you are not made for this work." Helen looks over at the bookkeeper as if for assurance. "You're like a happy chicken out there. Always smiling."

What the fuck is a happy chicken? I leave the question unasked. "That's just how I am. It doesn't matter what I'm doing, I'm going to try and enjoy it." She shakes her head slowly.

"If it was summertime and slower maybe we could use you."

Now I'm shifting from shock to anger. "How am I supposed to know everything? It might seem like common sense to you and Tony but I've been here only two days. When I started I didn't even know what a magnolia tree looked like."

She shakes her head again. "It's not just the magnolia trees. If you don't know something, you should ask Tony."

Hysterical. What world is this woman living in? I quickly learned that asking Tony a question—any question—was useless. He ignored my questions; only once did he actually answer. Yesterday afternoon he told me to sweep trash into a bag. I did, and then made the mistake of asking where he wanted the trash placed.

"What should you do with the trash?" he asked. "You should call UPS and have them pick it up. Come on, mister—common sense!"

"You must know that Tony doesn't answer questions," I tell Helen. I consider reciting a list of the responses Tony has given me—beginning with the UPS anecdote—but can already sense the futility of arguing with her.

"You just don't fit in here. You can call Tony tomorrow and see what he says." I stand up, wanting to curse her out. Instead I walk away, tell the workers I've been fired—they are all equally incredulous—and bike home. I call Tony the next day and plead to be rehired, but he doesn't budge.

OVER THE WEEKEND I process the two-day experience. After surviving in lettuce fields and a poultry plant, I certainly didn't expect to be fired from a flower shop of all places. It was difficult to explain the firing to friends. Why, they wondered, would this store—in violation of so many labor laws—even hire

Why do you think he got fired at the flower shop?

me? And once they decided to hire me, and saw that I was a diligent employee, why let me go so soon? It would have been one thing had I loafed or talked back. But I worked *hard* in the shop. I held my tongue when yelled at; I learned to remain silent and keep my eyes down when Tony or Helen went off. I didn't even complain about not having a lunch break, or ask for gloves to protect my hands. When I was given a task I did it, as quickly as possible. On my second day another new worker showed up, from Ecuador. I helped him out as much as I could, but he was having an even more difficult time than I in keeping up. This man, I later learned, kept the job.

The issue, I came to believe, wasn't about "work ethics" or "following instructions" or any other concrete criticism a boss might make. It was about power and submission. Tony and Helen, the rulers of their little fiefdom, had a very particular notion of how a worker ought to comport themselves. They should hang their heads, look miserable, and extract very little enjoyment out of the experience. In my case, they were mostly successful: I hated being at the shop. But I still did my best to keep up a friendly banter with coworkers and maintain an incongruous smile on my face throughout much of the day. It was a means to mentally distance myself from the place, to assert some small measure of levity into an environment that felt like a sweatshop. While I was on the clock they owned me—as they did everyone else—but my "happy chicken" antics evidently made this sense of ownership less secure. What if the other workers started smiling? That could be dangerous.

IN 2007 THE Brennan Center for Justice, a progressive think tank, published a report on the unregulated economy in New York City. Although the underground economy is vast, they wrote, it is "a world of work that lies outside the experience and imagination of many Americans":

It is a world where jobs pay less than the minimum wage, and sometimes nothing at all; where employers do not pay overtime for 60-hour weeks, and deny meal breaks that are required by law; where vital health and safety regulations are routinely ignored, even after injuries occur; and where workers are subject to blatant discrimination, and retaliated against for speaking up or trying to organize.¹

I found low wages and grueling conditions in Yuma and Russellville, and judging the work by degree of difficulty alone, the flower shop was an "easier" job. I wasn't stooped over in the sun or lifting and dumping tons of chicken breasts. But there is something qualitatively different about my short-lived stint in the flower district. They didn't pay overtime or grant lunch breaks—and paid me less than the minimum wage—but these are not the abuses I will remember. What leaves a lasting impression is the incessant string of accusatory comments, the assumption that we, as workers, merited zero respect. In sum, I will remember being in an environment where the workers were treated as chattel—a more difficult phenomenon to quantify with statistics than wages, but a key component of the work experience for many undocumented immigrants. Just as certain occupations are physically unsafe, certain workplaces are psychologically unhealthy (often, of course, they are both). On some level, then, I ought to be grateful to Tony and Helen for granting me direct access to a world hidden to most Americans—if only for a brief period. But gratitude isn't the first word that springs to mind.

And either way, Tony and Helen are now behind me. I've been fired twice in the last three months, and I'm back where I started: in need of a job.

Translating Power!



CHAPTER 12

Less than a week after getting fired at the flower shop, I'm sitting in the lounge of a Mexican restaurant that I'll call Azteca, flipping through the most recent issue of *Portfolio*. The magazine's placement on the table is clearly a status signifier: Azteca aims to be the kind of place that people who read *Portfolio* go to eat, the sorts of folks who, even in an economic downturn, will gladly shell out \$14 for an order of guacamole.

After a weekend spent recovering from the flower shop, I spent the first part of the week visiting another half-dozen restaurants, leaving my name and number with noncommittal managers. Azteca holds some promise, because Daniella saw a listing on Craigslist for various positions, including dishwashers and delivery workers. A manager named Greg, wearing a sleek dark suit, invites me to join him at a table in the bar area. Six feet tall and with closely cropped gray hair, he gives a cursory glance over my application and offers me a job in delivery. "We're adding more workers now 'cause we're going to get slammed soon, once we

sign up for Seamless Web." Seamless Web, he explains, will allow customers to place delivery orders online.

"I could see you becoming the delivery team leader," he tells me. Thus far, I've shaken his hand and said hello.

"Thanks," I say, not knowing how else to respond.

He nods. "It will be nice to have someone who speaks English. I try to tell people things and they can't understand me." Ah, there's my leadership quality.

Greg doesn't ask many questions during the short interview, or seem surprised that I am interested in doing a job that is normally done by immigrants. He asks briefly about my work experience, and I tell him that I'm coming from a nearby flower shop—"It didn't work out so well"—and have done a variety of nonprofit work for my trusty reference, Artemio. Neither seems to raise any red flags. In fact, once I've accepted the job, Greg is too distracted to focus on the interview; his eyes dart around the mostly empty restaurant, giving the sense that he's got important work left undone. He tells me to come back tomorrow with my Social Security card and driver's license. "Once we get that, you will have a day-long orientation and trail a person for two days." Like the flower shop, there is no discussion of pay, although they do check my license and Social Security card.

The following day Greg is out, but a young Latina at the hostess station is expecting me. I follow her through the double doors of the kitchen, where a handful of people are chopping vegetables, and down a flight of stairs to a small office. She copies my documents and hands me an orientation packet, which includes photos of the thirty or so meals that Azteca delivers. I'm to bring the packet for my first shift, and show up wearing all black. While in training I'll earn \$7.50 an hour but won't get to keep any tips. After the training is over, my pay will be \$4.60 an hour and I'll

split the tips with the other workers. This sounds low to me, even for a position that receives tips, but that evening I learn it is New York's minimum wage for delivery workers.

"Greg mentioned I was supposed to go to an orientation somewhere," I tell her before leaving. Orientations, as I learned in Russellville, can be inadvertently instructive. "Do you know anything about that?"

"He said that?" She shrugs and picks up the phone. "I don't think the delivery boys have to go to the orientation, because you're just . . . the delivery boys." She's on the phone for a few minutes. "No, you don't have to go. Greg says come back tomorrow at five to start your training."

ON THE MORNING that I am to begin work, the *New York Times* publishes another article by Steven Greenhouse that catches my eye: "For \$2-an-Hour Restaurant Deliverymen, a \$4.6 Million Judgment."

The story involves a group of workers from Saigon Grill, a Vietnamese restaurant with locations on the Upper West Side and in the West Village (the West Village location is not far from Azteca). I already knew that there had been a boycott of the restaurant—complete with noisy protests that certainly scared away a few customers—along with a lawsuit against its owners, Simon and Michelle Nget. The *Times* reported that a federal judge, Michael H. Dolinger, had ruled in favor of thirty-six workers—all Chinese immigrants—finding that over an eight-year period they regularly worked thirteen-hour days, six days a week, for less than \$2 an hour. Along with back pay, the judge awarded the deliverymen substantial damages, citing the fact that they were illegally fined up to \$200 by the restaurant for such crimes as letting the door slam behind them as they rushed out. "At a minimum, Simon

Nget and Michelle Nget showed no regard whatsoever for legal requirements in connection with their wage policies,” Dolinger concluded.

As a result of the lawsuit, a woman with Justice Will Be Served, a group that organizes restaurant workers, said that some businesses, fearful of another high-profile boycott, had already increased wages. It was a remarkable ruling: From earning \$2 an hour, a number of the deliverymen were awarded more than \$300,000 apiece. One of the workers, Yu Guan Ke, said that the first thing he would do with the money was purchase health insurance for his family. “It was worth the fight because we were treated badly for so long,” he said. “I never imagined we would receive so much money.”

When I arrive at Azteca, Greg shows me how to clock in using a computer touch screen—my ID number is 6905—and gives me a quick tour of the kitchen. The delivery area includes a counter space and sink, and is on the immediate right after walking through the swinging doors from the restaurant floor. A short man with spiky black hair stands at the counter making guacamole in a stone bowl. His left arm ends at the elbow, an apparent birth defect, but the lightning-quick speed with which he slices the avocado and stirs in spoonfuls of tomatoes and onions is truly impressive. “This is Guillermo,” Greg says, introducing me to the senior delivery worker, whose name is not, in fact, Guillermo. (Names are a challenge for Greg; he will call me “Gable” for the first several weeks. Here in the book I’ll follow Greg’s lead and stick with Guillermo.)

The kitchen is pretty quiet at the moment, as it’s too early for dinner. A long grill and stovetop run along the rear wall, where two cooks stand and chat in Spanish. In the far corner is the dishwashing station, where I can see the outline of a man behind a wall of steam. Opposite the delivery counter is the dessert and

salad area. As I take in the scene, Greg rattles off a list of things to know while waving his arms about the kitchen—hang jackets here, get sodas from there, receipts print downstairs—at a pace that seems designed to confuse.

I follow Greg past the food preparation counters to the exit door, which leads down a corridor and onto the street that runs behind Azteca. This is how I am to come and go from deliveries. Near the exit is a set of stairs that leads to a small storage room. Leaning against the stairs is a large black bike with a basket attached to the handlebars, which Greg says I’m to use; another mountain bike, whose paint has been partially stripped, is propped against a wall. “The very first thing you do when you arrive is make sure you’re stocked up on containers for the night,” Greg explains. “All the containers you’ll need are up these stairs. Once you’ve got the containers stocked, fill up at least ten bags of chips. You’ll be fucked if you don’t get those ready before the rush.”

Back at the station, Greg hands over a set of keys for the bike lock. “Your main tasks tonight are to watch how the kitchen works and study the menu,” he says.

“Excuse me, *niñas*,” says a stocky man, balancing a tray of food over his head with one hand and grabbing a collapsible stand leaning against the counter. He just called Greg and me girls. The man, with a shaved head and puffy nose, brushes past us and sends the double doors flying open with a vigorous front kick. I make a mental note to enter the kitchen carefully.

“Fucking asshole,” Greg says. “Okay, you’re set. Any questions, ask Guillermo.” He leaves, following the trail of the karate kid.

There’s another person standing next to Guillermo. Rafael is also in training—this is his third day—and at six feet he towers over most of the kitchen workers. He grew up in the Bronx and is of Dominican descent. “Didn’t ever think I’d be doing this,” he tells me. The economic slowdown caused his employer, a marketing

firm, to slash his hours, and he came across the opening on Craigslist as well. "I told myself that I'd give this two weeks," he says, sounding doubtful. "It was the only job I could find. Getting really hard to make an honest dollar out here—be so much easier to just sell drugs."

"Delivery!" yells a heavyset white woman—the only non-Latino in the kitchen besides me. Guillermo walks over to her and grabs the ticket.

"Since it's your first night, let me give you a word of warning about Greg's bike—the black one," Rafael says. "I call that thing the catapult. First night I was here, take out my very first delivery. Food is in the basket and I hit this little pothole and the containers go flying into the street. Had to come back and take out another order. If you're riding the catapult, make sure to hold the food in the basket with one hand."

Guillermo waves me over. The delivery is for chicken tacos, mole enchiladas, and guacamole. Stacks of containers are on a shelf above the delivery counter; he grabs a container with three compartments for the tacos and a circular one for the enchiladas, placing them on a shelf near the cooks. "You have to watch to make sure they're cooking your order," he instructs. "They like to forget our orders. If it's taking too long you have to tell Becky." He motions to the white woman.

Now that the delivery containers are ready for the cooks, Guillermo grabs two plastic bowls and heads to a station to dish out rice and beans, adding a sprinkling of white cheese onto the beans and cilantro atop the rice. "Enchiladas always get a side of *arroz y frijoles*," he says. "If you forget that, people will call and complain. They'll complain too if you forget tortillas." He puts the rice and beans on the delivery counter and grabs a piece of tin-foil. I follow him across the kitchen to a grill, where two women are making tortillas by hand. "Each order of tacos comes

with four tortillas—and four more for the guacamole." He reaches for a metal cylinder that contains a stack of steaming tortillas. One of the tortilla women turns and lightly smacks his hand.

"Don't you rob me!"

Smiling, Guillermo snatches the tortillas. "They're mine now." He crinkles the foil around them. "For the guacamole you need red and green salsas—those are in the fridge over there—and a bag of chips."

Once I've grabbed the salsas from the fridge and a bag of chips from below the counter, Rafael walks me through a guacamole tutorial. On the counter, four small glass bowls sit in a metal pan filled with ice; the bowls contain chopped jalapeño peppers, onions, cilantro, and tomatoes. Next to the pan is a ceramic bowl of salt and a cylinder that holds several knives and spatulas. Rafael grabs a *molcajete* and *tejolote* from a sink—a traditional Mexican stone version of the mortar and pestle—and adds a small scoop of jalapeños along with a spoonful of onions and cilantro and a teaspoon of salt. "Now the fun part." He grinds the mix with the pestle until it forms a green paste, then cuts an avocado in half and places the pit to the side. "Hold on to that—we put it in the guacamole at the end. Supposedly it keeps it fresh." He slices up the avocado, scoops the pieces into the molcajete with a spoon, and adds more salt, onions, and cilantro, along with two scoops of tomatoes. Once it's mixed together he dumps the guacamole into a plastic bowl, plops the pit into the middle of the serving, and snaps on a lid. "That's it. One avocado, fourteen bucks."

By now the tacos and enchilada are ready. Guillermo shows me how to pack the order: tacos on the bottom, then the enchilada, then rice and beans, then guacamole and tortillas and salsa, and finally the bag of chips is stuffed down one side to keep things from moving around. I'm starting to realize how easy it could be to overlook an item: This isn't even a big order.

Rafael volunteers to take the food out, asking and receiving permission to use Guillermo's mountain bike instead of the catapult. He returns fifteen minutes later with scraped hands. "This fucking asshole was walking across the street with a red light," he tells me as he hangs up his jacket. "I know he saw me, but he just kept walking—didn't even try to move." Rafael tugged too hard on the front brake and went face first over the handlebars. Luckily he had already made the delivery and only scraped his hands. He heads to the bathroom to clean up.

"Delivery!" This time I pick up the ticket from Becky: tacos with baby goat meat and an order of guacamole. With Guillermo's guidance I fumble through my first guacamole experiment. He packs the meal and I'm off on my first delivery, to Seventh Avenue and Twenty-seventh Street.

DESPITE INITIALLY STRIKING me as a decent guy, I quickly identify two reasons to believe that Greg wants his deliverymen to be killed. The first is the uniform. I am wearing, as ordered: black socks, black shoes, black pants, black T-shirt, black button-up long-sleeve shirt, and a black windbreaker (the windbreaker is provided by the restaurant). This all-black ensemble makes Azteca's by far the coolest, most quintessentially New York delivery team in Manhattan. At night, it also makes us nearly invisible. On my first trip out I notice that many deliverymen from other restaurants have been given florescent yellow vests, with reflective tape stitched across the front and back. Some even have front lights and bells, as required by law. Safer, sure, but not nearly as sophisticated.

The second dangerous item is the bike itself, a Raleigh that on closer inspection turns out to be a beach cruiser. I stick the bag of food into the basket and walk the bike down a ramp to the street. As soon as I slide onto the seat I realize that I'm in for a completely new experience, despite having cycled throughout New York City for years. It is easily the heaviest bike I've ever ridden—probably

weighing more than fifty pounds—and has chopper-style handlebars that are three feet wide, completely erasing a bike's normal mobility advantage. As I wobble down the street in the bike lane, cars feel like they're inches away. Nearing the first intersection I hit a slight bump and the catapult leaps into action, launching the bag into the air; thankfully the order lands back in the basket. Choosing to steer with one hand while holding the food down in the basket, I come to a red light and press back on the pedals—the bike is equipped with only coaster brakes. Unaccustomed to the distance needed to halt such a boat, I skid through the crosswalk, narrowly dodging a pedestrian who shoots me an angry look. Two minutes on the catapult and I already understand why, of the thousands of crappy delivery bikes I have seen crowding Manhattan's streets, I have never seen anyone, anywhere, rolling along on a beach cruiser.*

Using my own bike, I could easily have made the trip in five minutes, but the girth of the catapult forces me to wait several times with the traffic on Sixth Avenue, as I'm unable to wind around cars crowding the bike lane. More than ten minutes after leaving the restaurant I finally arrive at the corner building and lock the bike to a scaffolding post. What seems to be an unremarkable structure transforms as I pass beneath an archway and enter a long courtyard. I initially believe that the gentle sounds of splashing water are being piped in to induce a sense of peace, until I notice that the entire right wall is an illuminated waterfall. Inside the lobby—which feels like it belongs to a hotel—a large Jackson Pollack-inspired painting hangs on the wall, and I get in

* I later look up the bike on the Internet, hoping to learn its weight. While that fact is not revealed, I discover that the bike is called the "Special." The company writes, "Cruising on one of these, you can't help but feel exceptional." Perhaps on a boardwalk; in New York City, it only feels exceptionally stupid.

line behind three other deliverymen at the security desk. When it's my turn I give the guard the apartment number, he makes a call, and I'm allowed up.

A woman who looks to be in her early twenties, evidently a frequent customer, answers the door. "New delivery guy?"

"Yeah, just started." I hand over the food. She signs the bill and closes the door. On the way down I check the tip—\$5. Not too bad for a \$30 meal. It's official: I'm a deliveryman.

When I arrive back at the kitchen, Guillermo and Rafael are standing at the delivery counter with their hands in their pockets. "Sloooow," Rafael says. "It's been like this every night I've been here."

By now the action in the kitchen has picked up. Becky, who I learn is playing the role of expeditor, stands in the center of the storm, next to a machine that prints out the orders. Her primary task as expeditor is to make sure the cooks know what the orders are, which she does by yelling, and to coordinate large orders so that they are served simultaneously. Three stocky men stand alongside Becky; these are the "runners," who ladle out sides of rice and beans, wipe the edges of the plates clean, and carry out the orders on trays—some quite massive—without breaking a sweat. I find the runners intimidating: One has a large scar running across his face, another calls us "*niñas*" each time he passes, and the third has a habit of hitting Guillermo in the shoulder whenever he gets the chance. Each time they leave for the front of the restaurant, they snatch up one of the folding stands—which they call *burros*, or donkeys—that are leaning against the delivery counter. As a result, we're frequently in their way. All seem to take special pleasure in kicking the double doors with unnecessary force as they exit the kitchen.

While dodging the runners I focus my attention on the cooks. Two men grill meat while two women, farther down the line, heat

food in pans over a stovetop. When the food is ready they slide the dish on a shelf running above the counter, where it is kept warm by heat lamps. To the left of the cooks is another stovetop—the tortilla station—where two women roll corn meal into balls, flatten the balls with a metal presser, and place, flip, and remove the tortillas by hand over the heat.

"You getting all this?" Rafael asks.

"Kinda. I think."

"It's hard for me to remember everything 'cause of the stress—already forgot tortillas for one delivery. Too many people running around shouting."

"Yeah, I can see that." It's true that the kitchen has become a beehive of activity. Becky is yelling out orders and cooks are yelling back questions and waiters are wandering in complaining about customers ("Is it just me or was she a total *bitch*?") and burly guys are streaming past while warning us *niñas* to get out of the way. Still, it seems like a manageable place to work. Of course, I'm fresh from the flower shop, so just about anything seems preferable to the constant nagging of Tony and Helen.

"Delivery!" I grab the ticket from Becky: enchiladas, tuna salad, and guacamole. Fifth Avenue between Twenty-sixth and Twenty-seventh. I place the enchilada container on the shelf and dish out rice and beans while Rafael starts mashing the ingredients in the molcajete. Ten minutes later I'm out the door. Ten minutes after that, I'm back at the station with a \$4 tip in my pocket. This isn't too bad.

By the end of the five-hour shift, I've made only three deliveries, for a grand total of \$13 in tips. The slow night doesn't much matter to me, since I don't keep any tips during training. "Use this time to learn as much as you can," Greg says as I'm preparing to leave. "Once we get Seamless Web hooked up, you won't have any time to stand around."

WHEN I ARRIVE at work the next evening, Greg is engaged in an animated conversation with Guillermo, laying out his vision for Seamless Web. I overhear Greg mention that we're going to have a computer, printer, and fax machine so that orders will come up at our station. "That way it prints right up—bam!—and you can just grab the containers and get moving," he says excitedly. "The fax machine will be used only if for some reason the Web isn't working—that way people can send us a fax directly with the order."

*language
is
a
barrier*

It was my impression that Guillermo, who told me he came to the United States from Mexico about six years ago, didn't speak much English. Indeed, as soon as Greg walks away he turns to me. "What did he say?" I do my best to explain the backup function of the fax machine. Guillermo looks nonplussed, saying, "I don't know how to use a computer, but it will be good if it means more deliveries."

Tonight, again, begins slowly. We stand at the counter for fifteen minutes, waiting for a delivery, until a man wearing a white apron and camouflage pants—who worked the grill yesterday—introduces himself as Armando, one of the head chefs. I ask how he rose through the ranks so quickly, as he looks young.

"I'm only twenty-five." He smiles. "Started as a grill cook, then sous-chef." (Totally ignorant about restaurant jobs and titles, I have to look up sous-chef to learn it is the assistant chef.) He tells me he's from Mexico City, which concludes our time for small talk: He orders us to measure out shredded cheese in the prep area.

The assignment—we fill small bags with 2.5 ounces of shredded cheese—is the sort of mindless work that leads to rambling conversations. I learn that Guillermo, who rents a room in the Queens neighborhood of Astoria, worked for five years at a large restaurant not far from his home, mostly as a prep cook. A fire has tem-

porarily shut down the restaurant, but it's set to reopen next week; Guillermo will then work both jobs. He hopes to return to his regular schedule in Queens, working from six in the morning to five in the afternoon, which will allow him to arrive at Azteca by six o'clock.

"Do you think the other place needs people?" Ideally, I'd like more hours; I'm scheduled to work six nights a week at Azteca, but that comes out to only about thirty hours. He shakes his head. Out of curiosity, I ask how much they pay.

"Three hundred a week, cash. That's pretty good, no?" Pretty good works out to roughly \$5 an hour, well below the minimum wage—and doesn't include overtime (as a prep cook, the minimum wage is \$7.15, not the \$4.60 of deliverymen).

"I know," he says when I point this out. "They have signs up that show the minimum wage." This is a new one: a workplace that posts labor laws while breaking them.

Long after we've finished weighing the cheese, two orders finally come in. Both have guacamole, which I prepare. Guillermo says I can borrow his bike—I'm done experimenting with the catapult—and I string the bags on either handlebar and set off (I can't use my own bike, because its drop-style handlebars don't allow for the hanging of bags).

Guillermo's bike, despite being adjusted for someone about half a foot shorter than me, is a much more pleasant ride. With his narrow handlebars I'm able to weave around traffic, and when I pull on the brakes I actually find myself immediately slowing down. Still, as I'm pedaling down Broadway, I can tell that I'll need time before I feel completely comfortable riding with food.

Both deliveries go to what I will learn are typical buildings for Azteca customers: brightly lit awnings, spotless lobbies complete with flat-screen televisions, doormen, and security desks. Also typical is that very few words are exchanged at the apartment doors.

"How's it going tonight?" I ask. "Good, and you?" "Good." "Good." "How much is it?" "Forty-five eighty-six." "Here you go, keep the change." "Thanks, have a good night." "You too."

Back in the kitchen I wander over to the tortilla ladies and introduce myself to Gloria, who has been at Azteca for several months and makes \$8 an hour. She stands over the stovetop the entire shift, churning out thousands of handmade tortillas each night. "This is exactly how I made them in Mexico," she says, showing me how to roll the corn meal into small balls that she then flattens with a metal press. "I just didn't have to do it all day."

Isolation = Unhirable to wage theft

A compact woman with long hair and a ready laugh, Gloria grew up in Cuautla, Morelos, just a few blocks from what was once the home of Emiliano Zapata. She came to the United States six months ago—her first time north of the border—at the age of forty-six. Soon after arriving she paid \$100 to an employment agency in Washington Heights, near the apartment she's sharing with her boyfriend, and was placed in a job cleaning houses. "The boss said he'd pay me \$7 an hour, but only gave me 6," she says, so she went back to the agency and was sent to Azteca. She knows very little about New York, beyond the subway route she takes to and from work, and her only contact is her boyfriend, whom she met in Cuautla.

In Cuautla, Gloria—a sweet-looking grandmother who may be just five feet—worked as a security guard for a hospital, earning two thousand pesos a month while sporting a .22 pistol on her waist. "It was such a pretty little thing," she says about the handgun in her high-pitched voice. She eventually became a cook at the hospital, but decided in early 2008—with encouragement from her boyfriend, who had already emigrated to New York—to come and join him. She flew from Mexico City to the border and endured an eight-day trek through Arizona, anticipating a glori-

ous reunion. Instead, she's starting to wonder if she wouldn't have been better off staying put.

"He's acting strange," is how she describes her boyfriend's behavior. Eventually she clarifies the statement: He's seeing other women and drinking too much. She can't imagine a future with the man he has become, but doesn't feel like she's in a position to break it off, as he's the only contact she has in the city. She has friends in the United States, but they all ended up in Los Angeles. "Maybe I'll go there," she says. "If someone would tell me where it is." ←

By the end of the shift I've made only five deliveries and rolled several hundred balls of corn meal for tortillas. My back isn't sore; my hands are perfectly functional. I could get used to this.

AND THEN COMES Saturday night, marking the official end of my honeymoon with delivery work. The first bad omen occurs before I even arrive at the restaurant. As I'm biking from my apartment it begins to drizzle and swiftly turns into a downpour. I haven't biked in the rain for some time—since Russellville, actually—and I've apparently forgotten that wet ground means slow down, because as I'm veering onto the sidewalk near the Manhattan Bridge, my tires slide out. I slam the right side of my body into the pavement but thankfully discover, once I recover from the accident, that I have avoided doing any serious damage to my body or bike.

Guillermo and Rafael are already at the kitchen when I arrive, with two delivery tickets hanging from the shelf and a third packed and ready to go. I clock in, do my best to wipe the dirt from my pants, and grab the three orders from the counter. Just as I'm walking out the door, Claudia, who takes the delivery orders over the phone, stops me. "The credit card didn't go through for the guy on Irving Place," she says. "Make sure he calls back while

you're there." I scribble a note on the ticket and head back into the rain.

In my eight years of cycling around New York City, my general strategy in dealing with cars is to avoid making direct contact. If someone cuts me off, I'll slam on the brakes and mutter to myself. If a driver is moving into the bike lane, I'll slow down and let him take it over. But when one spends five or six hours a night pedaling back and forth in a very congested area, there quickly comes a time when passivity and avoidance are no longer sufficient if one hopes to survive. This is when being a deliveryman becomes a contact sport.

I hit that point riding down the right side of Third Avenue with the three orders of food. A black town car, driving at the same speed that I'm cycling, starts edging into my path. The driver either doesn't see me through the rain or sees me and considers my presence a trivial matter. In response, I drift slightly rightward; moments later, so does the car. By now I can't move any more to the right without launching my body into a row of parked cars. I glance backwards, preparing to slow down, and see a yellow cab bearing down from behind, ready to make a turn at the upcoming light. As the town car continues to list right, I take the only appropriate action and slap the palm of my hand on the passenger-side window. The driver looks over and gives a slight nod of the head, moving several inches back into the lane, as if this is his normal means of determining correct driving position: Wait for the frantic strike. Although the encounter speeds up my heart rate, it also gives me an odd sense of confidence and control. I can slap these cars around if they get out of line.

The first order, on Third Avenue, is for \$55. The building is a fourth-floor walk-up, and since I've got two more deliveries to make, I take the steps two at a time. By the time I knock on the

door I'm panting and soaking wet. A man comes to the door. "It's raining, huh?" Behind him a movie is playing on a massive flat-screen TV.

"Yep, just started coming down pretty hard." He signs the credit card bill and hands it back to me, which I pocket without looking. As I'm huffing back down the stairs I take out the bill. He's left me a \$2 tip.

My next stop is at 1 Irving Place. According to the ticket, it is near Fifteenth Street. I ride down Irving until it ends at Fourteenth Street, but don't see the address, so backtrack to Sixteenth Street. Nothing. Because it's raining, there aren't many people on the street, but I eventually stop a woman walking her dog, who points to a large awning halfway down Fifteenth Street. As I get closer I can see that it's the address I'm looking for.

One Irving Place is by far the largest building I've delivered to thus far. I take one elevator that runs to the seventh floor, then walk through a long hallway, passing a number of people wearing workout gear—the building has a pool and health club—and take another elevator up one of four towers. The man who answers the door has short gray hair, is wearing a suit, and continues speaking rapidly into his cell phone about what sounds like some sort of business deal. I explain politely over his conversation about the credit card number not going through.

"I knew that idiot on the phone would mess up," he snarls. "Look at this"—he holds the bill up to my face—"She didn't even spell my name right! Fucking idiot. No, not you," he says into his phone. "I've got a delivery here. Hold on." He puts the phone into his pocket.

"Sorry about that, sir. Could you just call her back and give—"

"Forget it, I'll pay cash. How much?" I tell him. "Okay, here's the money. Give yourself a five-dollar tip out of it."

"Thanks. I think this is right." I hand over his change. He flips through the bills.

"Hey, someone graduated high school," he says before closing the door.

Next up after Mr. Dickhead is a penthouse apartment on Eleventh Street. I check my watch—I've got six minutes to go if I want to make the forty-five-minute window that Greg has said is our goal. I ride east along a congested Fourteenth Street, take a left on Fifth Avenue, and am standing at the door of the penthouse with a minute to spare. The man who answers has a friendly smile, and I can hear his wife in the background, yelling to the kids that dinner is ready. He leaves me a \$12 tip, my largest so far.

Back at the kitchen, three more bags are packed near the exit door and ready to be delivered. I snatch them up, noticing that the catapult is gone—poor Rafael—and am off. Since the buildings are nearby, I'm back within twenty minutes. "I forgot tortillas at Eleventh Street," Guillermo tells me, handing over a small bag. "Can you run them over?"

"Anything else to take?"

"No, not right now."

When I ring the buzzer at Eleventh Street, a woman's voice shouts angrily at me through the intercom. "It's too late! We've already finished our meal—*thank* you!" Since I haven't even said anything, I realize that the building must have a hidden camera (good to know: wouldn't want to be picking my nose at the door). By now I'm ready for a quick break and a few tortillas, and take a seat on steps beneath the awning of a nearby building. I open the bag and discover that, in apology, the restaurant has included a large piece of cheesecake (value: \$8.50) along with the tortillas. While the rain falls around me and people scurry for shelter, I combine the two items, enjoying four cheesecake tacos.

By the end of the night we've completed twenty-three deliveries. Rafael, riding the slow catapult, took six; Guillermo, responsible for packing, took one; I dropped off sixteen. Together we make nearly \$100 in tips, which Guillermo splits evenly with Rafael and me, even though, since this is my last day of training, I'm not supposed to see any of it.



CHAPTER 13

I've worked in two restaurants before coming to Azteca. The first was a relaxed pizza joint in San Jose, California, where I made deliveries in the company pickup. The second was a line cook position at a ski resort in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where the general goal of the staff, most in their early twenties and with zero interest in things culinary, was to have a good time (my coworkers and even one manager were often drunk, or stoned, or both). Over holiday breaks the lodge could become very busy, but the hectic pace was leavened by the fact that we lacked proper supervision and so could often do as we pleased. One friend, after receiving a complaint that he had overcooked a hamburger, reached over the grill, grabbed the patty from the customer's plate, and slung it against a wall.

Neither experience was especially good training for the culture of a busy, upscale restaurant. Picture the atmosphere of a rush-hour subway station in New York City, late July: Folks are dashing

around, muttering to themselves or yelling at others, oozing sweat and stress and in no mood for pleasantries. I've seen a few episodes of those reality cooking shows, where celebrity chefs berate the cooks and the cooks soon turn on each other, acting as if lives hang in the balance. I figured they were over-the-top. They're not.

One night, during a busy stretch, an Ecuadorian waiter named José comes to Becky with a question. Becky, playing the role of expediter, is busy. So Becky says, "José, get the fuck out of my face." José stays put, hoping to get a word in. "I need a tuna salad, *now!*" Becky screams. "¡Atún!" (Becky has picked up some Spanish while in the kitchen.) "I need tuna!" shouts the salad preparer in Spanish; the salad is already on a plate, awaiting a grilled tuna from a cook. "The tuna is fucking coming!" yells a cook, standing over a grill jammed with chicken, skewers of shrimp, salmon, and—yes—a tuna steak. Becky turns to grab a bottle of sour cream from the fridge to squeeze onto an enchilada, in the process bumping into José. "José, I can't take your shit right now! Where the fuck is my tuna salad? I need tuna!"

The stress level reaches its highest point when the restaurant hosts large parties, which is often. This is when the screaming and fighting that goes on between cooks and the expediter, or servers and cooks, or runners and servers, or—when there's a true crisis—between just about everyone at the same time, sounds like it will erupt into a full-scale brawl. The beads of sweat, always present on foreheads, start rolling down cheeks. Faces usually pink from the heat turn crimson. But once the rush passes, after the fourteen house salads and five tortilla soups and sixteen racks of lamb have been sorted out and served, the people in the kitchen quickly put the conflict behind them. There is an understanding, it seems, that at rush hour the kitchen is a war zone, and that people behave differently in war zones—so don't take it personally. It's definitely not an environment for everyone, but there's something attractive about the lack of pretense and brutally direct

communication. Of course, my ability to enjoy the environment is certainly helped by the fact that as a delivery worker, I'm usually not a target.

Most nights Becky plays expediter, setting the emotional tone of the kitchen. Becky is fun to be around. She has perhaps the foulest mouth I've ever encountered, shares my interest in 1980s punk music, and tells me that she can't stand *Top Chef* because it's "full of pretentious assholes." In her late twenties, she dropped out of culinary school and works between sixty and seventy hours a week while raising a young son. In the kitchen she is fearless: She gets into shouting matches with managers, grill cooks, even the executive chef. One night Azteca has a VIP customer—a vice president of operations for the restaurant chain, or some such title. "We have some feedback," the general manager, a woman given to wearing skintight dresses, tells Becky. "He says it's too salty."

"Fuck that!" Becky shouts. She tastes the sauce. "There's hardly any fucking salt in it! What a fucking dick!" It's hard not to enjoy watching her work.

The one person who seems completely unaffected by the environment is Pancho, a thirty-four-year-old runner from the state of Puebla who has long black hair tied back in a ponytail.* "He says he's from Mexico, but he seems like a total California surfer dude," is how one of the servers puts it to me. Even at the height of kitchen craziness, Pancho always seems to be playing practical jokes. He'll pat Guillermo in a friendly manner, leaving a sticker on his back that stays on through an entire shift, or he'll drop an avocado into the hood of my windbreaker, which I'll discover when I flip it up as I head out the door. When I return from a delivery with a story of

* After working in lettuce fields and a chicken plant, where every employee—even the completely bald—was ordered to wear hairnets, it is curious to see that in restaurants, which serve food directly to consumers, plenty of long hair is allowed to dangle over plates.

avocados falling from the sky, he scrunches up his face in determination and says, "You know what, I'll look into who did that."

Across the kitchen from the unflappable Pancho is his polar opposite, a lanky nineteen-year-old cook who left Mexico, he tells me, because his hometown in Guerrero had grown too dangerous due to the drug trade. Called Flaco (skinny) by the other workers, his face seems to have frozen some time ago into a petulant scowl. It doesn't matter what Flaco is doing—grilling up an order of chicken, sucking down a Coke through a straw—he retains the same "what the fuck are you looking at?" expression. When he walks to get a pan of beans, he struts slowly; when someone criticizes something he does, he looks like he's going to explode. Like many young men, he hopes to project an image of toughness, but what comes across instead is a very vulnerable and sensitive boy, far from home and making his way in a foreign country. It also doesn't help that he weighs about 130 pounds and looks like he could be in junior high.

During my second week a stocky white man wearing remarkably unattractive black-and-white pants replaces Becky as expeditor.

"What the fuck is this?" the man shouts at Flaco. He's holding a plate of food. "Is this how we do rice, *niño*?" Flaco shoots him a look of total disgust and shrugs, remaining silent. "What? What!" The man walks over. "I said, is *this* how we do rice, *niño*?" He dumps the yellow rice back into a metal container. After several more seconds of uncomfortable staring, Flaco finally stirs a bunch of greens into the container of rice—perhaps cilantro, I'm not sure—and puts a serving on the plate. "I will stop calling you *niño* when you start acting like a man," the man with the piebald pants says.

I turn to Guillermo. "What was that about?"

"He's the head chef." Guillermo looks pleased; he often complains to me that Flaco purposely forgets delivery orders, waiting until Becky reminds him.

I'm able to stand around observing the goings-on in the kitchen because after the rush of Saturday the next few shifts are unbelievably slow—so slow that I wonder if Greg has made a mistake in hiring me. With Guillermo coming from his second job in Queens, I'm now arriving an hour before him, so it's my responsibility to set up the station. For the first twenty minutes I fill bags of tortilla chips, replenish the avocado supply from downstairs, fill the glass bowls with tomatoes, jalapeños, cilantro, and onions from the walk-in fridge, and stock needed containers from upstairs. By 5:30 p.m. I'm ready with no place to go.

I soon learn that standing at the delivery counter ensures that I'll keep bumping into the runners as they move in and out of the kitchen. Aside from Pancho, whose lighthearted demeanor I appreciate, my general desire is to steer clear of the runners whenever possible. Felix, who has a prominent facial scar and gravelly voice, is impossible to read. Sometimes he seems to be joking when he tells me to "move it," but other times I'm not so sure; I figure the less he tells me to move it, the better. And Isaac, a broad-shouldered man who refers to everyone on the delivery staff as little girls, is definitely someone I don't want to annoy.

Another reason to give room and respect to the runners is their propensity to purposefully punch people, usually each other. The first time I witnessed this I was convinced that Pancho, who was hit in the ribs by Isaac while hoisting a large tray over his head with one arm, would drop the order. But he simply proceeded onto the restaurant floor as if nothing had happened, and returned the favor to Isaac a few minutes later. On Pancho's prodding, I try to balance a tray holding only two plates overhead and barely get it back on the stand without the food sliding onto the floor. Yet the runners can literally run through a crowded kitchen with a full tray balanced high above their heads—often using only their fingertips—while absorbing body shots.

SKILL sets
that are NOT
recognized
compensation

*turnover
isles*

TO FILL THE downtime during the slow week—I make only fourteen deliveries over a three-day period—I take on a variety of jobs in the kitchen, from helping the dishwashers toss out the trash to pulling chicken meat from drumsticks and rolling tortilla balls. While assisting the back-of-the-house staff—all Latino immigrants—it doesn't take long to realize that Azteca suffers from a turnover rate that rivals the poultry plant, at least for the positions that don't receive tips.

Most of the prep cooks and dishwashers have paid storefront referral agencies in immigrant neighborhoods anywhere from \$100 to \$200 for the job, a common practice within the restaurant industry in staffing the less desirable positions. In recent years, the state attorney general has launched dozens of investigations into employment agencies, often finding that they violate laws by referring immigrant workers to jobs that pay less than the minimum wage. Some of the referred workers have been at Azteca for a few weeks, some a few months, but no one I speak to has a year under his or her belt, and many aren't planning on sticking around much longer. By far, the most disgruntled workers are the dishwashers. "They don't pay enough," says Alvaro, a middle-aged dishwasher from the Galapagos Islands, as we're rolling a heavy dumpster to the curb. Earning \$7.50 an hour, he has taken another low-paying job washing dishes at a restaurant called Chop't, and frequently works fourteen-hour days. "They have me running around all night, doing work that should be done by two people," he says. Sweat is trickling down his wide cheeks and his black mustache glistens under the streetlight. "And for what? At the end of the night I have earned almost nothing."

One of Alvaro's dishwashing partners, Antonio, also plans to leave soon. When I ask Antonio how much he makes, he tells me, "No good, no good." One night at the end of the shift I see him staring in concentration at his paycheck.

"Something wrong?"

"I'm missing hours." He tells me that he worked forty-four hours last week, but received payment for only forty hours. "They did that the week before, too," he mutters quietly. Hour shaving is a widespread practice in the restaurant industry; of the more than 500 workers surveyed by the Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York (ROC-NY), for its study "Behind the Kitchen Door," 59 percent reported not being paid overtime hours.²

"You should go downstairs and tell a manager," I say. He nods halfheartedly. "Really—if you worked forty-four hours then they should pay you for forty-four. I could even go down there and tell them in English."

He shakes his head. "I'm going to wait and see," he says before leaving. I hope to check in on the situation, but a few days later Alvaro informs me that Antonio quit. A new man takes his place, from a town near Mexico City. He paid a labor agency in Queens \$100; thus far, no one has told him how much he'll be making at Azteca. When he learns that Alvaro earns less than \$8 an hour, he tells me that he'll probably be gone soon. A week later, I strike up a conversation with a third dishwasher, Javier, in the locker room downstairs as we're changing. He also reports that he's being shorted hours each week, and though he says he might switch jobs, he would rather not complain directly to management, despite being one of the few back-of-the-kitchen staff I've met who has their immigration papers in order. * "If I need to, I'll just switch jobs," he tells me. "That's easier than starting a fight." ←

Which brings me to something else: There is a certain perversity to the wage scale of restaurant workers. The people earning the

* I later learn that this dishwasher is the uncle of Enrique, a friend of mine whose life I chronicled in my first book, *There's No José Here*. When I called Enrique, who worked as a dishwasher when he first arrived in New York, and told him about his uncle's payment problems, he scoffed. "Of course they don't pay all the hours," he said. "I worked sixty hours a week but was paid forty. That is nothing new."

least are the dishwashers, and they have the hardest jobs. They are stationed at one end of the kitchen, obscured behind an always-present wall of steam, coated in sweat and smeared with leftovers. When they emerge from the humidity, pushing heavy carts of clean dishes, they often receive glares, as they inevitably clog up the passageways as they unload plates and bowls. If restaurant kitchens are filled with people who are invisible to the general public, dishwashers are the most invisible. While servers and cooks and delivery people banter amongst themselves and call each other by name, the only time anyone notices the dishwashers is when they're in the way.

On the opposite end of the earning scale are the servers. In less expensive restaurants a server takes an order and returns to the table with the food. But at Azteca, as with most upscale restaurants, a server doesn't usually serve anything: They describe the specials, write down the orders, and plug the orders into a touch-screen computer. The task of serving falls on the shoulders of the runners. For this, servers can earn hundreds of dollars a night. Meanwhile, the people who prepare the food, cook the food, and clean the dishes make somewhere between \$7.50 and \$10.00 an hour. The wide gap in earnings between these two extremes is filled by the restaurant's "middle class," the runners, bussers, and baristas, who are tipped out by servers and seem to average anywhere from \$70 to well over \$100 a night. As a deliveryman, I suppose I'm part of the lower-middle class, earning more than dishwashers but much less than other tipped positions, while dealing with inclement weather and the dangers of the road.

At Azteca, the servers are generally a nice and funny crew, and in contrast to many upscale restaurants, they are quite diverse.*

* Azteca's diverse server staff is unusual for fine-dining establishments in New York City, which are usually segregated by race, with the high-paying positions of servers and bartenders filled almost exclusively by whites. In 2009, the Restaurant Opportunities Center of New

There are white and black and Latino servers, servers born in Ecuador and servers born in Queens. I have no bone to pick with servers; what I find confounding is the system of payment that exists throughout the restaurant industry. By what logic do servers receive tips, and runners receive tips, but not dishwashers or grill cooks? Each job is of comparable importance—whether or not the customer sees the face of the person performing it—as anyone who has received a dirty dish or undercooked meat can attest.

IT'S A RELIEF on slow nights when deliveries finally start rolling in sometime after seven o'clock and I'm able to escape the heat of the kitchen. By now Guillermo and I have reached a working agreement: He packs the orders and I make the deliveries using his bike. I'm glad to hand off the packing responsibilities, because even though my training ended some time ago, I still tend to forget obvious items.

On the streets I'm starting to spot trouble early in what can be a dangerous profession. A 2006 report published by the city found that an average of 23 cyclists were killed each year, with another 400 left seriously injured (the data lumps all cyclists together, and so precise figures on delivery workers aren't available). One of the most frequent dangers occurs when a passenger swings open a car door without looking. When this happens and a cyclist is passing within close range, he plows into the door at full speed, an experience called getting "doored." It happens to just about everyone who spends enough time on a bike—I've been doored twice—and

York published the results of a study in which equally qualified applicants—one white and one of color—applied for server positions at more than a hundred Manhattan restaurants. The white applicants were nearly twice as likely to receive a job offer. The report, "The Great Service Divide," is available online (as of April 30, 2009) at www.rocunited.org/files/greatservicedivide.pdf.

Race & Gender → The Restaurant Class System

what is the logic of Restaurant class system — or is it more than class?

Health & Safety & Delivery

it is as unpleasant as it sounds. The worst offenders are taxi passengers: People entering and leaving cabs can be very dangerous, behaving as if they are protected by a force field and not in the middle of a very busy street.

Being doored is one of the predictable dangers; what makes each delivery an adventure are the threats that pop up without warning. Riding along a dark stretch of Nineteenth Street, I hit a huge and invisible pothole. It's nearly as jarring as slamming into a curb, and though I'm able to avoid tumbling over the handlebars, the two orders I'm carrying rip through the bottom of the paper bags and go flying into the street. Containers of shrimp salad and goat tacos and duck breast and guacamole explode, ruining \$150 worth of food and ensuring that I'll be making two late deliveries to two upset customers.

Yet another danger to deliverymen, ironically but not surprisingly, are other deliverymen. Many have had little cycling experience before landing the job, and riding around Manhattan on a rickety bike loaded with food is a baptism by fire. Rafael, for instance, had never ridden in the city, and when I went out with him on an early delivery, it was plain that he had no idea what he was doing: He rode against traffic, ventured onto the sidewalk for no apparent reason, and nearly ran into two pedestrians. Of course, Rafael received zero training: Like all deliverymen, he was given an ungainly bike and an address and told to hurry up and go. "It's not rocket science," is how Greg described the work to me one night, with a flippancy that would be erased if he ever tried to make a delivery himself.

Rafael eventually becomes a safer cyclist, but with such a high turnover, there are always beginners on the streets, and over two months I hit three deliverymen who are riding the wrong way and have a handful of extremely close calls. The blogger BikeSnob NYC is exaggerating, but not by much, when he writes about certain rogue deliverymen:

I don't mean to begrudge anybody making a living by bike, and I certainly respect someone who makes a living in a manner as difficult as this. But the fact is, some of these guys are incredibly dangerous and will come at you in ways you'd never expect: from between parked cars; flying off curbs; head-on between two lanes of traffic; and leaping from rooftops and swinging from power lines like Paul Reubens did in *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* during the climactic Warner Brothers studio rampage scene.³

But while I'm occasionally spooked by someone pedaling at me ~~like~~ mad from the opposite direction, more often I feel a sense of camaraderie. At some intersections, waiting for the light to change, a team of four or five deliverymen, Latino and Asian, will gather (for whatever reason, it seems to be an entirely male occupation). Some wear rectangular heat-retaining backpacks, some hold pizzas in their baskets, but most use the low-tech method of dangling bags from the handlebars. As we stand and wait, it can feel like I'm a member of a biker gang, and when we zoom off, there are times, especially cruising down Broadway, that our numbers give us the confidence to take over two lanes, at least for a short while.

Now that I'm delivering food, I discover that it's very easy to strike up conversations with fellow deliverymen. Once when I worked on an article for which I needed to interview a deliveryman, I had approached dozens of people in the streets, but after I identified myself as a journalist, they were very hesitant to speak. It took several weeks to find an individual willing to share details about wages and working conditions. Now, whenever I bump into someone, whether we're taking the same elevator or waiting in a lobby, I find that people readily share information, and ask the same questions of me. (My conversations are only with Latino workers; I try conversing with several Asian men but none speaks English.)

What I learn, as far as deliverymen go, is that my minimum wage of \$4.60 an hour puts me in the highest income bracket. One Mexican man delivers for an Indian restaurant, and is paid \$25 in cash for a twelve-hour shift, which he works six days a week. On a good day he makes \$50 in tips. Another, who cooks and delivers for a pizza joint, gets \$4 an hour in cash and takes home between \$30 and \$40 in tips. He also works twelve-hour shifts, six days a week. A nineteen-year-old Ecuadorian I meet while locking up my bike just started at a Thai restaurant; at the end of each day he's given \$20 in cash, and earns an additional \$40 or so from tips. When I ask how they're able to survive on their income, the answer is always the same: They live in a small apartment with many others.

It quickly becomes obvious that I don't need to "investigate" the prevalence of illegal wages in the food delivery business: That's all there is. The "Behind the Kitchen Door" study of restaurant workers by ROC-NY found that 13 percent of respondents earned less than the minimum wage. For deliverymen, I'm willing to bet that number is more like 95 percent. Over the two months that I deliver food, I speak to perhaps fifty deliverymen about wages, and never meet another person who matches my princely wage of \$4.60 an hour, which runs counter to the claim that restaurants increased wages in response to the Saigon Grill decision. That Azteca has decided to comply with minimum-wage laws probably explains why they were willing to hire me. In terms of understanding why Azteca was willing to pay the minimum wage in the first place, the best I could figure was that since it is part of a small corporate chain operating in multiple states, they are more centralized, professionalized, and potentially vulnerable to large-scale lawsuits by workers.

ON THE JOB, I enter buildings that I would never otherwise set foot in, including many in the posh neighborhood of Gramercy

Park. They have doormen and security desks and sign-in protocols. Some require that I wear an ID badge around my neck (Hello, my name is FOOD DELIVERY). At times, guards accompany me into the elevator, even follow me to the resident's door to ensure nothing untoward happens during the transaction. Others tell me to leave the lobby and enter the building around the corner. "You use the service elevator"—as if my presence might somehow lower property values.

The city the residents have chosen to live in is noisy, dirty, and rowdy. Their apartment buildings are closely guarded refuges, offering multiple barriers to the unwashed masses, even small children. During the week leading up to Halloween, I see notices posted in various buildings that read something along the lines of: "Halloween is just around the corner! Happy Halloween! If you have people that you would like to allow up to knock on your door for treats, please inform the security desk within three days so we can put their names on our list!"

The people who get deliveries live in PUBLICS -

ON HALLOWEEN, as I set up the delivery station, Azteca's bar back, who assists the bartender, stops by to say hello. Raimundo is stocky and exceedingly polite—he calls me *caballero* (gentleman) instead of *güe* (sort of like dude)—and worked his way up from delivery. "Last year deliveries on Halloween were very slow," he says.

Greg stops in, and, as usual, his mind is on Seamless Web. "It's going to be up next Tuesday," he says.

My first delivery, which normally should take about ten minutes, is to an apartment on Thirteenth Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. As I cruise toward Sixth Avenue, the street becomes increasingly congested with foot traffic, all heading in the direction I'm pedaling. This should tell me something, but I keep plowing forward as the density increases, winding between groups

Delivery wages

* why do corporate chains always cheat the law?

of revelers decked out in costume. I manage to swerve around Fred Flintstone before finally dismounting and walking with the throng. I push my way to the front only to realize that the street is blocked off by barricades and police officers.

"Sorry, can't get across Sixth here," an officer tells me, sounding sympathetic to my situation: With two bags of food hanging from my handlebars, I must look pretty helpless. "I'd like to let you through, but if I do then I'm gonna have a hundred assholes screaming that they want across too." He tells me that because of the Halloween parade, Sixth Avenue is blocked all the way up to Twenty-third Street. To get to the apartment I have to go up ten blocks, west two blocks, and south ten blocks. Then, to get back to Azteca, I have to do the entire loop in reverse.

It would be a long detour on any night—I'm cycling an additional forty-four blocks—but when I turn around I am faced with thousands of people streaming to get close to the barricades so they can watch the parade. I begin to pick my way through the crowd, cursing myself for not remembering the parade (I'd watched it once before, after all). "It's a delivery guy!" a woman yells at me, impressed with her powers of observation. Other people join in. "Hey, delivery guy!" someone shouts to my left. I turn and look at the man, who is dressed as a marshmallow. *Hello, idiot*. "That's my delivery!" The marshmallow's buddies laugh hysterically at this witticism. "Watcha got for us?"

I finally make it through the dense throng and hop back on my bike, pedaling through a group of mimes playing tennis. I normally depend on Sixth Avenue to travel north, but since it's shut down, the only way to Twenty-third Street is to go against traffic on Fifth Avenue for ten blocks. I have a rule of thumb about going the wrong way—I'll do it for a maximum of three blocks; otherwise I'll schlep over to another avenue—but tonight I have little choice.

It proves to be an especially bad time to break my rule, because Fifth Avenue is a madhouse. The cars are bumper to bumper and

the bike lanes are clogged with drunken revelers spilling over from the sidewalk, along with horse-drawn carriages, which have relocated from their normal territory around Central Park. I pedal very slowly, nodding at a fellow deliveryman who passes me. He looks at me and shakes his head. Forced to stop every several hundred feet, it takes ten minutes to reach Twenty-third Street. From there I bike west to Seventh Avenue, then south to Thirteenth Street. At Seventh Avenue, a police barricade has shut down the street, making it accessible only to people who can prove they live on the block. I get in a long line to show the delivery receipt to a policeman. A man at the front of the line is telling the cop that he's recently moved and his license doesn't yet have his current address, which seems plausible, as people are constantly moving in and out of the city. The cop, though, has apparently been given strict orders, and doesn't let him through. Which leads, predictably, to a shouting match: Ever try telling New Yorkers they can't do something?

An older woman in front of me has a completely different story, explaining that she doesn't believe in carrying identification. The cop lets out a visible sigh, and seeing me with my bags and obvious business tells her to step aside for a moment. As he shoos me through, I hear the woman start to shout about living in a police state.

It's taken me forty-five minutes to arrive at the building, and by now I'm beginning to focus my anger on the true culprit, the customers who placed the order. As residents of the neighborhood, they know that Sixth Avenue is closed for the parade; as patrons of Azteca, they know that the restaurant is located on the *other* side of the parade. They must know, therefore, what I just endured to bring them a double order of guacamole and two enchilada dinners. What asshole would order food to be delivered on the one night when it is nearly impossible to do so?

A white man wearing khakis and a black pullover sweater answers the door. "Hey, what's it like out there?" he asks in a British accent.

I counter his friendliness with a stone face. "Crowded. There's a parade outside your door."

"Yeah, the parade—good fun!"

I hand over the food. "That's one way of looking at it."

"You said it—good fun!" I didn't say that. He signs the credit card receipt and passes me a \$10 tip, which softens my feelings somewhat.

On the long ride back, I make my first contact with a pedestrian—actually, part of a pedestrian's costume—when I bump into a large inflatable doll. The female doll belongs to a young man and has been tastefully affixed to his body so as to appear that he is on the receiving end of a blow job. Concerned that his creativity will go unnoticed, the man stands at the curb's edge, silently thrusting the doll into the street with his pelvis. It's hard to know what to make of the scene—for one thing, the guy is alone, and there's a certain workmanlike aspect to his thrusts—but I know what to do about the doll in my path, which is to land a sharp elbow and continue down Fifth Avenue.

Throughout the night I see men dressed as women, women dressed as men, adults dressed as babies, babies dressed as puppies, puppies dressed as criminals. With the election looming, many have chosen political motifs, and I can't help but notice that the Sarah Palins wandering the Manhattan streets are by far the most inebriated. It is this drunkenness, especially, of the Palins and others, that turns each trip from the restaurant into a test of reflexes. As anyone who has witnessed a spontaneous bar fight knows, people who are intoxicated tend to be unpredictable, especially when they're roaming in rowdy groups and dressed up as sumo wrestlers. They race each other down the bike lane, hide behind cars, dash into the street, and engage in all sorts of pointless activities fueled by the extra energy of excessive alcohol.

By eight o'clock I've grown weary and start taking more risks, careening through intersections and doing just enough to avoid

hitting pedestrians crossing against the light. The only contact I make is with a woman dressed, I believe, as Pippi Longstocking, who darts out from behind a car and into the bike lane. I slam on my brakes and veer into the street, but still gently clip her ankles. As I pass, she lets fly a violent shriek: "Fucker!" she screams at my back. "I was standing here and you just *rode right into me!*" Not my version of events.

While making a delivery on University Place, I'm joined in the elevator by a trio returning from the parade. Each is decked out in wigs and heavy makeup, though I'm not sure who they're meant to be. "Where did you get the idea?"

I'm staring at the elevator door, half listening to their conversation about favorite costumes of the night. "Where did you get the idea?" I realize the woman is speaking to me.

"Me?"

"Wait. Are you a *real* delivery guy?"

"Yeah, there's real food in here and everything."

"That's so cool."

One thing I have certainly not been feeling tonight is cool. "Thanks."

By 10:30 p.m., I've completed fifteen deliveries and made \$53 in tips. On the bike ride home I immediately cut east, wanting to get as far from the parade as possible.