

Two

December 23, 2020

That Night.

Inside an abandoned fruit distribution warehouse, two beat up portable air conditioners sit next to a mud encrusted, six-by-nine foot, beveled glass window with deliberate breaks for the exhaust. Whining and groaning, their internals churn, blowing out blasts of coolness that are instantly enveloped and tempered by the stale, suffocating, hot night air.

It's four in the morning and a small consortium of marginalized and disillusioned people, who call themselves Lazador (the name adopted as a nod to the Gauchos of Argentina who rope wild bulls in Patagonia), are working tirelessly in preparation for a better way of life. Underground. In a self-sustaining, self-governed, honeycombed, human nest smack in the center of California's Central Valley.

Under cover of an old dilapidated horse stable, people and machines move in and out of the earth through a wide mouthed tunnel lit by strands of hanging lightbulbs. From the depth of the Earth, a loud, gasping noise is emitted from the conveyer belt as it protests the weight of the virgin soil it's transporting to the surface. Above ground, in the darkness, silhouettes of trucks and bulldozers can be discerned zigzagging about, dispersing and disappearing all evidence of excavation.

As usual, the day's sweltering heat is still trapped in the rickety fruit warehouse where Marco Hernandez and his crew are sorting through the night's harvest.

It wasn't supposed to work out this way. It wasn't supposed to mature and ripen all at once.

"What do you think?" Marco asked his engineer, with a cadence of frustration.

The extreme daytime temperatures had proven too much for the old industrial air conditioners tasked with cooling the poorly insulated warehouse that housed his vertical and hydroponic farms.

The engineer thoughtfully took a step back and tilted her head upwards.

"Until we're in the nest, we're going to have to make do." Her gaze ran up the vertical garden beds, all the way to the very top. The warehouse was ninety-six feet high and the last bed was only six inches below the ceiling. "Things will be a lot different once we're operating in the nest. The greenhouses will be insulated, you'll have climate control, and there will be no more power outages affecting your timers and garden lights." She pushed a button and, like a Ferris wheel, the garden beds lowered and went round for inspection. "Right now it's like the plants at the top think they're in the tropics and the one's below are so confused that some bud and some don't."

"Perhaps I should rotate the beds more often."

The engineer didn't really see the point but offered anyway, "If it will make you feel better. Truthfully, there's just too much out of your control right now."

At the far left corner of the warehouse, opposite the vertical gardens and Marco, stood the kitchen. It had two massive, well stained, stainless steel, eight burner stoves with dual oven along the back wall. On the left, there were three walk-in refrigerators that stood shoulder to shoulder and on the right, two ginormous freezers. In the center of the kitchen sat two massive steel butcher tables and pallets filled with supplies and surrounded by five workers.

Towards the back end of the kitchen, two sweaty men wearing hairnets, heavily stained aprons, and heat safe gloves were standing over the stoves, busy sanitizing jars in huge vats of boiling water. Across from them, between the two tables, two women, similarly dressed to the men, ladled pickled green beans into the sanitized jars. Across from them, a third woman, Yesenia, Marco's wife, fell further and further behind with sealing them.

The kitchen staff had fallen into an exhaustion induced hypnosis. Each of them mechanically performed their task in utter silence as their thoughts ruminated and weaved through their own private lives; at least until the handsome one dared to shatter the silence.

"I haven't seen you eat any animal protein this last week." The gorgeous jar sanitizer directed to the wafer thin guy standing next to him.

It took a second, but Scrawny eventually registered the question.

"Sorry. I zoned out." He looked at his watch—three hours to go. Then, with a disappointed sideways pucker of the lips, he replied, "Hardest thing I've ever done. I'm hungry all of the time, which means I'm always thinking about food I can't have." His tortured visage exemplified his

longing. “Like right now. I was just imagining myself eating a big juicy burger.” He was one of those skinny guys who could eat anything they wanted, in vast quantities, and remain as skinny as a rail.

“Don’t fret. It’ll take some effort, but eventually your body will just stop craving meat.”

“I don’t know about that.”

With an elbow to his friend’s skeletal ribcage he said, “Ah, come on... have some faith. We’ve all done it.” He looked into his friend’s doubt filled eyes. “Try eating more than starchy vegetables. Incorporate greens, nuts, beans, and some of that quinoa stuff... protein. That’ll help get your cravings under control.”

Nodding as he mentally digested his friend’s advice, he pulled off his gloves and took a candy bar out of his pocket and bit into it. As the chocolate melted and coated the inside of his mouth, he casually leaned against the table, savoring its richness, unbothered that his sweat dampened shirt was clinging on to him, outlining his skeletal physique.

“Okay.” He said, through intermittent chews. “I can try that.” And quickly shoved the remaining melting piece into his mouth before licking his fingers.

“Dude, that’s your fourth candy bar of the night!”

“I’m trying to have as many as I can before we go underground, who knows how long our stash will last.”

“I’m thoroughly impressed.” Handsome said, his eyes tracing his friend’s concave chest. “Is it possible that you have a tape worm? I mean, where does it all go?” Earlier in the evening he’d watched him demolish an entire bag of potato chips.

“I think you’re envious of my slim physique.” He riposted, clearly uncomfortable discussing his weight, or lack thereof.

“But you’re—”

“I don’t have a tape worm. Trust me. I’ve been checked. Anyway, I’ve already been lectured about my eating habits by the pot guy..., Edward.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. He said I make poor food choices and—”

“And?”

“And,” he rolled his sunken eyes, “that I need to eat more vegetable proteins.” His thick black head of hair was sopped and matted in a way that framed his face as he grudgingly conceded his point.

“Well, then, I guess I’ll leave you be. I’m sure you’ve heard it enough.”

“I have.” He said, grateful to be spared the lecture. “You know what’s ironic?”

“What?”

“I don’t think being a vegetarian will be good for my weight.”

“Your weight?! You’re as skinny as a cadaver!”

“Exactly my point!” Scrawny spread his arms so that his friend could give him a thorough inspection. Wanting to prove his point further, he lifted his soggy shirt. His skin was like saran wrap, covering over his skeleton and sunken wherever bone was lacking. “Without fat and sugar I might disappear.” Satisfied that he’d made his point, he changed the subject. “Did you read the news this morning?”

“About what?”

“The multinationals. They defeated the base national income initiative.” Wrestling with a thought he added, “I just can’t wrap my head around how future generations are going to survive. Artificial intelligence is swiftly replacing human labor.” With a good headshake, he added, “There’s no way around it, people are going to need some sort of income stipend.”

“Of course they defeated it. They would never agree to pay the necessary tax to fund it. If they ever did, they’d want some kind of population control to prevent their tax burden from ballooning in the future. They’d want a downward sloping population growth.”

“Where are the angry voters? Why aren’t they kicking these people out of office?”

“Brainwashed.” He shrugged with disappointment. “There’s no future out there anymore. The multinationals run that show by proxy.”

“The multinationals?” Scrawny said, as he dropped a basket of jars into the pot of scalding hot water, then wiped the sweat off his forehead with a hanky he kept in his back pocket.

“They’re accreting... buying up their competitors, solidifying their global power. It’s only a matter of time before they rule the world.”

Yesenia was doing her best to ignore them, pre-occupied with thoughts of her own unraveling life.

“They have to be stopped.”

“By who? Since our graduating class, how many more have joined the ranks of the chronically unemployed?”

“Too many to count.”

They were so engrossed in their conversation they didn't notice the sideway glances they were getting from Yesenia, who was becoming increasingly agitated with their chatter.

“Do you think jobs would come back if government said, ‘Hey, stop outsourcing, the people in our communities need jobs too!’” Disappointed, he added, “We should have organized and acted sooner.”

“Outsourcing is not the problem... mechanization and automation, those are the culprits.” He thought about his training as a mechanical engineer and how much he paid for the education. There were presently so many newly minted engineers competing with artificial intelligence that they depressed wages to an untenable rate. He had no choice but to walk away from his career. He joined Lazador's underground community because he wanted to live in a society that was inclusive and placed community over all else. “But at least we're incentivizing them to bring jobs back by giving them tax breaks for manufacturing within our borders.”

“What a racket. The only ‘jobs’ that came back are the ones done by machines. While they're getting tax breaks, we're losing income tax dollars from all of those disappeared jobs.”

“Who wins here?”

“A select few.”

At the other table stood an exhausted Yesenia trying to block out their conversation. She knew they were right about the world outside of the nest. Out there, corruption and power consolidation were submerging the masses in a quagmire of poverty, but it still enticed her, because if she were out there, she would be away from her cheating husband.

“I don’t know.” A blithe twenty-eight-year-old ladling green beans into jars said, inviting herself into the conversation. “Rumor has it that the multinationals are contributing billions to interconnect San Francisco’s high-rises with one another via air conditioned walkways. They’re calling them SunSafe communities.” Blowing a stubborn, sweaty strand of hair from her face, she added, “That’s somewhat appealing.”

“I agree.” Yesenia said, already regretting butting in.

Scrawny and handsome exchanged a surprised look before the former said, “It might sound nice, but you have to be able to afford to live there. That’s how they keep the ‘undesirables’ out.”

Yesenia’s hackles rose. Those were the same words her husband had thrown at her during last night’s heated exchange where she threatened to leave him and he chided her naiveté.

“Enough with wasting time on meaningless conversations! Back to work!” She said, with a poignancy that caught everyone off guard.

“Something’s got to give. The government can’t turn their back on their people.” The youthful girl snickered to the guys working behind her.

“They already have. That’s why we’re here and not in a city.” Said the small, stalky woman who’d remained quiet until that point.

“Enough.” Yesenia pleaded trying to brush her sweaty hair off her cheek meanwhile putting the lid on a jar, but the jar slipped from her grasp and fell onto its side, spilling its contents.

Helplessly, she watched as the green beans swam away on the running liquid and splattered onto the floor like dead fish. In her effort to stop the jar from rolling off the table, she inadvertently thumped it and accelerated

its escape. When it crashed onto the floor, she accepted defeat by throwing her hands up, into the air, and backing away.

“Fuck!” She shrieked, taking her gloved hand and wiping the spilled contents onto the floor. “Fuck!”

Marco, who wrapped up his conversation with his engineer, heard his wife curse and sauntered over. Once there, he stood with his feet far apart and took in the pitiful sight. The five people in the kitchen looked as if they were about to keel over.

Maria, the four-foot-nine stalky woman, was using a ladle as long as her own arm to fill the jars. A knob of grey hair kept her thick mane out of her face as she worked. He could see her cringe and fight the pain with every ladle she poured into a jar. And the young girl, who had a five inch advantage over her, stood between the tables with heavy eyes as she worked. It was a pure miracle that the girl hadn't already collapsed onto the floor from sheer exhaustion.

He looked at his watch, only forty minutes to go before quitting time and they still had so much to do. Out of concern, he took one more glance at the working crew and without warning he billowed out, “Where are Michael and Vicente?” His authoritarian tone caused those in the kitchen to stop what they were doing and look over at their scowling boss. Marco's five-foot-five-inch stature was not an intimidating one, but his temper certainly was. He had brought his hands to his hips and a V-shaped scowl crowned the thick, black, square-lens glasses that sat on the unattractive hump of his nose.

No one responded. The boys were most likely sleeping on a pile of rags in a backroom. Not one of them begrudged them that. Over the last

few days they had stood side by side with everyone in the kitchen, washing, peeling, and cutting.

“Don’t get all worked up. I’ll go find them. They’re boys, you know.” Yesenia finally replied to her husband who was glaring at her, expectantly.

The two other women in the kitchen exchanged a sideways glance and prepared themselves.

“No, Yesenia!” Marco’s voice dialed up a few octaves. “They are ten and eleven! They are young men.” Everyone braced for his well-rehearsed oration. “We are living in different times. There is no time for childhood. Find them and get them back in here. We are all overworked and we cannot afford to spare their help.”

Everyone in the kitchen pretended to be too busy to notice the power struggle taking place between Marco and Yesenia. They intentionally avoided making eye contact with either, afraid of being dragged into the battle.

A quiet young man who had been busy getting supplies ready for tomorrow’s canning of the tomatoes, happened to hobble into the kitchen area just then, saw the tension between Marco and Yesenia, then quickly hobbled away, to a pallet of jars and began tearing into the plastic wrap.

“Yesenia!”

When Marco growled her name, the guy unwrapping the mason jars happened to look up and noticed that everyone in the kitchen had simultaneously dropped their heads another inch, as if what they were doing required some intense form of concentration.

Embarrassed, Yesenia dared a glance at her worn out co-workers and felt a sudden pang of guilt for indulging her sons. Everyone was working so hard. No one, including her sons, should be exempt.

“Marco, it’s okay. We understand—”

“No. it’s okay.” Yesenia said, placing a hand on her friend’s shoulder.

“Marco is right. I’ll go find them.”

Shocked, Marco seemed to stumble back.

What just happened? Did she just agree with me?

Never before had he won an argument with his wife. Unsure of how to proceed, he pulled his pants up to his naval and strutted off feeling empowered.

A half mile from Marco’s warehouse, Edward and six of his fellow workers travelled from abandoned home to abandoned home, tending to their hemp plants. Solar panels line the roof of every abandoned structure employed for growing. Some panels provide power to the garden lights and others juice up the batteries.

Edward, a blue-eyed, tanned, mellow guy and his cast of expert growers consider themselves the Dolce and Gabbana of the nest. They are tasked with providing the hemp needed to make clothes and other essentials.

“Hey, Edward, I got some news!” Jimmy, the pock-marked, skinny redhead, said as he sprinted into what they dubbed the Pepto house because of its hot pink exterior.

Edward, Steven, Mildred, and Moose had been hunched over their plants, inspecting their progress, when Jimmy startled them into an upright position.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.” Jimmy fumbled.

Edward rolled his eyes. Jimmy was always going out of his way to accidentally annoy the people around him.

“Spit it out, Jimmy.” Mildred growled as she brought up a portly hand to push up her wire-rimmed glasses that sat on her greasy, blackhead covered nose.

Jimmy was sweating, huffing, and puffing, when he said, “I just heard one of the engineers say that as of next month, no meat consumption will be allowed.”

Edward rolled his eyes again and said, “Really Jimmy. This is why you blew in here?” He shook his head and went back to what he was doing. “We all knew that was coming down the pipe. Moose has already started working on his diet.”

Moose, whose nickname befitted his thick, husky stature, gave a big unhappy nod of confirmation.

“We can’t be self-sufficient if we can’t stop being dependent on meat.” Mildred said, repeating what Gary, the nest’s founder, had said just last week during their group meeting.

Mildred was a small, somewhat robustly built woman of Filipino origins. She was as mean as a tiger but as smart as a whip. No one messed with her, especially since she seemed to be in a constant state of irritation.

“Well, I’m only telling you what I just overheard.”

“Thanks, Jimmy.” Moose said, with sincerity. “At least now I know that I have one month to ween myself off of sausage, ham, chicken...” He was salivating.

“Enough, Moose. You’re making me nauseous.” Edward was a devout vegan and couldn’t stomach the smell or thought of meat, which was why he was secretly ecstatic about the definitive date finally having been set. “Jimmy, what about the dwarfed willow and the other medicinal plants?”

“Oh,” Jimmy said, searching his thoughts for the correct answer.

Edward could actually see the thought process taking place and shook his head, thinking to himself that it was a good thing that Jimmy stopped sniffing glue when he did; otherwise, he’d be operating with far fewer brain cells than he presently had, and it was already a dicey situation.

“Jimmy?”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry. So yeah. We will have some samples to work with. I was told that Marco is going to be given some seedlings in the next few weeks.”

“I can’t believe we’re going back to the indigenous ways for pain meds. I never thought I’d be chewing on tree bark to get rid of a headache.” Moose had to wipe the sweat off his red face as he spoke and accidentally knocked the sunglasses off his face and onto the floor. The price for his mistake was high for someone of his girth, and the regret on his face showed it.

With laborious breaths he placed his hand against the wall and leaned into it for support as he brought himself down, onto his knees. Once he had the sunglasses in his hand, he followed the same procedure to get

back up, only it took a couple of extra tries before he was fully upright again.

“Jimmy! You were saying?” Edward said, moving the group away from the awkwardness of having stared at Moose as if he were a side show.

“Oh...oh, yeah. So, Gary said we’ll have enough antibiotics and pain medication to last us a year, but not much more beyond that.” He crinkled his brow. “Did you know that antibiotics lose their effectiveness with time?”

“That’s why they have expiration dates.” Steven, the usually silent, resident genius, chimed in.

Jimmy’s expression said that he just learned something new.

“That’s right.” Mildred confirmed with a roll of her eyes meant for Jimmy.

“Jimmy! Anything else?”

“Oh...yeah. There’s this lady... a Shaman lady from the heart of the Amazon that Gary recruited.” He was basking on the fact that for the first time in his life he was the one with all of the answers. It helped that everyone in the room was hanging on every one of his words—what a glorious feeling.

Edward knew exactly what Jimmy was doing and regretted his decision of having tasked him with such an important fact finding mission—he had known he had made a mistake when he had given Jimmy the task, but he couldn’t bring himself to take it back.

“Jimmy!” Edward warned with gritted teeth. “Please, just...”

“Oh, yeah. Anyway.” Now he was nervous, seeing how irritated Edward was with him and all. “So...so,” his face contorted as he tried to recall something important, and when it came to him, he said with excitement, “Oh, yeah. So, this Shaman lady...her um.” He bobbed his head sideways a few times and just as Edward was about to burst at the seams with frustration, he finally said, “Her name is Diana. She supposedly cures diseases with plants that grow in the Amazon. So I think Gary said that...what’s Marco’s wife’s name again?”

“Yesenia, dumbass.” Mildred chided, unable to control her own frustration with him for dribbling the information.

Steven, the resident herb expert, was suddenly interested in the conversation.

“Oh yeah, but wait, it’s not Yeseniadumb...” Then with a pause, he gave Mildred a disapproving look and chose to move on. “Right. So Yesenia is going to go down to the Amazon...the part that hasn’t permanently flooded, and she’s going to spend a few days there with that Shaman lady. They are supposed to come back together with all of the saplings.”

“I’d like to go.” Steven seemed resolved on going. He looked at Edward, his boss, for approval.

“Hey, talk to Gary. I think the more cross experience we have in the nest the better.”

Steven’s expression and the nod of his head told the group that he had every intention of doing just that.

“Oh, yeah,” Jimmy interjected. “One more thing. It’s kinda creepy, if you ask me.” He looked around and was thrilled to have everyone’s

attention again. But before he could bask in it, Edward cursed his name, causing Jimmy to jumpstart right where he had left off. “Oh, yeah. Well, this Shaman lady, the farmer guy that recommended her to Gary said that her fingers were like all gnarly and stuff from like arthritis and stuff.”

“You’re an ass, Jimmy.” Mildred said, and everyone got back to work, leaving him to wonder what he had said to earn that.