

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, human nest, excavated from beneath California's Central Valley.

Not too far from the warehouse, under cover of an old, dilapidated stable, people and machine move in and out of the earth through a wide mouthed tunnel lit by strands of hanging lightbulbs, bringing forth, from the depth of the Earth, a loud trill, harmonized by gasping ventilators, squealing machinery, and human labor. Everyone works in tandem. As some excavate and reinforce new living quarters, others lay floors, build walls, or put finishing touches and ready the space for move in.

Back at the warehouse, temporary vertical gardens and kitchens espouse their own sounds. In the kitchen, boiling pots of water with clattering lids, prat about. Mason jars batter themselves against the wire basket, clinking and clattering, as they are dropped into pots of scaling water. A fork lift groans just off the kitchen, moving pallet of mason jars and fruit for the kitchen staff.

Across the warehouse, where the vertical gardens sit, crop pickers are harvesting the crop of tomatoes. Thumps and splats can be heard as the mostly overripe fruits are dropped into plastic buckets. The sound of shuffling feet is heard in the background, from the runners replacing the half full buckets with fresh ones, then taking the fruits to a sorting table for others to sort.

It wasn't supposed to work out this way. It wasn't supposed to mature and ripen all at once. Marco Hernandez, thought to himself as he took his cheap purple handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

The day's sweltering temperatures could still be felt, thanks to the lack of insulation in the warehouse walls. It was built to store machinery, not to house a greenhouse, or people. The nocturnal schedule had helped, but not by much.

"What do you think?" Marco asked his engineer, with a tightness that emphasized his frustration. She was slowly climbing down the ladder that traveled up the vertically rotating beds. Drops of her sweat landed on the ground much before she did.

Fruit pickers stood opposite him, on the other side of the vegetable bed, busily harvesting and trying not to fall asleep on the job.

“Marco,” a groggy, silver-haired picker with heavy eyes called to him. When Marco looked over, he tilted the bucket for him to see the smooshed, over ripe tomatoes inside. “Most are like this. What should we do with them? Compost?”

Marco pursed his lips as he thought what to do. Gary had insisted that nothing be wasted. The kitchen was responsible for making everything work. The goal was to be over-subscribed on all fronts: food, water, everything possible, when they moved into the nest. They would not have a second chance to change things. They needed to have enough in store incase their first crop below ground fell flat. “No.” he shook his head. “The kitchen can make tomato sauce, or something with them. Take them to Yesenia.” He shook his head and reiterated Gary’s words, “Nothing gets wasted. Everything gets used.”

The picker nodded a heavy nod then looked to the far left, where the kitchen sat, and his shoulders sagged—it looked far. Knowing he had no choice, he turned and stalked away, his body slanting right, from the weight of the barely filled bucket.

Marco watched him as he enlisted the help of the fork lift driver to move the fruit from the sorters section to the kitchen, shook his head, and turned his attention back to his engineer, who was now standing right beside him.

“He seems pretty tired.” Nia, said, sweeping her matted hair off her forehead. She was wearing a tank top that clung to her body like saran wrap, thanks to the buckets of sweat it had licked off her body, and her khaki pants were no better off.

“We all are.” Marco tilted his head towards the pickers working on the other side of the vegetable beds. “But we’re getting close to move-in and we have to make sure we have a solid safety net of food... just in case.” He said, thinking they’d better not have two years of bad crops once they were below ground, or they would be living off canned mush. His thoughts were pulled in a different direction when a worker pushed the button to make the vertically rotating vegetable beds rotate but then didn’t let go. “Jay! Jay! You gotta let go of the button!” Like a Ferris wheel, the beds kept moving. Marco quickly realized that Jay had fallen asleep pushing the button. Marco leapt into action. He pulled up his pants to his navel and hurriedly sauntered over. When he tapped Jay on the shoulder, he seemed surprised to find Marco standing next to him. Marco shook his head and reversed the rotation, so that the fresh beds were at waist height for the pickers and said, “Jay, go get some coffee, then get back to work.”

Jay nodded and did as he was told.

“It’s the head.” The engineer said. “It’s making everything ripen faster than it should.” 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. “It’s also why we’re using more water than we had estimated.” She thoughtfully took a step back and tilted her head upwards. “All I can tell you is that until we’re in the nest, we’re going to have to make do.” Her gaze ran up the vertical garden, 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. 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 shrugged and said, "That will help, but truthfully, there's just too much out of your control."

At the far left corner of the warehouse, opposite the vertical gardens and Marco, stood the kitchen. Along the back wall sit two massive, well stained, stainless-steel, eight-burner stoves with dual ovens. To the left of them stand three, shoulder to shoulder, walk-in refrigerators and two ginormous freezers. In the center of the kitchen are two massive steel butcher tables surrounded by five kitchen staffers. Adjacent to them is a wall made of wooden pallets heavy with mason jars and other supplies.

Towards the back end of the kitchen, between the table and the stoves, two sweaty men were at work wearing hairnets, heavily stained aprons, and heat safe gloves. Though exhausted, they kept 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 her task of sealing the jars.

The kitchen staff had fallen into an exhaustion induced hypnosis. Each of them mechanically performing their task in utter silence as their thoughts ruminated and weaved through events in their own private lives.

“I haven’t seen you eat any animal protein this last week.” The staffer known as “Handsome” said to his co-worker, the one referred to as “Bones” because of his skeletal physical attributes.

It took a second, but Bones eventually registered the question. “Sorry. I guess I was 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.”

Bones is one of those skinny guys who can eat anything he wants, in vast quantities, and still remain as skinny as a rail.

“I get it. I had the same problem... It will take some effort on your part, 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 the advice, he pulled off his gloves and apron, so he could quickly towel off his sweaty body, then took a candy bar out of his pocket, and proceeded to bite into it. As the melted chocolate coated the inside of his mouth, he casually leaned against the table, savoring it’s richness, unbothered that his sweat dampened shirt was clinging to him, outlining his skeletal physique.

“Okay.” He said, through intermittent chews. “I can try that.” He then 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.” He shook his head and added, “or if we’ll ever have it again.”

Chocolate, or cocoa, was one of the crops on the chopping block. Per Gary, it would all depend on the vertical farms, how proliferous they were, and how much space for *other* non-pertinent crops they had.

“I’m thoroughly impressed by your inability to gain weight.” 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?” Edward is the in house, unofficial, nutritionist who has been vegan his entire life. “Did he give you good advice?”

“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. It sounds like 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!” Bones spread his scrawny arms so that his friend could give him a thorough inspection. Wanting to prove his point further, he lifted his soggy shirt, revealing his tightly wrapped skin over his skeleton. Handsome noticed that his skin was 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.” When he’d read the news, he felt relief that he had chosen Lazador’s nest over the status quo. Wrestling with a thought he added, “I just can’t wrap my head around how people are surviving out there. Artificial intelligence is swiftly replacing the whole of human labor.” With a good headshake, he added, “There’s no way around it, people are going to need some sort of income stipend. Hell, they already do!”

Handsome had read the news, but somehow he’d missed that part; although, he wasn’t surprised. “Of course they defeated it. *They* know it would require them to pay a huge tax to fund it. Besides, if they ever did agree, it would be because they found a way to curb population growth.”

He nodded as if the thought just came to him and his reasoning confirmed it. “They’d want a downward sloping population growth that would guaranty a declining expense.”

“I’d say they got it. I mean, the human population is clearly shrinking. Global warming has allowed diseases that only survived in the tropics to spread, globally. People are going blind from sun exposure, even dying from it at higher rates. Crops are failing, causing huge swath of people to starve to death. Fresh water lakes are overtaken by algae blooms, making our supplies undrinkable... and then you have surging, rampant poverty, so no one can buy what *is* available in the market place, so more people are dying from malnutrition in their homes.”

“Right!” Handsome agreed. “And still, the politicians and the Supreme Court only carry on as if the everyday person doesn’t matter.” He shrugged with disappointment. “There’s no future out there, not anymore. The multinationals and the wealthy run the three houses of government by proxy... no future.” He thought of the millions who would never have a Lazador as an alternative, like they did, and it filled him with sorrow.

“The multinationals?” Bones 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. “That’s a whole ’nother story.”

Handsome was nodding as he said, “They’re accreting... buying up their competitors, solidifying their global power... if they’re not stopped, then it’s only a matter of time before they rule the world.” With an exhale that came from the depths of his bowels, he said, “The CEOs of these multinationals would be like Kings and the world would be their

kingdom. With their wealth, they could *buy* governments like you and I buy groceries.”

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

“They have to be stopped.” Bones said, recalling the images of the wave of protests that swept the nation only a few weeks ago. The police and National Guard had been called in. They were equipped with military gear: armored tanks, machine guns, and the works. Many tens of thousands died that day. And, according to his recollection, they still haven’t released the number of people “gone missing”.

“By who? Look at how many people have already died trying. Besides, people are growing afraid of their own government.”

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.

“I think it’s too late. Do you think jobs would come back if government said, ‘Hey, stop outsourcing, the people in our communities need jobs too!’” Disappointed, he added, “Action should have been taken soon, before the ozone was destroyed, before people lost their jobs... just sooner.”

“Well, I can tell you that 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 valued his contribution. "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."

"In the world out there, only a select few will win. That is why I am grateful for the opportunity Lazador has given me. I can thrive here. Contribute and participate, and feel as though I am a valuable member of our community."

"Agreed." Bones replied.

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 it a SunSafe community and they say that it is the way of the future." Blowing a stubborn, sweaty strand of hair from her face, she added, "That's somewhat appealing."

"I agree." Yesenia said, already regretting butting in.

Bones and handsome exchanged a surprised look before the former said, “It might sound nice because you get to be above ground and all, but you still have to be able to afford to live there.”

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!” Her usually soft, feminine features hardened as she said, “Back to work!” with a poignancy that caught everyone off guard.

Several minutes of silence settled in amongst the kitchen staff. Each was considering the conversation and any points they may have failed to make.

“I don’t know... 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, stalker woman who’d remained quiet until that point.

“Enough.” Yesenia pleaded trying to brush her jet black, sweaty hair off her cheek with her shoulder, while simultaneously putting the lid on a jar. But she failed. The jar slipped from her grasp and fell onto its side, spilling its contents.

Helplessly, they all watched, frozen in place, 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, Yesenia 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 from across the room and sauntered over to investigate. 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 stood nearly ten feet apart, their eyes, casting daggers at the other, and their posture, crouched like a tiger, ready to pounce on its prey.

Those in the kitchen worked to avoid 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 a half step.

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.