

15 Years on the Bottom Rung

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In the dark before dawn, when Madison Avenue was all but deserted and its pricey boutiques were still locked up tight, several Mexicans slipped quietly into 3 Guys, a restaurant that the Zagat guide once called “the most expensive coffee shop in New York.”

For the next 10 hours they would fry eggs, grill burgers, pour coffee and wash dishes for a stream of customers from the Upper East Side of Manhattan. By 7:35 a.m., Eliot Spitzer, attorney general of New York, was holding a power breakfast back near the polished granite counter. In the same burgundy booth a few hours later, Michael A. Wiener, co-founder of the multibillion-dollar Infinity Broadcasting, grabbed a bite with his wife, Zena. Just the day before, Uma Thurman slipped in for a quiet lunch with her children, but the paparazzi found her and she left.

More Mexicans filed in to begin their shifts throughout the morning, and by the time John Zannikos, one of the restaurant’s three Greek owners, drove in from the North Jersey suburbs to work the lunch crowd, Madison Avenue was buzzing. So was 3 Guys.

“You got to wait a little bit,” Mr. Zannikos said to a pride of elegant women who had spent the morning at the Whitney Museum of American Art, across Madison Avenue at 75th Street. For an illiterate immigrant who came to New York years ago with nothing but \$100 in his pocket and a willingness to work etched on his heart, could any words have been sweeter to say?

With its wealthy clientele, middle-class owners and low-income work force, 3 Guys is a template of the class divisions in America. But it is also the setting for two starkly different tales about breaching those divides.

The familiar story is Mr. Zannikos’s. For him, the restaurant—don’t dare call it a diner—with its \$20 salads and elegant décor represents the American promise of upward mobility, one that has been fulfilled countless times for generations of hard-working immigrants.

But for Juan Manuel Peralta, a 34-year-old illegal immigrant who worked there for five years until he was fired last May, and for many of the other illegal Mexican immigrants in the back, restaurant work today is more like a dead end. They are finding the American dream of moving up far more elusive than it was for Mr. Zannikos. Despite his efforts to help them, they risk becoming stuck in a permanent underclass of the poor, the unskilled and the uneducated.

That is not to suggest that the nearly five million Mexicans who, like Mr. Peralta, are living in the United States illegally will never emerge from the shadows. Many have, and undoubtedly many more will. But the sheer size of the influx—over 400,000 a year, with no end in sight—creates a problem all its own. It means there is an ever-growing pool of interchangeable workers, many of them shunting from one low-paying job to another. If one moves on, another one—or maybe two or three—is there to take his place.

Although Mr. Peralta arrived in New York almost 40 years after Mr. Zannikos, the two share a remarkably similar beginning. They came at the same age to the same section of New York City, without legal papers or more than a few words of English. Each dreamed of a better life. But monumental changes in the economy and in attitudes toward immigrants have made it far less likely that Mr. Peralta and his children will experience the same upward mobility as Mr. Zannikos and his family.

Of course, there is a chance that Mr. Peralta may yet take his place among the Mexican-Americans who have succeeded here. He realizes that he will probably not do as well as the few who have risen to high office or who were able to buy the vineyards where their grandfathers once picked grapes. But he still dreams that his children will someday join the millions who have lost their accents, gotten good educations and firmly achieved the American dream.

Political scientists are divided over whether the 25 million people of Mexican ancestry in the United States represent an exception to the classic immigrant success story. Some, like John H. Mollenkopf at the City University of New York, are convinced that Mexicans will eventually do as well as the Greeks, Italians and other Europeans of the last century who were usually well assimilated after two or three generations. Others, including Mexican-Americans like Rodolfo O. de la Garza, a professor at Columbia, have done studies showing that Mexican-Americans face so many obstacles that even the fourth generation trails other Americans in education, home ownership and household income.

The situation is even worse for the millions more who have illegally entered the United States since 1990. Spread out in scores of cities far beyond the Southwest, they find jobs plentiful but advancement difficult. President Vicente Fox of Mexico was forced to apologize this month for declaring publicly what many Mexicans say they feel, that the illegal immigrants “are

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doing the work that not even blacks want to do in the United States.” Resentment and race subtly stand in their way, as does a lingering attachment to Mexico, which is so close that many immigrants do not put down deep roots here. They say they plan to stay only long enough to make some money and then go back home. Few ever do.

But the biggest obstacle is their illegal status. With few routes open to become legal, they remain, like Mr. Peralta, without rights, without security and without a clear path to a better future.

“It’s worrisome,” said Richard Alba, a sociologist at the State University of New York, Albany, who studies the assimilation and class mobility of contemporary immigrants, “and I don’t see much reason to believe this will change.”

Little has changed for Mr. Peralta, a cook who has worked at menial jobs in the United States for the last 15 years. Though he makes more than he ever dreamed of in Mexico, his life is anything but middle class and setbacks are routine. Still, he has not given up hope. Querer es poder, he sometimes says: Want something badly enough and you will get it.

But desire may not be enough anymore. That is what concerns Arturo Sarukhan, Mexico’s consul general in New York. Mr. Sarukhan recently took an urgent call from New York’s police commissioner about an increase in gang activity among young Mexican men, a sign that they were moving into the underside of American life. Of all immigrants in New York City, officials say, Mexicans are the poorest, least educated and least likely to speak English.

The failure or success of this generation of Mexicans in the United States will determine the place that Mexicans will hold here in years to come, Mr. Sarukhan said, and the outlook is not encouraging.

“They will be better off than they could ever have been in Mexico,” he said, “but I don’t think that’s going to be enough to prevent them from becoming an underclass in New York.”

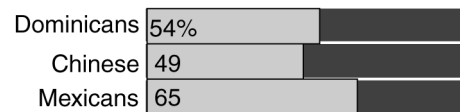
Different Results

There is a break in the middle of the day at 3 Guys, after the lunchtime limousines leave and before the private schools let out. That was when Mr. Zannikos asked the Mexican cook who replaced Mr. Peralta to prepare some lunch for him. Then Mr. Zannikos carried the chicken breast on pita to the last table in the restaurant.

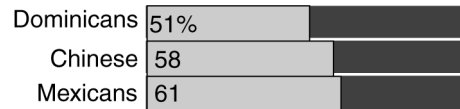
“My life story is a good story, a lot of success,” he said, his accent still heavy. He was just a teenager when he left the Greek island of Chios, a few miles off the coast of Turkey. World War II had just ended, and Greece was in ruins. “There was only rich and poor, that’s it,” Mr. Zannikos said. “There was no middle class like you have here.” He is 70 now, with short gray hair and soft eyes that can water at a mention of the past.

Because of the war, he said, he never got past the second grade, never learned to read or write. He signed on as a

Percentage without a high school degree



Percentage with poor or no English



Percentage of households overcrowded (more than one person per room)

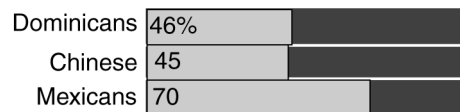


Figure 1 Comparing Poorly. Mexicans are the third largest group of immigrants, after Dominicans and Chinese, who have arrived in New York City since 1990. Here is how the groups compare.

Source: Queens College Sociology Department from 2000 census data

merchant seaman, and in 1953, when he was 19, his ship docked at Norfolk, Va. He went ashore one Saturday with no intention of ever returning to Greece. He left behind everything, including his travel documents. All he had in his pockets was \$100 and the address of his mother’s cousin in the Jackson Heights-Corona section of Queens.

Almost four decades later, Mr. Peralta underwent a similar rite of passage out of Mexico. He had finished the eighth grade in the poor southern state of Guerrero and saw nothing in his future there but fixing flat tires. His father, Inocencio, had once dreamed of going to the United States, but never had the money. In 1990, he borrowed enough to give his first-born son a chance.

Mr. Peralta was 19 when he boarded a smoky bus that carried him through the deserted hills of Guerrero and kept going until it reached the edge of Mexico. With eight other Mexicans he did not know, he crawled through a sewer tunnel that started in Tijuana and ended on the other side of the border, in what Mexicans call el Norte.

He had carried no documents, no photographs and no money, except what his father gave him to pay his shifty guide and to buy an airline ticket to New York. Deep in a pocket was the address of an uncle in the same section of Queens where Mr. Zannikos had gotten his start. By 1990, the area had gone from largely Greek to mostly Latino.

Starting over in the same working-class neighborhood, Mr. Peralta and Mr. Zannikos quickly learned that New York was full of opportunities and obstacles, often in equal measure.

On his first day there, Mr. Zannikos, scared and feeling lost, found the building he was looking for, but his mother’s cousin had moved. He had no idea what to do until a Greek man passed by. Walk five blocks to the Deluxe Diner, the man said. He did.

The diner was full of Greek housepainters, including one who knew Mr. Zannikos's father. On the spot, they offered him a job painting closets, where his mistakes would be hidden. He painted until the weather turned cold. Another Greek hired him as a dishwasher at his coffee shop in the Bronx.

It was not easy, but Mr. Zannikos worked his way up to short-order cook, learning English as he went along. In 1956, immigration officials raided the coffee shop. He was deported, but after a short while he managed to sneak back into the country. Three years later he married a Puerto Rican from the Bronx. The marriage lasted only a year, but it put him on the road to becoming a citizen. Now he could buy his own restaurant, a greasy spoon in the South Bronx that catered to a late-night clientele of prostitutes and undercover police officers.

Since then, he has bought and sold more than a dozen New York diners, but none have been more successful than the original 3 Guys, which opened in 1978. He and his partners own two other restaurants with the same name farther up Madison Avenue, but they have never replicated the high-end appeal of the original.

"When employees come in I teach them, 'Hey, this is a different neighborhood,' " Mr. Zannikos said. What may be standard in some other diners is not tolerated here. There are no Greek flags or tourism posters. There is no television or twirling tower of cakes with cream pompadors. Waiters are forbidden to chew gum. No customer is ever called "Honey."

"They know their place and I know my place," Mr. Zannikos said of his customers. "It's as simple as that."

His place in society now is a far cry from his days in the Bronx. He and his second wife, June, live in Wyckoff, a New Jersey suburb where he pampers fig trees and dutifully looks after a bird feeder shaped like the Parthenon. They own a condominium in Florida. His three children all went far beyond his second-grade education, finishing high school or attending college.

They have all done well, as has Mr. Zannikos, who says he makes about \$130,000 a year. He says he is not sensitive to class distinctions, but he admits he was bothered when some people mistook him for the caterer at fund-raising dinners for the local Greek church he helped build.

All in all, he thinks immigrants today have a better chance of moving up the class ladder than he did 50 years ago.

"At that time, no bank would give us any money, but today they give you credit cards in the mail," he said. "New York still gives you more opportunity than any other place. If you want to do things, you will."

He says he has done well, and he is content with his station in life. "I'm in the middle and I'm happy."

A Divisive Issue

Mr. Peralta cannot guess what class Mr. Zannikos belongs to. But he is certain that it is much tougher for an immigrant to get ahead today than 50 years ago. And he has no doubt about his own class.

"La pobreza," he says. "Poverty."

It was not what he expected when he boarded the bus to the border, but it did not take long for him to realize that success in the United States required more than hard work. "A lot of it has to do with luck," he said during a lunch break on a stoop around the corner from the Queens diner where he went to work after 3 Guys.

"People come here, and in no more than a year or two they can buy their own house and have a car," Mr. Peralta said. "Me, I've been here 15 years, and if I die tomorrow, there wouldn't even be enough money to bury me."

In 1990, Mr. Peralta was in the vanguard of Mexican immigrants who bypassed the traditional barrios in border states to work in far-flung cities like Denver and New York. The 2000 census counted 186,872 Mexicans in New York, triple the 1990 figure, and there are undoubtedly many more today. The Mexican consulate, which serves the metropolitan region, has issued more than 500,000 ID cards just since 2001.

Fifty years ago, illegal immigration was a minor problem. Now it is a divisive national issue, pitting those who welcome cheap labor against those with concerns about border security and the cost of providing social services. Though newly arrived Mexicans often work in industries that rely on cheap labor, like restaurants and construction, they rarely organize. Most are desperate to stay out of sight.

Mr. Peralta hooked up with his uncle the morning he arrived in New York. He did not work for weeks until the bakery where the uncle worked had an opening, a part-time job making muffins. He took it, though he didn't know muffins from crumb cake. When he saw that he would not make enough to repay his father, he took a second job making night deliveries for a Manhattan diner. By the end of his first day he was so lost he had to spend all his tip money on a cab ride home.

He quit the diner, but working there even briefly opened his eyes to how easy it could be to make money in New York. Diners were everywhere, and so were jobs making deliveries, washing dishes or busing tables. In six months, Mr. Peralta had paid back the money his father gave him. He bounced from job to job and in 1995, eager to show off his newfound success, he went back to Mexico with his pockets full of money, and he married. He was 25 then, the same age at which Mr. Zannikos married. But the similarities end there.

When Mr. Zannikos jumped ship, he left Greece behind for good. Though he himself had no documents, the compatriots he encountered on his first days were here legally, like most other Greek immigrants, and could help him. Greeks had never come to the United States in large numbers—the 2000 census counted only 29,805 New Yorkers born in Greece—but they tended to settle in just a few areas, like the Astoria section of Queens, which became cohesive communities ready to help new arrivals.

Mr. Peralta, like many other Mexicans, is trying to make it on his own and has never severed his emotional or financial ties to home. After five years in New York's Latino community, he spoke little English and owned little more than the clothes on

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his back. He decided to return to Huamuxtitlán (pronounced wa-moosh-teet-LAHN), the dusty village beneath a flat-topped mountain where he was born.

“People thought that since I was coming back from el Norte, I would be so rich that I could spread money around,” he said. Still, he felt privileged: his New York wages dwarfed the \$1,000 a year he might have made in Mexico.

He met a shy, pretty girl named Matilde in Huamuxtitlán, married her and returned with her to New York, again illegally, all in a matter of weeks. Their first child was born in 1996. Mr. Peralta soon found that supporting a family made it harder to save money. Then, in 1999, he got the job at 3 Guys.

“Barba Yanni helped me learn how to prepare things the way customers like them,” Mr. Peralta said, referring to Mr. Zannikos with a Greek title of respect that means Uncle John.

The restaurant became his school. He learned how to sauté a fish so that it looked like a work of art. The three partners lent him money and said they would help him get immigration documents. The pay was good.

But there were tensions with the other workers. Instead of hanging their orders on a rack, the waiters shouted them out, in Greek, Spanish and a kind of fractured English. Sometimes Mr. Peralta did not understand, and they argued. Soon he was known as a hothead.

Still, he worked hard, and every night he returned to his growing family. Matilde, now 27, cleaned houses until the second child, Heidi, was born three years ago. Now she tries to sell Mary Kay products to other mothers at Public School 12, which their son, Antony, 8, attends.

Most weeks, Mr. Peralta could make as much as \$600. Over the course of a year that could come to over \$30,000, enough to approach the lower middle class. But the life he leads is far from that and uncertainty hovers over everything about his life, starting with his paycheck.

To earn \$600, he has to work at least 10 hours a day, six days a week, and that does not happen every week. Sometimes he is paid overtime for the extra hours, sometimes not. And, as he found out in May, he can be fired at any time and bring in nothing, not even unemployment, until he lands another job. In 2004, he made about \$24,000.

Because he is here illegally, Mr. Peralta can easily be exploited. He cannot file a complaint against his landlord for charging him \$500 a month for a 9-foot-by-9-foot room in a Queens apartment that he shares with nine other Mexicans in three families who pay the remainder of the \$2,000-a-month rent. All 13 share one bathroom, and the established pecking order means the Peraltas rarely get to use the kitchen. Eating out can be expensive.

Because they were born in New York, Mr. Peralta’s children are United States citizens, and their health care is generally covered by Medicaid. But he has to pay out of his pocket whenever he or his wife sees a doctor. And forget about going to the dentist.

As many other Mexicans do, he wires money home, and it costs him \$7 for every \$100 he sends. When his uncle, his nephew and his sister asked him for money, he was expected

to lend it. No one has paid him back. He has middle-class ornaments, like a cellphone and a DVD player, but no driver’s license or Social Security card.

He is the first to admit that he has vices that have held him back; nothing criminal, but he tends to lose his temper and there are nights when he likes to have a drink or two. His greatest weakness is instant lottery tickets, what he calls “los scratch,” and he sheepishly confesses that he can squander as much as \$75 a week on them. It is a way of preserving hope, he said. Once he won \$100. He bought a blender.

Years ago, he and Matilde were so confident they would make it in America that when their son was born they used the American spelling of his name, Anthony, figuring it would help pave his passage into the mainstream. But even that effort failed.

“Look at this,” his wife said one afternoon as she sat on the floor of their room near a picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Mr. Peralta sat on a small plastic stool in the doorway, listening. His mattress was stacked against the wall. A roll of toilet paper was stashed nearby because they dared not leave it in the shared bathroom for someone else to use.

She took her pocketbook and pulled out a clear plastic case holding her son’s baptismal certificate, on which his name is spelled with an “H.” But then she unfolded his birth certificate, where the “H” is missing.

“The teachers won’t teach him to spell his name the right way until the certificate is legally changed,” she said. “But how can we do that if we’re not legal?”

Progress, But Not Success

An elevated subway train thundered overhead, making the afternoon light along Roosevelt Avenue blink like a failing fluorescent bulb. Mr. Peralta’s daughter and son grabbed his fat hands as they ran some errands. He had just finished a 10-hour shift, eggs over easy and cheeseburgers since 5 a.m. It had been especially hard to stand the monotony that day. He kept thinking about what was going on in Mexico, where it was the feast day of Our Lady of the Rosary. And, oh, what a feast there was—sweets and handmade tamales, a parade, even a bullfight. At night, fireworks, bursting loud and bright against the green folds of the mountains. Paid for, in part, by the money he sends home.

But instead of partying, he was walking his children to the Arab supermarket on Roosevelt Avenue to buy packages of chicken and spare ribs, and hoping to get to use the kitchen. And though he knew better, he grabbed a package of pink and white marshmallows for the children. He needed to buy tortillas, too, but not there. A Korean convenience store a few blocks away sells La Maizteca tortillas, made in New York.

The swirl of immigrants in Mr. Peralta’s neighborhood is part of the fabric of New York, just as it was in 1953, when Mr. Zannikos arrived. But most immigrants then were Europeans, and though they spoke different languages, their

Caucasian features helped them blend into New York's middle class.

Experts remain divided over whether Mexicans can follow the same route. Samuel P. Huntington, a Harvard professor of government, takes the extreme view that Mexicans will not assimilate and that the separate culture they are developing threatens the United States.

Most others believe that recent Mexican immigrants will eventually take their place in society, and perhaps someday muster political clout commensurate with their numbers, though significant impediments are slowing their progress. Francisco Rivera-Batiz, a Columbia University economics professor, says that prejudice remains a problem, that factory jobs have all but disappeared, and that there is a growing gap between the educational demands of the economy and the limited schooling that the newest Mexicans have when they arrive.

But the biggest obstacle by far, and the one that separates newly arrived Mexicans from Greeks, Italians and most other immigrants—including earlier generations of Mexicans—is their illegal status. Professor Rivera-Batiz studied what happened to illegal Mexican immigrants who became legal after the last national amnesty in 1986. Within a few years, their incomes rose 20 percent and their English improved greatly.

“Legalization,” he said, “helped them tremendously.”

Although the Bush administration is again talking about legalizing some Mexicans with a guest worker program, there is opposition to another amnesty, and the number of Mexicans illegally living in the United States continues to soar. Desperate to get their papers any way they can, many turn to shady storefront legal offices. Like Mr. Peralta, they sign on to illusory schemes that cost hundreds of dollars but almost never produce the promised green cards.

Until the 1980's, Mexican immigration was largely seasonal and mostly limited to agricultural workers. But then economic chaos in Mexico sent a flood of immigrants northward, many of them poorly educated farmers from the impoverished countryside. Tighter security on the border made it harder for Mexicans to move back and forth in the traditional way, so they tended to stay here, searching for low-paying unskilled jobs and concentrating in barrios where Spanish, constantly replenished, never loses its immediacy.

“Cuidado!” Mr. Peralta shouted when Antony carelessly stepped into Roosevelt Avenue without looking. Although the boy is taught in English at school, he rarely uses anything but Spanish at home.

Even now, after 15 years in New York, Mr. Peralta speaks little English. He tried English classes once, but could not get his mind to accept the new sounds. So he dropped it, and has stuck with only Spanish, which he concedes is “the language of busboys” in New York. But as long as he stays in his neighborhood, it is all he needs.

It was late afternoon by the time Mr. Peralta and his children headed home. The run-down house, the overheated room,

the stacked mattress and the hoarded toilet paper—all remind him how far he would have to go to achieve a success like Mr. Zannikos's.

Still, he says, he has done far better than he could ever have done in Mexico. He realizes that the money he sends to his family there is not enough to satisfy his father, who built stairs for a second floor of his house made of concrete blocks in Huamuxtitlán, even though there is no second floor. He believes Manuel has made it big in New York and he is waiting for money from America to complete the upstairs.

Manuel has never told him the truth about his life up north. He said his father's images of America came from another era. The older man does not know how tough it is to be a Mexican immigrant in the United States now, tougher than any young man who ever left Huamuxtitlán would admit. Everything built up over 15 years here can come apart as easily as an adobe house in an earthquake. And then it is time to start over, again.

A Conflict Erupts

It was the end of another busy lunch at 3 Guys in late spring 2003. Mr. Peralta made himself a turkey sandwich and took a seat at a rear table. The Mexican counterwomen, dishwashers and busboys also started their breaks, while the Greek waiters took care of the last few diners.

It is not clear how the argument started. But a cross word passed between a Greek waiter and a Mexican busboy. Voices were raised. The waiter swung at the busboy, catching him behind the ear. Mr. Peralta froze. So did the other Mexicans.

Even from the front of the restaurant, where he was watching the cash register, Mr. Zannikos realized something was wrong and rushed back to break it up. “I stood between them, held one and pushed the other away,” he said. “I told them: ‘You don't do that here. Never do that here.’”

Mr. Zannikos said he did not care who started it. He ordered both the busboy and the waiter, a partner's nephew, to get out.

But several Mexicans, including Mr. Peralta, said that they saw Mr. Zannikos grab the busboy by the head and that they believed he would have hit him if another Mexican had not stepped between them. That infuriated them because they felt he had sided with the Greek without knowing who was at fault.

Mr. Zannikos said that was not true, but in the end it did not matter. The easygoing atmosphere at the restaurant changed. “Everybody was a little cool,” Mr. Zannikos recalled.

What he did not know then was that the Mexicans had reached out to the Restaurant Opportunities Center, a workers' rights group. Eventually six of them, including Mr. Peralta, cooperated with the group. He did so reluctantly, he said, because he was afraid that if the owners found out, they would no longer help him get his immigration papers. The labor group promised that the owners would never know.

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The owners saw it as an effort to shake them down, but for the Mexicans it became a class struggle pitting powerless workers against hard-hearted owners.

Their grievances went beyond the scuffle. They complained that with just one exception, only Greeks became waiters at 3 Guys. They challenged the sole Mexican waiter, Salomon Paniagua, a former Mexican army officer who, everyone agreed, looked Greek, to stand with them.

But on the day the labor group picketed the restaurant, Mr. Paniagua refused to put down his order pad. A handful of demonstrators carried signs on Madison Avenue for a short while before Mr. Zannikos and his partners reluctantly agreed to settle.

Mr. Zannikos said he felt betrayed. "When I see these guys, I see myself when I started, and I always try to help them," he said. "I didn't do anything wrong."

The busboy and the Mexican who intervened were paid several thousand dollars and the owners promised to promote a current Mexican employee to waiter within a month. But that did not end the turmoil.

Fearing that the other Mexicans might try to get back at him, Mr. Paniagua decided to strike out on his own. After asking Mr. Zannikos for advice, he bought a one-third share of a Greek diner in Jamaica, Queens. He said he put it in his father's name because the older man had become a legal resident after the 1986 amnesty.

After Mr. Paniagua left, 3 Guys went without a single Mexican waiter for 10 months, despite the terms of the settlement. In March, an eager Mexican busboy with a heavy accent who had worked there for four years got a chance to wear a waiter's tie.

Mr. Peralta ended up having to leave 3 Guys around the same time as Mr. Paniagua. Mr. Zannikos's partners suspected he had sided with the labor group, he said, and started to criticize his work unfairly. Then they cut back his schedule to five days a week. After he hurt his ankle playing soccer, they told him to go home until he was better. When Mr. Peralta came back to work about two weeks later, he was fired.

Mr. Zannikos confirms part of the account but says the firing had nothing to do with the scuffle or the ensuing dispute. "If he was good, believe me, he wouldn't get fired," he said of Mr. Peralta.

Mr. Peralta shrugged when told what Mr. Zannikos said. "I know my own work and I know what I can do," he said. "There are a lot of restaurants in New York, and a lot of workers."

When 3 Guys fired Mr. Peralta, another Mexican replaced him, just as Mr. Peralta replaced a Mexican at the Greek diner in Queens where he went to work next.

This time, though, there was no Madison Avenue address, no elaborate menu of New Zealand mussels or designer mushrooms. In the Queens diner a bowl of soup with a buttered roll cost \$2, all day. If he fried burgers and scraped fat off the big grill for 10 hours a day, six days a week, he might earn about as much as he did on Madison Avenue, at least for a week.

His schedule kept changing. Sometimes he worked the lunch and dinner shift, and by the end of the night he was worn

out, especially since he often found himself arguing with the Greek owner. But he did not look forward to going home. So after the night manager lowered the security gate, Mr. Peralta would wander the streets.

One of those nights he stopped at a phone center off Roosevelt Avenue to call his mother. "Everything's O.K.," he told her. He asked how she had spent the last \$100 he sent, and whether she needed anything else. There is always need in Huamuxtitlán.

Still restless, he went to the Scorpion, a shot-and-beer joint open till 4 a.m. He sat at the long bar nursing vodkas with cranberry juice, glancing at the soccer match on TV and the busy Brazilian bartender who spoke only a little Spanish. When it was nearly 11 p.m., he called it a night.

Back home, he quietly opened the door to his room. The lights were off, the television murmuring. His family was asleep in the bunk bed that the store had now threatened to repossess. Antony was curled up on the top, Matilde and Heidi cuddled in the bottom. Mr. Peralta moved the plastic stool out of the way and dropped his mattress to the floor.

The children did not stir. His wife's eyes fluttered, but she said nothing. Mr. Peralta looked over his family, his home.

"This," he said, "is my life in New York."

Not the life he imagined, but his life. In early March, just after Heidi's third birthday, he quit his job at the Queens diner after yet another heated argument with the owner. In his mind, preserving his dignity is one of the few liberties he has left.

"I'll get another job," he said while baby-sitting Heidi at home a few days later. The rent is already paid till the end of the month and he has friends, he said. People know him. To him, jobs are interchangeable—just as he is to the jobs. If he cannot find work as a grillman, he will bus tables. Or wash dishes. If not at one diner, then at another.

"It's all the same," he said.

It took about three weeks, but Mr. Peralta did find a new job as a grillman at another Greek diner in a different part of New York. His salary is roughly the same, the menu is roughly the same (one new item, Greek burritos, was a natural), and he sees his chance for a better future as being roughly the same as it has been since he got to America.

A Long Day Closes

It was now dark again outside 3 Guys. About 9 p.m. Mr. Zannikos asked his Mexican cook for a small salmon steak, a little rare. It had been another busy 10-hour day for him, but a good one. Receipts from the morning alone exceeded what he needed to take in every day just to cover the \$23,000 a month rent.

He finished the salmon quickly, left final instructions with the lone Greek waiter still on duty and said good night to everyone else. He put on his light tan corduroy jacket and the baseball cap he picked up in Florida.

"Night," he said to the lone table of diners.

Article 33. 15 Years on the Bottom Rung

Outside, as Mr. Zannikos walked slowly down Madison Avenue, a self-made man comfortable with his own hard-won success, the bulkhead doors in front of 3 Guys clanked open. Faint voices speaking Spanish came from below. A young Mexican who started his shift 10 hours earlier climbed out with a bag of garbage and heaved it onto the sidewalk.

New Zealand mussel shells. Uneaten bits of portobello mushrooms. The fine grounds of decaf cappuccino.

One black plastic bag after another came out until Madison Avenue in front of 3 Guys was piled high with trash.

“Hurry up!” the young man shouted to the other Mexicans. “I want to go home, too.”

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