Photo by Dan Peterka

Return to Sender

By Cindy Carcamo

A dust-covered bus emerged from the jungle and stopped in a dark and quiet Guatemalan village. The driver opened the door, letting out an earful of thumping reggaeton as a single passenger stepped off. Across the highway, a boy stood waiting.

"Chello!" the boy called out.

The man brushed off his jeans, tossed a camouflage backpack over his shoulder, and looked toward the silhouette of his ten-year-old nephew, barely visible in the glow of fireflies and brake lights as the bus roared into the night.

"Erick!" called back the man, nicknamed Chello. The boy kicked his foot in the dirt as the man approached, and then gave his favorite uncle a hasty embrace. Behind them, in a flat, open-air house that doubles as a roadside diner, the lights flickered on one by one. Melvin Eliceo Súchite Hernandez was home. Maybe this time for good.

Faces exhausted, eyes emptied of emotion, and shoulders slouched, the 117 airline passengers barely whispered as their plane lifted off the desert tarmac and headed for the lush, volcano-dotted country some thought they'd never see again.

It was a Friday morning, October 8, 2010, many hours before Súchite's Guatemala homecoming, as his chartered flight left Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport. Just as you'd see on any friendly, no-frills airline, the flight attendants wore khaki pants and blue polo shirts. But on this ride, they gave their announcements from the front of the plane, not venturing past a phalanx of security agents who stood from their seats as soon as the jet was airborne and stationed themselves along the plane's aisle, resembling statues as they towered over their charges. Thirteen of the passengers wore shackles.

Most of the travelers to Guatemala City had been wearing the same grimy clothes for days. Some had never been inside a jetliner, and their eyes darted about the cabin with curiosity. Others stared outside the windows, already lost in the clouds and endless sky. A few anxiously rubbed their arms, as if trying to console themselves. The air was thick with the smell of humanity.

The crew—the pilots and flight attendants, the onboard nurse and security agents—were contract hires. Normally, a single officer from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) would be aboard to supervise, but for this flight, with two reporters, a TV cameraperson, and a newspaper photographer along for the ride, two extra ICE agents came to assist.

Behind their stoic masks, many of the plane's passengers were coming to terms with what they considered a failure. Some lamented the thousands of dollars still owed to the smugglers who helped them cross into the United States. But at least one of the travelers viewed the flight as something of a process—and a blessing, certainly not the worst result in a game where risks are high and death is possible.

"Who knows?" Súchite said as he shrugged his shoulders and settled in to enjoy the ride. "Perhaps a rattlesnake waited for me in the desert." This was his third time on a U.S. deportation flight.

The first time Súchite tried to emigrate to the United States, in 2006, he went to a smuggler and paid the Guatemalan equivalent of $5,000 for a three-try package deal. On his first try, he didn't even get to the U.S. border. He was caught in Mexico and deported. On Súchite's second try, he managed to get through the dangerous Mexican traverse and made it into Arizona, but was quickly apprehended after crossing over.

On his third attempt, success. After four nights and three days walking through the Arizona desert, he evaded ICE agents and made it to a coyote-hired truck at a designated meeting spot. The driver hauled Súchite and several others to Los Angeles and then to Las Vegas, where he met up with his brother, Benjamin Jr., now thirty-two (Súchite, twenty-five, is the youngest brother of thirteen siblings). The pair hugged, gorged themselves at a $20 casino buffet, and traveled to Wyoming, where Súchite worked for a year and a half before getting caught without documents and sent home.

Paying another $5,000 for a new three-try deal was out of the question for his most recent trip north. So when Súchite decided to reclaim his job working on gas lines in the Wyoming desert, he knew he'd have only himself to rely on.

In late September, following the scraggly notes he'd written during his last coyote-led trip, Súchite set out from Buena Vista, his eastern Guatemalan hometown, which is inland from the Caribbean port town of Livingston, along the road to Peten in the department of Izabal. With Gatorade, water, and cans of corn and tuna in his backpack to sustain him, he hopped aboard a series of rickety buses and trucks that snaked their way into Mexico, past the U.S. border, and up into the Arizona desert.

At first, after trekking safely across the U.S. border, it looked as if he'd have no trouble reaching Wyoming. But nearly three and a half hours into the Sonoran Desert, on September 28, 2010, a U.S. Border Patrol agent nabbed Súchite in Ajo, Arizona. ICE records showed that Súchite had been caught previously at the border and had signed a voluntary deportation order. Súchite was arrested and taken to a cell at the Arizona Removal Operations Coordination Center, the deportation hub at the Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport that ICE opened in March 2010 to send Central Americans, most of them Guatemalan, back to their home countries on regularly scheduled flights.

As of September 18 in fiscal year 2010, ICE centers around the country deported 158,964 people on flights to destinations worldwide on what some call ICE Air. Nearly 18 percent of those people—28,204—were sent to Guatemala City, most of them on flights from Mesa-Phoenix Gateway. After Mexicans, according to ICE data, Guatemalans make up the second-highest number of deportees from the United States. Deportations from Mesa took a sharp rise during the Bush administration, as the *Arizona Republic* reported, from about 6,150 in fiscal year 2003 to nearly 16,000 in 2006. The numbers have continued to grow under the Obama administration. And the flights aren't cheap—for each one-way trip to Latin America, the federal government spends an average of $560 per deportee, according to 2010 ICE data. Little of this cost goes to passenger amenities. The in-flight meal on Súchite's plane was a sack lunch that contained a cheese sandwich and a juice box.

Juan Sebastian Chavez, a few rows up from Súchite, was a first-time flier from Mesa-Phoenix Gateway. A forty-two-year-old from a community inhabited by a handful of mostly indigenous families, Chavez resembled most of the plane's passengers—high cheekbones, ashen complexion, small frame. And like many of the deportees, he was worried about money.

Chavez left his wife and children in Colcoquitz, an isolated village near Mexico in western Guatemala, where the people speak Mam, one of the country's twenty-three recognized Amerindian languages. There are no roads in or out of Colcoquitz—it's a three-hour mountain trek to Ixchiguan, the nearest town. In 2005, Hurricane Stan shattered the hamlet and carried away the village's topsoil, making it impossible for residents to grow corn, a Guatemalan staple.

"There are no fields to work," Chavez explained in Spanish.

Desperate to feed his family, Chavez borrowed the equivalent of about $1,250 in quetzales at 15 percent interest to fund a trip to visit his friend in the U.S. who promised to help him get a job in Minnesota. Chavez was caught on his way north, and is now deep in debt. He doesn't know whether he'll try the trip again.

Immigrant-rights activists paint those who cross the border illegally as the poorest, most vulnerable in society—the exploited backbone of the American economy. Anti–illegal immigration activists describe them as job stealers, invaders, and leeches who are contributing to the eventual downfall of an overly generous United States.

Súchite doesn't consider himself part of either group. Unlike Chavez and many of the others on the plane, his reasons for venturing north have little to do with surviving. It's about thriving, he explained.

"Sometimes you have to take risks," he said, "or else you'll never achieve anything."

Most Guatemalan men are married with children by the time they are in their early twenties. But Súchite, who is Ladino, a mix of Spanish and indigenous blood, had none of the usual attachments when he decided to set out on his own.

"In Guatemala you have two alternatives to make something of a good life," he said, holding up two fingers. "You join the narcos or you leave for the United States."

In his stylish, well-fitting jeans and Puma-like shoes, Súchite stood out on the planeful of men, who mostly wore dusty work boots and oversize pants and shirts. Savvier and more educated than the typical deportee, he showed off his ruby-encrusted gold ring from his 2004 high school graduation—an achievement in a country with a 30 percent illiteracy rate.

Three brown beaded bracelets Súchite bought on his way through Mexico decorated his arm. But he had hopes for a better souvenir from his trip, an iPhone 4.

Súchite said the temptation of joining the narcotics trade is a lure for young men like him, who carry ambition and want more in a country where social class follows a family for generations. But many who join the narco trade end up dead. Migrating north, he said, is a less-dangerous alternative.

"Over there you can make a pretty good life and you can save something," he said. "Over there you can treat yourself to nice things."

During the four-and-a-half-hour flight, many of Súchite's fellow passengers slept, awakened only by the announcements of two escorted bathroom breaks and lunch. As the plane neared Guatemala City, a few pulled yellowed family photos from their pockets while everyone buckled their seat belts and braced themselves for what U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement considered the end of the journey. For the deportees, though, the real journey was just beginning.

The welcome center created for the thousands of Guatemalan migrants who return home every year is a drab concrete building that blends into the rest of the Guatemala City airport, a scar on the green tropical range enclosing it. Some of the new arrivals from Arizona sighed with relief as they filed inside. Others smiled uneasily, scratching their heads. A few hastily covered their faces with their hands and T-shirts, hiding from the local press, who were there to report their arrival.

A half-dozen Guatemalan immigration officers in white polo shirts handed out sack lunches, jotted down the repatriated men's information, inked their thumbs, and directed them to sit in a waiting area.

Above them, a sign written in Spanish and Quiché read: "*Ya estás en tu país y con tu gente. It ko chupan ri a tinamit ki kin ri ka winiäg.*" Translation: "You are now in your country and with your people."

One of the Guatemalan immigration officials stood before his captive audience and greeted the group with his best line: "Welcome back to your country, young men. Because there are people who leave and never return."

The men inhaled their meals as the Guatemalan official spoke, but it wasn't until the ICE officers left the building that their sober faces thawed. Whispers became yells and teasing among friends. Noisy conversations erupted as long lines formed behind a bank of telephones—each of the men was entitled to a free, three-minute call.

"I'm leaving for home right now," Súchite said into the receiver when he reached his mother and told her that he was okay.

He hung up and then made one more stop to recover his backpack, which got through transit with all of his money and personal items intact. It's part of protocol for U.S. officials to return all belongings found on deportees at the time of capture, and Súchite said that during his three times in U.S. custody he's never had anything taken.

It's different in Mexico, Súchite said. He heard stories of police theft, brutality, and worse against Central Americans when he was caught there and thrown into jail next to inmates convicted of robbery and homicide. "Mexico is dangerous for us."

But so is Guatemala City for a freshly arrived deportee. The capital has a reputation for theft, kidnappings, even killings, and the returnees, some with wads of dollars in their pockets, are easy marks.

At a makeshift money-exchange counter at the airport terminal, Súchite received 1,200 quetzales for $150 he was carrying, and then entered the noisy and congested mess that is Guatemala City. Cars honked. Sirens wailed. Trucks burped fumes. Pedestrians breathed in plumes of exhaust.

Three unmarked white buses idled, waiting to take the deportees to terminals across the city. After that, they'd be responsible for paying their own way home.

While Súchite had plenty of money to get back to his small tropical town, many others did not. Súchite handed one man he befriended 60 quetzales—about $7.50—and split about 110 quetzales among six others running toward the buses.

"Poor guys," he said. "They didn't even have enough for their bus fare back home."

As the government-provided buses began to fill, Súchite hung back. A seasoned deportee, he knew it would be smarter to find his own transportation right from the start. The government vehicles, he claimed, were moving targets for potential thieves.

"Besides, they're too slow," he said. "I want to get home as soon as possible."

Súchite then jumped into a taxi with a couple of other deportees he was helping out. The older of the two talked about how he had to find a way north again, to the wife and children he left behind in the United States. He was on the hunt for a coyote.

Ervin Lopez, a fifty-two-year-old who has chauffeured deportees for the past three years, ricocheted his white Toyota-turned-taxi past dented vehicles and pedestrians in a ride that resembled a game of Frogger.

"This was today's second flight of deportees," he said. Snarled in traffic, he cranked down his window. His brow beaded with sweat, Lopez began his daily lecture. "The truth is that I think what they do, traveling up there, is not correct," he said of the deportees. His waving finger punctuated his lesson. Súchite and his friends pretended not to listen.

"One can make it here if one is astute enough," the driver said. "Really, if you can't make it here, how are you going to make it on the other side—lost among Americans?"

Some of his passengers, Lopez said, have cried in his taxi. He spoke of the *naturales*—the indigenous folks who barely speak Spanish, indebted up to $6,000.

"They should invest that money here instead," he said.

Later, Súchite dismissed the taxi driver's opinion as "ignorant," but at the bus terminal he thanked the driver and paid him 60 quetzales. He and the other two men exchanged numbers and hugs before separating. A moment later, Súchite realized that he'd missed the 3:30 p.m. bus, and the next one wouldn't get him all the way home. A quick ride on a second taxi and another 60 quetzales took him to a separate terminal ten minutes away.

Súchite grabbed a ticket and collapsed into seat forty-three—the last seat sold. This bus wasn't as nice or as fast as the one at the first terminal, but it would have to do.

Súchite surrendered to six and a half more hours of travel. No air conditioning. Windows rolled down. Dust caked around the torn cushions. Some of the passengers stood, gripping the luggage compartments above.

"I hate how they allow people to stand," Súchite said. "There's no order here, compared to the U.S."

A second later, the bus growled its way through the city's oldest neighborhoods, squeezing through narrow colonial streets originally built for travelers on horseback.

The heat radiating from the diesel engine cooked Súchite's feet. Motorcycles zoomed past the bus. Big rigs hauling weighed-down trailers sped by on a two-lane highway, passing the bus rolling north through the country's green interior.

"Peanuts. Quesadillas," yelled a woman as she climbed aboard the bus, carefully balancing her wares. The sales pitch woke Súchite, who had been sleeping for the past couple hours.

He beckoned the woman and paid 20 quetzales for two corn tortillas topped with tomato-doused chicken.

"Organic," he said. "Not like that stuff Americans call chicken. Not the same taste."

About an hour later, the bus screeched its way into Morales—essentially a town with a cafeteria and gas station, serving truck drivers and travelers.

Súchite bumped fists with Ever Aldana, a twenty-three-year-old who supervises the station. They are old high school classmates.

"I thought you were in the United States," Suchite said. Aldana replied that he's never had the desire to go.

Soon enough, Súchite was back on the bus, only about an hour south from home. The highway, which heads north en route to El Petén and eventually Mexico, is the same route Súchite has taken many times—north to Naranjo on the border of Guatemala and Mexico.

With about a half hour to go before his stop, the bus lurched to a halt, near the Cruce de Ruidosa. Two Guatemalan transit officials climbed aboard. Súchite

was about to undergo an immigration check in his own country. The officers were looking for foreigners—specifically other Central Americans making their way to the United States.

"They do this all the time," Súchite said, throwing up his hands in exasperation.

The uniformed men worked their way down the bus aisle, demanding identification from each passenger.

"Documents?" they barked.

One of the officials stopped before a husky man sipping on a water bottle.

"You have none?" the official said. "Out," he commanded, and pointed to the door.

Then the official stopped before Súchite. "Documents," he ordered.

Súchite got out his identification card. "Son of a bitch," he murmured under his breath when the official turned his back. Súchite pointed out that Central Americans are allowed to move and work freely within the region without a visa. "Still they hassle them," he complained. "All for money. They're just transit police. This isn't even their area. They'll probably take 50 to 100 quetzales from each of them. It's wrong what they do to these people."

At least ten men were forced from the bus. Salvadorans, Nicaraguans, Hondurans—all lined up, inspected up and down by an official pointing a flashlight at them.

Soon after, the bus engine revved and the men who'd been kicked off run toward the door, hopping on just before it shifted into gear. Back at their seats, the murmurs and questioning began as a love song by Ana Gabriel blasted from the chauffer's cab.

The husky man seated in front of Súchite, a Salvadoran, introduced himself as Jose. He wouldn't give his last name. Jose said he was heading to Miami. It was his third trip north. He wouldn't say whether the officials took any cash from them, and didn't seem bothered by the inspection. The hardest part of the journey, Jose pointed out, awaited them in Mexico. Neither the authorities there nor the drug runners show mercy toward migrants. They rob and accost people at will. He rubbed the sweat off his brow and took a sip from his water bottle.

"You know," Súchite whispered, "Jose is the coyote. He told the guy next to him to have the money ready for the police."

The bus accelerated. The driver, looking to make up lost time, zoomed past Rio Dulce, a town overrun by American and European expats and tourists. Their white yachts glistened in the river, dwarfing the one-engine fishing boats belonging to locals. Merengue music flowed out of a popular nightclub called Disco Bahia. It was a Friday night after all, Súchite pointed out. He was only twenty minutes from home.

A few hugs. A pat on the back. No tears. Unlike a *telenovela*, Súchite's family reunion was drama free. After the roadside greeting from his nephew, Súchite stepped inside his childhood home, where his parents invited him to take a seat at the head of the dining table.

Above them was a tin roof; below, a concrete floor. Rebar poked out of cinder blocks where a door should have been, and much of the dining room was open to the outside. Two hammocks swayed across the de facto concrete porch, which becomes a nightly domain for several geckos.

The home is undergoing a remodel, Súchite explained. There's not much money to finish the job.

Súchite's older sister Suceli, thirty-five, emerged from the kitchen with a plateful of refried black beans and a couple of stiff corn tortillas topped with two anemic pork rinds.

A carpenter by trade, Súchite left a wooden railing around the open-air room half finished before heading north.

"Now that he's back he'll have to fix it for me," said his mother, Edith Consuelo Hernandez de Súchite. She laughed. "We're going to put him to work."

The first time Súchite left for the United States, in 2006, Edith was overcome with sadness. While she still worries, this time around things felt more routine.

"Thank God he's here and he's okay," she said. "I never wanted him to go because it's a great risk. One has fear for one's children. There are so many stories of disaster."

"Here life is hard," said Súchite's father, Benjamin Súchite Cordón, who is considered something of a philosopher in the family. "That's why there are so many over there."

The seventy-year-old with a jack-o'-lantern smile wore a blue-and-white sports band on his head to keep what's left of his wild hair in place. He flipped through a book covered in cartoonlike wrapping paper and transparent tape. He studies the Bible and the dictionary every day.

Neither Edith nor Benjamin have ever wanted to visit or move to the United States. "I'd rather visit Israel," Edith said, adjusting a white cotton cloth covering her head. "We're evangelical."

Edith's kitchen serves passing travelers willing to pay for refried black beans, coffee, sugar-laced plantains, and whatever else she can coax up that day. There's a plastic sign outside advertising the diner—called Comedor Glendy, after her twenty-two-year-old daughter—but the restaurant is not much more than the family dining table.

"Business is still bad," she said, "but at least we have something coming in, enough to buy beans to eat."

Even though the diner is right along the main highway, a prized spot, business slowed after September 11, 2001.

"That's when things really got bad," Edith says. The crackdown on the U.S.-Mexico border after the terrorist attacks in the United States has meant fewer travelers heading north on the Guatemalan highway.

At first, Súchite says, the town experienced a tidal wave of locals returning to Buena Vista, some after decades in the U.S. But with fewer dollars funneling into town, the returning migrants had less money to spend at local businesses, including Edith's diner. Competing diners opened by deportees trying to start their lives anew dealt a second blow to Comedor Glendy.

Edith used to serve fifteen to twenty traditional meals on a given day. Now she's lucky to see five customers trickle in. Suceli and her young daughter, Noemi, pitch in by selling clothing and shoes from the diner. But the family mostly survives on whatever money Benjamin makes on side deals as an ad-hoc real estate broker. And on this day Benjamin had promising news. A Brazilian visitor may have some buyers interested in a 1,613-acre piece of land that Benjamin has been brokering on the outskirts of town. On the other hand, this parcel has been in play for five years. Edith rolled her eyes at the mention of the deal.

Still, if the land were to sell, Benjamin would stand to earn a 5 percent cut. The land is priced at 12 million quetzales, or about $1.5 million. That would be $75,000 for Benjamin. The money would go to finish the remodel, attend to Edith's diabetes, and other needs that have been put off for years.

With the money he earned in the U.S., Súchite managed to buy a few of his own plots of land, bordering his father's holdings. But he has yet to develop or cultivate the property. And so, for now, Súchite would crash at his parents' home.

He's not the only one. Suceli returned home with Noemi after the girl's father abandoned them for the capital. They rarely hear from him and he never sends money, Edith said in a hushed voice when Noemi looked away.

Another of Súchite's sisters left her son, Erick, in Buena Vista with her parents when she emigrated to Honduras and started another family with a new husband and new children.

Glendy, the youngest of the thirteen, will likely never live on her own. Edith called her a slow learner, and Súchite later explained that his sister may have slight mental retardation, but she's never been diagnosed.

"We had them out of respect for God," Edith said to explain her large family. "He said to grow and multiply, so we accept what God gives us."

"You see the years I have and I'm still working," said Benjamin, pointing to liver spots on his hands.

Súchite excused himself from the table to get ready for bed and Noemi followed. Then Erick, Glendy, and Benjamin rose from the table and blocked the dining room's entrance with plastic chairs—a nightly ritual.

"It's very safe here," Edith said. "The chairs are to keep dogs and other animals away from the kitchen." She grabbed the plates and shuffled her way to a concrete basin that serves as the kitchen sink.

"He's the most level-headed and centered of our children," Edith said of Súchite, as if revealing a secret. "He's the only one who graduated from high school out of the thirteen. He really liked school … he's also one of the few who looks out for us."

Súchite plopped into a sun-bleached hammock, stepped away from the back garden, and soon fell into a deep sleep.

Rock Springs, Wyoming, is a kind of Mecca for job seekers. In the midst of the economic downturn, the city's official website still advertised its low unemployment rate to prospective residents. It was a promising place for Súchite to follow Benjamin Jr. and work alongside him at a plant creating, sandblasting, and painting gas pipes.

"They didn't ask for a Social Security card or papers," Súchite said. "They provided training in English and Spanish. I made $1,300 a week. Not in a month, in a week." Sometimes with overtime, he was paid up to $1,800 for a week's work.

He quickly warmed to American culture, developing a taste for country music.

"I like that Strait guy," he said, referring to country music legend George Strait.

Every month, he'd join the locals at the civic park to listen to country music. Other times he'd attend rodeos. It reminded him of his bull-riding days as a youth, when he earned the nickname "Matador."

"It was like out of a Western movie," he said.

Mostly, Súchite's American life revolved around work and hoarding pennies. Once in a while, he'd join his brother on road trips to Las Vegas, Oregon, or Los Angeles—places he found more interesting but less lucrative than Wyoming. "Too many immigrants and low-paying jobs," he said. In Rock Springs, he added, "there were … maybe twenty-five to thirty homes in town."

He regularly sent money home to his parents. On occasion he'd send packages full of talking dolls, stuffed animals, and other knickknacks for Erick and Noemi, who quickly became their uncle's biggest fans.

"If you are well behaved and finish your work, you won't get into trouble," said Súchite, who added that he never felt discriminated against. "I have no complaints."

And yet, even though he lived with his brother and other fellow Guatemalans, Súchite started to feel isolated in Wyoming and thought about returning home.

The first time he left Wyoming, however, it was against his will. Local authorities knocked on his door looking for a roommate who had abandoned his vehicle after drunkenly plowing into a kiosk. Instead of the roommate getting into trouble, clean-and-sober Súchite ended up in confinement when he was the one who answered the door and

couldn't show that he was in the country legally. A few weeks after his April 2008 deportation, Súchite crossed back over the border and was quickly back at his old job.

But his glimpse of home stirred a longing for the family, friends, and slow-paced way of life he'd left behind in Buena Vista. After a few months back in Wyoming, he was still homesick. And so, in 2009, he returned to Guatemala, this time without the help of U.S. immigration authorities.

At first, he was thrilled to be home again. But after several months without finding a job that paid even close to what he was earning in the U.S., he realized he'd have to go north again to make a better life. And he was starting to miss Wyoming.

"I missed the work," he said, "the dollars, the country concerts and rodeos."

The sound of Edith's weathered hands thumbing corn kernels off their cobs and into a plastic container on her lap was the first sound Súchite heard when he awoke.

"The hens are hungry," she said as she mixed their breakfast.

Erick and Noemi helped Suceli sort through blue, fuchsia, and mustard-yellow sandals and flip though racks of clothing in the next room, taking inventory of the items and hoping they might make a sale today. Most of the clothing was tagged with stickers that read "Made in China." Months earlier Suceli bought the lot at a discounted price from another lady who bought it wholesale abroad.

A teenager selling the local paper *Nuestro Diario* rode by on a rust-speckled bicycle, and Erick ran toward the boy to stop him. He paid 2.50 quetzales for the paper, which had a photo of a bloodied body on the front page.

"Many people call the paper *Matan Diario* [*The Daily Kill*]," Edith said, thumbing through the pages.

"Here in Guatemala," said Benjamin, "we're subject to a lot of natural disasters and then drugs and killings. Central American justice is justice at its lowest."

He took a sip of instant coffee and lowered his voice. "I like to speak truth," he said. "But the truth can be shocking. That's why lies are so popular here."

Just as in Colombia, Benjamin explained, local drug lords have started building schools, medical clinics, and roads, essentially filling the void of an inept government that is too corrupt to care. "The narcos. These people help the town, the poor," Benjamin said, shaking his head in disapproval. "But they control the people." He gazed at a neatly trimmed house in the neighborhood, which dwarfs the Súchite home.

In this town of banana trees and make-shift businesses, Súchite said, the trinity of providers have been the church, the drug runners, and the United States.

Lines of laundry baked under the sun in the front yards of a mostly residential street as Súchite took a walk through town. He waved to friends driving by. They responded with honks and waves, as if he'd never left. Others he bumped into on foot urged him to come by later. His return to Buena Vista was nothing new. The novelty wore off years ago.

Of his five brothers, one half-brother, and six sisters, only Benjamin Jr. remains in the United States. Still, Súchite said, it's rare to run into young men between twenty and thirty-five years old in Buena Vista.

"They're in Georgia," said Súchite, pointing to a home on the left as he walked along the highway that cuts through town. "And they're in New Jersey …" He gestured toward another home, and then another. "That's New York, I think. … Utah. … Denver …

"They're all up there," he explained. "Most never return. They've been gone for eight, fifteen years."

This is a community inextricably linked with the United States. The town is marked by large, cinder-block homes paid for with dollars from the north and large trucks decorated with Virginia, Wyoming, and Utah license plates. "In almost every house," Súchite said, "there is someone on the other side without documents."

A local but now-retired coyote lives in a mustard-and-ketchup-colored home. Súchite waved at the man, who was sporting a cowboy hat and taking refuge from the sun underneath a covered porch.

"He used to take people up through Tijuana," Súchite said. "There, they were met by an American rancher who would take them to Los Angeles."

That was in the early eighties, though, when crossing was much easier.

"Here if you see a nice house it's because they have family on the other side," Súchite said, "or they're narcos."

The homes tell the story of each migrant's success or lack of it in the United States. Súchite gestured to a cinderblock one-story house with a Spanish-tiled roof. A locked gate fortified the property.

"They're now U.S. citizens and only visit every few years," Súchite said. "They ask friends or relatives to keep it looking good, and at the end of the month they send them money from the U.S."

Others lose their homes outright, giving up their land titles as partial collateral for safe passage across the border.

Up the road, weeds conspired to invade a half-built, white-washed home; its rusted door barely hung on its hinges.

"You see that house?" he said. "They've been away for years and have not done any improvements. They say that the couple still rents over in the U.S. After nine years, they still haven't bought a house there. Supposedly they drive around in big SUVs and live it up, drinking. They have nothing to show for their troubles."

Súchite, who cringes at the sight of anyone who litters, said he kept clear of

drugs, alcohol, and other mischief during his two years in Wyoming.

"I was there to work and to save money," he said. "Imagine … risking your life and throwing it all away on vice."

Súchite thinks that Latino immigrants who drive around the United States in souped-up trucks after having a few beers give others a bad name.

"They really don't deserve to be in the United States," he said. "They just earn money to blow it and don't think about anything else but partying."

Still, he understands that money brings all sorts of temptations.

"Let's say you make $300 a week and you can buy a twenty-four-pack of beer for $30," he said. "Here you are paid 300 quetzales a week and a twenty-four-pack will cost you 240 quetzales, so you really can't afford to drink.

"You see all the money and everything so cheap there. People just get crazy," Súchite said. "Wrongly, they think they'll never get in trouble. They think, Once I cross, I'm free of trouble or danger."

Súchite held Noemi's tiny hand as they meandered past palm trees under the blue tropical sky. He was checking out his three plots of land, tributes to his quick but successful stint in the United States.

"I hope to build a home here someday," he said.

He trudged onto the fertile land, overgrown and flourishing under the year-round sun. Unlike Rock Springs, where minus-twenty-five is typical winter weather, Buena Vista reaches sweltering temperatures in the thick of summer, forcing residents to sleep in hammocks because a bed is simply too hot to lie on.

As Súchite prepared to climb into his brother's mud-caked truck, Noemi clung to her uncle's leg, begging him to take her into Rio Dulce. He reluctantly put her down.

"Some other time," he promised. This trip to Rio Dulce, a twenty-minute drive away, was all business.

Once in town, he slowed to a putter, swerving past backpackers and other tourists, as he backed his truck into an official parking space.

His first stop was to remind a friend of money owed, but the friend wasn't home. At an Internet café, he checked up on his fifty-four Facebook friends, scrolled through e-mail, and picked up a cellphone.

Shopping for dinner was next on his list. A scrawny boy standing on a boat tied to the port threw some *mojarra* into a black plastic bag. The fish flopped about as Súchite steered his truck down a bumpy mud path toward a field on the outskirts of town where his thirty-five-year-old brother Edvin grows okra.

"Maybe *I* should grow okra," Súchite pondered out loud.

The cottonlike plant grows well in Guatemala and, spurred by demand in the United States and Europe, the country has become a major exporter of the vegetable in frozen form. Súchite would hardly get rich growing okra, but his brother makes an okay living at it.

"This way I can have some income for some sort of study." Súchite was thinking about going to law school.

"My family, my land," he said, "it's all here."

Back in Buena Vista, Súchite's father laid on his hammock, holding his wife's hand. He had bad news. The land buyers didn't come through. The Brazilian made excuses and tried to delay the sale.

"I think he was lying to you all along," Edith said.

The situation is just another example of what sparked Súchite's most recent attempt to return to the United States. Now that he's back, he's not sure what he will do. Stay and grow okra and try to earn money for law school or try his luck in the north once again? While it's become increasingly difficult to cross into the U.S., Súchite thinks that if one is smart and careful, it's not as dangerous as most make it out to be.

"Three times I've tried crossing and I've never seen a dead person," he said. "The ones who die are those who allow drugs to be stuffed into their packs so they don't have to pay. Or they allow themselves to be put into the back of trailers. Those are the people who die. I'd rather walk the whole way."

Martita Aguilar, his twelve-year-old niece, listened closely as Súchite talked. She said she wants to try her luck up north, too. But she doesn't want to do it her uncle's way—illegally.

"I want to go earn dollars," said the fair-skinned girl with an innocent smile. "Actually, I really want to go study over there. I just wish we could all go."

She's a good student, Súchite said of his niece. He wants to get her a scholarship, perhaps some sort of exchange through a local Rotary Club. But he'd hate for her to cross into the U.S. the way he did.

While he would never deny anyone else's right to make the journey north—he'd even be okay with a future son trying his luck—he said it's different for women. He's heard about and seen smugglers take advantage of the young, pretty girls, and he thinks the coyotes would likely have their way with Martita.

Then it was Erick's turn to speak up. He'd like to make the trip, too.

"It would be an adventure," Erick said. "I want to work for dollars."

He admired one of the Mexican bracelets his uncle gave him after an earlier trip. His fingers grazed the leather strap around his arm as he looked out to the highway and watched the buses zip by the front porch. Most of them were headed north.

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