

Day As a Day Laborer

By Ryan Deto

“Pinche” this and *“cabrón”* that. The day laborers I worked with in Capistrano Beach, California articulated these Spanish versions of “fucking” and “bastard” constantly. I even heard the occasional English “shit.” I didn’t realize that swear words could be incorporated, multiple times, into every sentence of every discussion. I was not taken aback or offended by this revelation; being a champion of curse words, I regularly drop F-bombs merely because I think they’re humorous. Still, I was shocked at the frequency at which the swear words were verbalized. The way the day laborers cursed opened me up to a whole new world that I didn’t think was a reality.

The Friday morning starts early. The coastal fog still lingers as I arrive at the parking lot behind Donut World on Camino Capistrano in Capistrano Beach at 6:30 a.m., hoping I am not too late to get a day-laborer job. The small restaurant resembles more of a run-down shack than a donut shop; the powder blue paint chips off the exterior walls and day laborers keep filing in and out the restroom located on the side of building. Workers speckle the parking lot, hanging out in small groups of three or five. I shuffle up to a pair of men leaning against the window of a deserted laundromat. The old plaid flannel jackets and tattered jeans of the two men are typical of the outfits worn by the majority of the workers waiting in the parking lot. I chose an ensemble that includes an old red Stanford hoodie, paint-stained blue sweatpants and a dirty black baseball cap to try to fit in with the crowd. Even with the outfit I still get a barrage of strange looks from all of the workers. My costume may resemble that of a typical day laborer, but it does

not disguise the fact that I am the only white guy waiting for a job in the parking lot. The two men standing next to me break apart to leave me all by myself. I am an island in an unfamiliar sea.

Standing silently is not the only way to pass time while waiting for jobs in Capistrano Beach. One Sunday morning I went down to Donut World to try to get some work. To my surprise, the workers were separated into groups, playing different games. Three men were throwing quarters on the sidewalk, playing a game called “The Line.” Each man threw a quarter onto the sidewalk, trying to get his quarter closest to the crevice between the blocks of concrete. Whoever got closest to the crevice won the quarters of the other two players. If a player landed the quarter in the crevice then the other two players would give the winner an extra quarter each. If any of the quarters were the exact distance from the crevice or in the crevice itself, then those players threw again to determine a winner. Further back in the lot, groups of men huddle around the back of trucks playing 5-card draw poker, gambling, smoking cigarettes and joints, and laughing all at the same time. A car drives by and a young white man and an older white woman, perhaps his mother, asked for two men to work in their yard. They pick a short, young Mexican man and his chubby friend and drive off.

The strange thing was that the majority of the members of each group didn't react to the employers driving up and asking for workers. Could all of the workers be so lazy as to refuse an easy opportunity to work? That seemed highly unlikely. In his book *Tally's Corner*, Elliot Liebow describes the congregation of black men on a street corner in Washington, D.C. An employer approaches the group and almost all of them refuse work. Since the men hang out on the street and refuse work, they are perceived as lazy.

Liebow explains, however, that each man has his own complex situation and the fact that they spend time on a street corner in the middle of the day does not mean that they do not have a job. The black men just chose the street corner as a gathering place, an escape from other parts of their lives. The workers hanging out near Donut World are probably doing the same thing. But I am not waiting in the parking lot to hang out or play games; I am waiting to find a job.

The name of the game is waiting. I stand alone waiting and waiting on that Friday morning. I watch other workers wait, they watch me wait. Most of us stay quiet and keep to ourselves; others drink coffee out of small Styrofoam cups and smoke cigarettes. “Ay cabrón, chinga tu madre” (*Hey you bastard, fuck your mother*), a worker says to thwart the insult of another worker.

After 45 minutes alone, I am approached by a scrawny wrinkled. His name is José. He looks at me and says in decent English, “You here for work?” “Yes, Sí, Trabajar” (*Yes, work*), I respond. “How long does it take to get a job?” I ask him. José’s response, either because he doesn’t understand the question or he has become so cynical that he just wants to say what is on his mind, is a bit confusing. “All this is bull-shit. All these guys, just bull-shit.” He points over to a group of men leaning against the concrete wall, and I conclude from their lackadaisical mannerisms that these men are technically waiting for work, but have no real intention of getting a job. After a few moments, José leaves and meanders from group to group. Steam from José’s breath mixes with the smoke from the cigarette dangling between his fingers as he tells jokes, complains about life, and shouts Spanish obscenities. “Callate. Eres uno joto” (*Shut up. You are a faggot*.)” When he is not talking, which occurs infrequently, José displays a scowl that

exposes his wrinkled, unshaven face. The dark brown skin ruffles around every part of his face except around his most noticeable feature, a missing left eye. He runs his two-toned hands, complete with dirty overgrown fingernails and calluses covering every digit and palm, up and down his face as if to attempt to wipe away the scowl.

Painters and carpenters drive in and out of the parking lot all morning. They speak with some laborers, but no one gets any jobs. I wonder if this day laboring situation is just a cat-and-mouse game between employers and laborers. Do workers here actually get work? There are about 30 of us waiting in the parking lot, and it looks like we will be waiting all day.

One city that seems to be on the right track for helping laborers get jobs is Laguna Beach. The small town has a designated day laborer waiting area right outside town on Laguna Canyon Road. Thinking that there must be someone behind this act of courtesy, I look into it. I find an article in the *Los Angeles Times*, written by Jennifer Delson, which gives me the answer, but not the one I am looking for. The article states that “For Laguna Beach officials, the issue is not immigration but controlling traffic and prevention of loitering.” Delson’s article states that the city manager, Kenneth Frank, said the center isn’t “right for immigration law or wrong for immigration law. It’s just a pragmatic solution. We do not have the practical ability to enforce federal immigration law.” Treating day laborers as a “pragmatic” solution towards traffic makes them sound like potholes or speed bumps. These immigrants, illegal or not, are people with feelings and responsibilities. Emma Lazarus’ poem *The New Colossus* engraved on the Statue of Liberty reads “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” This poem gave immigrants the promise of equality and freedom, no matter what

their background was in their country of origin. The laborers in Capistrano Beach are those tired, poor huddled masses, just waiting to get a job.

After an hour and a half, I walk a block down Camino Capistrano to see if there are any jobs but there are not so I walk back to Donut World. I go up to José and ask him if there have been any jobs. He says “no” and gives me the line about bull-shit again. *Alright man I get it; everything is bull-shit.* I lean against a stone wall that surrounds a lumber company adjacent to Donut World and begin to lose all hope. At 8:30 I decide that nothing is going to happen and contemplate leaving, when a black Mercedes S.U.V drives up and all the workers swarm to it like kids to an ice cream truck. They all start shouting “pick me, pick me.” The lady in the car needs four workers to do various gardening tasks, so I take my opportunity and shout “I speak English.” I am chosen instantly, and in a heartbeat the spotlight is on me. All of the workers turn to look at me as if I am the grown-up with the money for ice cream. I select Jos Emma Lazarus’ and the two men who are closest to me and all four of us cram into my two-door Honda Civic.

As we follow the black S.U.V, I sour about the fact that it might not have been my ability to speak English alone that won me the job. My fair complexion, my blue eyes, and my sandy brown hair probably figured into the lady’s decision. My gardening experience ends with mowing a lawn and trimming rose bushes. My soft hands blister every time I twist off bottle caps.

Racial tension has always coincided with day labor. When the employers, who are mainly white, hire laborers who are mostly minorities, racial tension cannot be avoided. A *Los Angeles Times* article by Richard Fausset shows the racial stereotypes that

go along with day labor in Atlanta, Georgia by stating “Everyone agrees that it's better to be brown than to be black.” The laborers themselves recognize this as well. Jose Diaz, an illegal immigrant from Mexico working in Atlanta says, “They don't want to pick them up because they don't like to work,” about his African American counterparts. In Capistrano Beach, however, there were no African American day laborers, only the Latinos and myself. And with me being white, the lady might have assumed me more trustworthy than others. I do not blame this decision entirely on the lady; she probably has little experience dealing with racial groups other than her own. San Clemente is 87.9% white (as of 2000 census). This percentage is reinforced by the gated community in which the lady lives, where the chance for interaction with individuals of a different race is slim to none.

The two-story house in San Clemente is designed to look as if it were built in Tuscany or Spain with beige and orange painted walls and a red shingled roof. We follow the lady to the backyard, where I become overwhelmed. The grass reaches up to my shins, weeds litter every planter box, and a miniature bamboo-likereed chokes the entire yard. The lady instructs us to remove the majority of the reeds and to perform other minor gardening tasks. I begin to assess the situation by standing and surveying the yard. While I stare blankly at the yard, not sure where to start, the other workers begin work, which immediately exposes my inexperience. I am the kid picked last for the dodge ball game and they are the kids who already have under-arm hair and who throw the ball hard enough to singe your skin.

José begins to pull weeds in the planter boxes that surround the stone-bordered pool. Mario, a tall Mexican man in his mid thirties with a prominent beer-belly and an ear

to ear smile, joins him. On the other side of the yard, Caesar pulls a pair of gardening gloves and small shovel out of his back pocket and starts removing the mini-bamboo reeds. I stand in the center of the yard, dumbfounded, when the lady walks up to me and says, “You probably need a pair of gloves, huh?” She fetches the only gloves she can find, a pair of ladies’ gloves that, to add insult to injury fit my lady-soft hands. With my beautiful teal-green gloves, I join Caesar in removing the reeds and am mesmerized by his technique. The youngest of the three men, in his late twenties, he uses his broad shoulders to dig underneath the reed which removes the ball-like root along with the two foot reed with ease. With no shovel, I grab the reed at its lowest point and pull delicately so I don’t break off the plant without removing the root. Unfortunately, I still fail in removing the root and Caesar, noticing my discontent, looks at me with his big, dark brown eyes, shows me how to use the shovel, then moves on to clearing dead shrubbery from the back of the yard. I imitate Caesar’s technique and finally begin to do my fair share in the day’s labor.

As the day moves on and the sun rises higher in the sky, the temperature escalates, the wind disappears, and the shade shrinks to where only the ants crawling alongside the house are shaded. By noon, the skin on the back of my neck is as red as well...as red as the skin of a stupid white boy who thinks he doesn’t need any protection from working for three hours in the sun. Caesar, on the other hand, came prepared with a full brimmed flannel hat. Luckily the lady is nice enough to bring us big glasses of ice water while we work so we are able to combat the heat. Also after three hours, other than acquiring a horrible sunburn, I settle into a groove. Thanks to Caesar’s technique I turn

pro at removing the reeds, and I also plant some rosemary and mint in an herb garden along with edging the lawn.

The yard is finally starting to come along. José mows the lawn and picks most of the weeds and Mario trims all the bushes. These accomplishments, however, do not stack up to the work of Caesar. Caesar spends two hours working the back of the yard where a group of bushes with skateboard-sized leaves covers an area 3 yards deep and 20 yards wide. He moves like a cartoon character removing and throwing groups of dead leaves so quickly that by the time the leaves hit the concrete another group is already in the air. When Caesar finishes there is a wall of leaves 2 feet high and 10 yards long.

Caesar and I converge after our tasks and we look over at José and Mario who are in the front yard, lounging under a tree. A part of me wants to go tell them to get up and get back to work, but Caesar beats me to the punch. “Hey those guys no good, don’t pick those guys for next time.” There will always be workers who are lazy and look to take advantage of situations, but Caesar is not one of them. In fact, he doesn’t even like José and Mario because he knows that they can jeopardize his reputation and performance at a job. The lady said that if we did a good job we would get a tip, and Caesar apparently wants that tip.

Caesar’s words inspire me to work harder. I ask the lady what else we can do and she tells me a list of things, some of which are ridiculous: plant groundcover seeds all over the planter boxes, rearrange an ivy plant so it “fans” over the fence (ridiculous), remove all the remaining dead shrubbery, power wash the perfectly clean driveway (ridiculous), remove some more reeds from one area, and clean her grill on the barbecue (ridiculous). Jose also thinks all these tasks are ridiculous and says under his breath “Ay

puta, no podemos hacer todo (Hey bitch, we can't do all that)." I, like Caesar want a good tip, and tell José to calm down. José responds with "Ok man, you are the boss."

Twenty-one years old, no labor experience, muscles aching from bending over all day, and I have become the foreman. "I am not the boss, José," I say and then look around to Mario and Caesar, "No estoy jefe, no estoy jefe." In reality, however, I am the boss. The lady comes to me to tell me the task and I tell José, Mario, and Caesar what to do. I drove them here in my car and I will end up handling the money situation. The lady thinks I am the most capable and responsible because of my race and therefore, non-purposefully, puts me in charge.

We accomplished the normal and ridiculous tasks in two hours with ease, with the exception of me cutting my hand on the power washer and the men all laughing at me. "Pinche idiota (fucking idiot)," José says as we walk to the back to collect our payment. The lady hands me \$280, 5 hours work at \$10 per hour and a twenty tip. On top of that the lady fed us pizza for lunch. All of us were content with the payment and the car ride back to Donut World was one full of jokes and stories. José asked me where I lived, if I went to school, and if I went to church. José's constant chatter was not surprising, but even Mario and Caesar, who were both quiet most of the day, conversed in the back seat. "Now the real work begins," José says and all I can muster is a confused face, "Cerveza!" he exclaims.

"Yes, yes of course. Borracho" (*get drunk*), I say as all of us laugh.

And I think after waiting two hours in the cold foggy morning, working five hours in the dry Southern Californian sun, cutting my hand with a high-powered water gun, all while trying to not look like an idiot, I could really go for a nice, cold beer.

Sources

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