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A Chronicle of Hope

The Odyssey Of

The Almonte Family

By Barbara Fischkin

Roselia Maritza Gonzalez de Almonte lives in a hut, a three-room *casita*, made from the trunks and leaves of palm trees. Hens and roosters pop into the kitchen at will; four people share two beds; the toilet is an outhouse, the bath, a hand basin in a tin shed. There was a time when none of that bothered Roselia, when she was happy with her thatched roof, her orange tree, her soothing view of green mountains. She could walk to her mother's house in five minutes if it was sunny, 10 if the rain made the road mud.

Now she is unsure. She imagines the kinds of houses where Americans live and she says, "I think I should be ashamed of this."

There is a balance sheet in her head: the poor versus the prosperous, the familiar versus the unknown, taking care of her family now versus working so she can provide more for them later — the calculations and mental preparations of an emigrant. Three years ago, with a visa in his suitcase and a new set of false teeth in his mouth, Roselia's husband, Javier, left their home in the Dominican Republic for the United States. On Friday, Roselia will join him. Only the oldest of her three children will be coming with her.

Roselia says that on her own she never would have developed the yearnings, the doubts or the plans. It was all because of Javier. He was the hustler, the one who dreamed about what people in their poor Caribbean country repeatedly refer to as "*una vida mejor*," a better life.

Roselia was 31 when Javier left. She had lived with him since she was 17. "I didn't want him to go," she says. "Everyone says that if your husband goes he'll meet an American woman." Javier convinced her that was not going to happen. He wrote love letters home in which he called her "my love, my life, my sky, my being." Like many couples in out-of-the-way Dominican country villages, Javier and Roselia had never bothered to get married. Although they considered themselves husband and wife, anyway, they knew that would not be enough for immigration officials. After a year, Javier came home on vacation and they had a civil ceremony in the nearby city of Puerto Plata so that, as a husband, father and legal alien, he could bring the rest of his family to America.

This February, Roselia and her oldest daughter, Elizabeth, 16, were granted visas. The American consular officer who interviewed them would not permit Roselia to bring her other children: a daughter, Cristian, 14, and a son, Mauricio, 11. The officer, according to his supervisor, was not convinced that Javier could support all his children. Roselia was not convinced she could leave without her two youngest. But her husband said she should. And, once again, she began to see things his way.

Roselia and Elizabeth will join Javier in his Queens apartment. They will become part of an insular but enormous Dominican immigrant community, concentrated in two New York City neighborhoods, Corona, where Javier lives, and Washington Heights. Twenty years ago, about 50,000 Dominicans lived in the United States; now estimates range from half a million to 800,000, including legal as well as illegal immigrants. In 1985

Dominicans received more immigrant visas than any other group of foreigners moving to the New York area. The United States Consulate in Santo Domingo says that one out of seven Dominicans lives in this country.

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The Almonte *casita* is in Camu, a hilly farming village of 1,500 where houses and huts of varying sizes are haphazardly arranged on a grid of bumpy dirt roads, riverbeds and sugarcane fields. Most of the structures are made from palm trees. A cinderblock wall or a tin roof signals upward mobility — or perhaps money sent from relatives in America. It is about a 20-minute drive to Playa Dorada, where condominiums surround a luxu-

ry golf course; a little farther to the city of Puerto Plata, where the Almonte children attend school and foreigners sunbathe at a Victorian-style resort hotel.

In Camu there is a rickety grocery, a neighborhood bar with black-spotted cowhide chairs, a small circular cockfight gallery, built by Javier, and a church where a lay minister gives communion when the priest from Puerto Plata can't make it. Since there are no telephones, friends visit by chance, traveling by foot, horse, burro or truck. In the evenings, the more comfortable citizens of Camu sit in front of black and white sets, watching Dominican television. Power outages are frequent; too often in

the midst of a favorite soap opera.

It is about 180 miles from Camu to the U.S. Consulate, a three-story, concrete, fenced building on Calle Cesar Nicolas Penson in Santo Domingo. Compared to Camu, the Dominican Republic's capital city is daunting. There are traffic jams, Chinese restaurants, movie houses and sprawling luxury hotels, including one with furnishings designed by a famous Dominican, Oscar de la Renta. But it is nowhere near as cosmopolitan as Manhattan — or even as frenetic as Corona. There are no real skyscrapers: residents say they are unafraid to walk the streets at night.

Roselia and her three children were summoned to the consulate on Feb. 19 to discuss their visa applications. They made the bus trip over two days on Carretera Duarte, the main north-south highway. Americans say it seems more like a country road.

At 7:30 a.m., the consulate was already in its usual state, packed with Dominicans laughing, chatting, fretting and praying in a Caribbean Spanish that moves so fast other Latins have trouble understanding it. That day, 205 other applicants had also been called for their *citas* — appointments with consular officers who would decide whether they could become legal, resident aliens, the cream of American immigrants.

Roselia had not slept in four nights. Her dull, days-old headache had become sharp. She was surrounded by faces — dark, dark brown to Mediterranean white, reflections of a country frequently overrun by foreign conquerors. They were poor and middle class, from the cities and farms, dressed up in New York-style clothes and thread-bare cotton dresses and suits. But they all had a common focus: Nueva York and *una vida mejor*, the Big Apple and the American Dream. With visas, they said, they could go to Washington Heights or Corona and make money. Excited adolescent girls wearing the kinds of handmade lace dresses that would wind up in the backs of their closets in New York, clung to their anxious mothers and fathers. When the waiting rooms filled up, people sat on a hallway bench underneath a portrait of Ronald Reagan smiling a wry half-smile — not welcoming, not unwelcoming.

Roselia was too nervous to join in the chatter. So were the children. They had only been to the capital once before — a week earlier for their medical examinations.

Mauricio Almonte, Roselia's 11-year-old son, stared with dark, almond eyes, breaking his silence only to tell his mother that he was hungry. She gave him her last mint. He put the hard candy in his mouth, bit it in half and offered a piece to his older sister, Cristian. Roselia opened her Gideon Bible and read Psalm 91, which promises believers protection from terror, pestilence and destruction. She was in the midst of her third reading when she heard the announcement.

"Senora Almonte y familia."

An American bureaucrat named Jonathan Mueller was the visa officer. The Almontes went into his office. He spoke in Spanish. No one in the family, including Javier, knows more than a few words of English.

Does her husband have a car? he asked. No, Roselia replied.

Who does her husband live with?

With his brother, she said.

The American officer turned to Elizabeth, the oldest daughter, and asked her where she went to school. At the Liceo Jose de Beau of Puerto Plata, she answered.

What class was she in? The fourth year of secondary school, she said.

Without speaking to Cristian or Mauricio, the officer turned back to Roselia. She says she will never forget what happened next. He told her that Cristian and Mauricio would have to stay behind.

"He said that I would get the visas only for myself and my eldest daughter. He said that after three months in the United States I could try to ask again for the other children. He asked me if that was okay and I said yes. I didn't ask him to explain because I was afraid.

"After that I started to cry. Eliza said, 'Mami. Are you crazy?' I had thought we could all go. Because they are so young. When he told me my head kept hurting. I was thinking in that moment 'how could I leave them?'"

Afterward, Elizabeth said she felt both happy and sad.

Cristian said she was relieved that,

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at least, she and her brother would be together in Camu.

Mauricio cried in the bus on the way home.

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Roselia's husband, Mario Wencesl Almonte-Mercedes, called Javier by family and friends, lives with his brother Ernesto in a utilitarian, two-bedroom, ground-floor apartment in a squat, brick building on 97th Place in Corona. Javier thinks it will make Roselia, whose house in Camu does not have indoor plumbing, cry with happiness. There is a refrigerator-freezer, a full-sized stove and oven and a bathroom with a tub and shower. At \$600 a month, it is a bargain in New York City. But Javier is now a New Yorker; he is looking for a bigger and better place.

He is 43, older than Roselia, who just turned 35. She was still a sturdy schoolgirl when he started looking at her. He remembers being entranced by her long dark hair and by her favorite dress with its multi-colored checks.

As a child, Javier had dreamed about becoming a pilot. But he was the son of poor farmers who never saw education as a way out. They did not object when he quit school at 15 and became a carpenter. Javier had no regrets. He just started dreaming new dreams. About immigration, city lights, college for his children, a big house for his wife. He watched the planes which flew over the palm thatched huts of Camu. But, now he wanted to be a passenger. Elizabeth was 11 when he told her: "Maybe one day you will go in a plane to America."

Roselia's father, Victor Gonzalez, was prosperous by Camu standards when the couple met. Today he owns 186 acres where he grows sugar cane and raises cattle. At one point, he even bought the small plot of land Javier's father had owned. Javier worked for his father-in-law for a while. But he wanted to make it on his own. At the best of times, he made less than the equivalent of \$200 a month working construction in the Dominican Republic. When his sister, Marta, who had lived in New York and New Jersey for almost two decades, offered to sponsor him for residency in the United States, he did not hesitate.

On February 5, 1983, Javier landed at Kennedy Airport and went to Marta's apartment in North Bergen. He wrote home to say that he had started missing Roselia as soon as he got off the plane, that the snow was terrible but the plumbing great: "Here, in relation to water, everything is hot and cold!"

His first job was at the Merrill Lynch building in Garden City, L.I. He emptied wastepaper baskets and mopped floors three hours a day for \$3.35 an hour, the minimum wage. He told his sister's friends that he was a carpenter and they helped him find construction work. With contacts from that job he found a better one with a contractor in Woodside. When he petitioned the U.S. Consulate for Roselia and the children he sent along his income tax return, which Javier says showed that he took home about \$14,600 in 1985. In 1986 he asked for — and received — a raise from \$8 to \$12 an hour, according to his boss at the construction company. On papers accompanying his visa application it says he expects to make a gross salary of about \$24,000 this year.

Roselia has used some of that money for household expenses, to pay for Eliza's English lessons, to buy a pig. There have been presents from Javier: frilly dresses that reflect Dominican taste more than they do American, and a four-speaker stereo radio and cassette recorder which fills the *casita* with merengue and rock from Radio Puerto Plata.

The night after her *cita*, Roselia stayed with a friend in Santiago and used her telephone to call Javier at his apartment. She said she did not know if she could leave Cristian and Mauricio.

"He told me, 'It's all right. It's all right. You shouldn't feel sad. They will come later. They will come later. Later. Much later.' I felt a little better. I was crying for two days. But after five days I was beginning to see that I could do it. I said to myself, 'Yes. I can leave them.' I was thinking that I could work there and that my husband and I together would ask for them. It is hard to leave your children. But for their benefit you should do it. For *their* benefit."

Eliza talked about becoming a computer operator in America. She said she would have to learn to type. She adapted her father's attitude, telling ev-

eryone that her brother and sister would come eventually.

Cristian kept smiling and doing the things she usually did: She fixed her hair, tried on her American clothes, copied down the words to the songs she heard on the radio. She promised to look after her brother and not to cry at the airport. "I don't want to make Mami and Eliza sad."

Mauricio told his mother he would like a bicycle. She said she would send him the money from New York. He said that would keep him happy. But if he had a choice between a bicycle and New York City, he would take New York City.

Roselia's headache faded. She started sleeping again. Her parents said Cristian and Mauricio could stay with them. Roselia told her mother she would send money for a refrigerator. She talked about finding a job in New York as a seamstress or factory worker. She felt better but she still worried. Cristian might be lonely and start looking for boyfriends. Mauricio has missed his father terribly. And he rarely tells anyone what he is thinking.

"He doesn't have nightmares now," says Roselia. "But after I'm gone, I don't know. I sleep with my arms around him."

* * *

Last month, Marta, Javier's widowed sister, went back to Camu and Puerto Plata for the first time since 1977. "Elizabeth will become all Americanized soon," she said examining her niece's blue jeans and chuckling. She spoke with pride. In the Almonte family, immigration is becoming a tradition. And Marta was the one who started it.

She left the Dominican Republic in 1965 and went first to Puerto Rico. She was sponsored by a friend there who wanted her to work as a domestic — in those days it was still possible for some Dominican immigrants without family ties to get a visa. Marta wound up in Manhattan working as a waitress in a Spanish restaurant. She became a citizen and married one of her customers, an American. She went back to Camu three times between 1965 and 1977. Her relatives looked at her from their *casitas*. Marta had gained weight, "got fat, real fat" as she put it. She wore jewelry and she had died her hair blond. In a country where black still is not considered beautiful by the mulatto population, that was an important detail.

"I can't tell you exactly what it was," says Javier, who remembers all of Marta's visits, including the one she made for her mother's funeral. "But in my mind I was able to see that life was different for her. She had on jewelry. Lots of jewelry. A necklace, a pearl necklace and a watch. A gold watch. She seemed very proud.

"And she paid for the funeral."

Marta who speaks some English but prefers Spanish, says that she looked at the huts, no different from the one she had lived in as a child, and was appalled. She asked her sister, Maria, and her three brothers, Antonio, Ernesto and Javier, if they wanted to come to America. When they said yes she started writing applications. The four had one *cita* and were all granted visas at the same time — another reason Roselia expected that she and all her children would get them. When Javier flew to New York, Antonio, Ernesto and Maria were with him.

Maria lives in Manhattan where she is an attendant for an elderly woman. Ernesto lives with Javier and does maintenance at LaGuardia Airport. Antonio lives in New Jersey and works in a factory.

Maria has six children and has petitioned for three of them, Flor, Marta and China. They have been called for a *cita* on Wednesday. She is planning to ask for the others. Ernesto is petitioning for his wife; Antonio for his wife and one of his 11 children. He also has nine grandchildren. Ultimately, Marta, who also brought over her son and daughter, could be indirectly responsible obtaining immigrant visas for more than 30 Dominicans.

At home, people such as the Almonte siblings are called "Dominican Yorkers." It is estimated that 80 per cent of Dominican immigrants live in New York City. According to figures compiled by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, of the 100,071 immigrant visas granted to individuals who went to live in the New York area during the 1985 fiscal year, 15,858, or 16 per cent, went to Dominicans. The next largest amount, 9,877, or 10 per cent, were given to Jamaicans.

The flow began after the 1961 assassination of dictator Rafael Trujillo, when restrictions on emigration were eased. Some Dominicans went to Miami; many just sailed across the Mona Strait to Puerto Rico. From there they would fly to New York. (That is still a favorite route for illegal immigrants from the Dominican Republic.) For those who wanted to go to New York directly, by plane, it was an easy trip.

Douglas Gurak, a Fordham University sociology professor who has studied Dominican immigrants for the school's Hispanic Research Center, adds that the urbanization of the Dominican Republic during the 1960s also increased the flow of immigration. Those who were willing to leave their country towns for Dominican cities were ultimately also willing to leave Dominican cities for American cities. Marta, for example, had left Camu as a teenager and moved to Santo Domingo.

IN 1965 an amendment to the federal Immigration and Naturalization Act made family ties even more important in the granting of visas. The Dominicans who had come a few years earlier started bringing over relatives, just like the Almontes today, and the community expanded. "There's always the pull factor," explains James Callahan, a spokesman for the U.S. Bureau of Consular Affairs. "The more immigrants you have in a nationality establishing themselves in the U.S. and becoming citizens, the more people they can petition for."

Dominicans have continued to see immigration to the United States as an escape from poverty in a country where wages are low, unemployment is 25% and many are underemployed. People like Marta, when they come home looking prosperous, only help to convince their countrymen that the way to get rich is to move to America.

Although many Dominican immigrants, particularly illegal residents, remain poor in America, they work hard and make more than at home. The Dominican Republic provides some food and medical care for its poor, but it has never had a system in which welfare checks were given out. That, some say, accounts for the Dominican work ethic in the United States, although there have been reports that an increasing number of "Dominican Yorkers," particularly single mothers, are applying for welfare in New York.

The decision that Javier and Roselia made the night after the *cita* also took the Almonte family one step deeper into an American immigrant tradition: the split family. It has been depicted in films and literature; it is a perennial element in tales told by grandparents to grandchildren. The movie "Hester Street," set in Manhattan in the early 1900s, shows an Americanized Jewish husband from Eastern Europe trying to cope with his newly arrived country cousin of a wife. John Montague, one of Ireland's most famous poets, writes about his mother's long separation from his father, who moved from County

Tyrone to Brooklyn because there was no other way to support the family.

Today, there are still immigrant families, particularly those from poor countries like the Dominican Republic, who have to come piecemeal if they want to come at all. Although "family reunification" has long been a stated philosophy of U.S. immigration officials, the reality, in some of those poor countries, such as the Dominican Republic and Mexico, is different. Families are often split up because consular officials are instructed not to issue visas to individuals who they believe might have to apply for public assistance to support themselves. If an officer is not sure that an applicant will be able to support his children, the applicant may not be allowed to take his entire family right away.

Barbara Tobias, acting U.S. Consul General in Santo Domingo, and Jonathan Mueller's boss, says officers are supposed to act in a bureaucratic and unemotional manner when granting visas. Their decisions are based primarily on pay stubs, income-tax forms, birth certificates and other documents supplied by applicants. Often the questions asked during *citas* are perfunctory. And often, she adds, visa officers question financial documents supplied by applicants and the relatives who are petitioning for them. Tobias refused to permit Mueller to explain in an interview why he had denied the visas for Cristian and Mauricio. She said those decisions cannot be made public because of laws regarding confidentiality. About Mueller's decision, she said, "He refused them for the time being pending verification of economic documents given to us."

Tobias said that in the Dominican Republic families are split up "because of the economic profile of Dominican immigrants in the United States . . . They are people who are starting out at the lower end of the economic spectrum and are not likely to advance quickly. They are handicapped by language and they are handicapped by limited education . . . And that is the reason for splitting them up."

According to Tobias, it could take from three months to over a year before Mauricio and Cristian are called for another *cita*. That will depend, in part, on how many visas can be given to Dominicans — because so many apply from that country the process is staggered — and how many applicants the short-staffed consulate can accommodate. Meanwhile, the two children are relegated to the bottom of the list — first-time applicants are called for *citas* before those who have been rejected. The Almonte children wait with other rejectees: including applicants suspected of living in the United States illegally and other children whose parents, according to visa officers, do not make enough money.

"It's a mill," Tobias agreed. "It may be cruel to make it so impersonal. But one of the saving graces of the system is that it is operating that way and there is equity for all of the people around the world . . . That is cruel and it can be very heart rending. But it is cruel for every single applicant in the world." The process is

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clear, even to a naive 16-year-old. "I thought I might be the only one allowed to go because on the application my father wrote that I could work," says Elizabeth. "And because I could work I could be a benefit to the government of the United States. Not Cristian and Mauricio. They are too young."

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"You know that work in the country is hard. We always thought about going to the city to better our lives. To live differently, much closer to the theater, a different life. Young people in small towns always dream of the city. There is something about the country. When you finish work at night everything is dark. In the city all the lights are lit."

— Javier Almonte, Corona, February, 1986

For Javier, the lights are those that shine on Junction Boulevard and Roosevelt Avenue in Corona. He has been here for three years without going to the theater or learning how to speak English. A street in Manhattan can be too much for him. He shudders with respect when he looks at skyscrapers.

He works six days a week. If anything, he probably will make more than his expected gross of \$24,000 this year. He leaves his apartment before seven and does not get home until after five. He confronts New York on a six-stop subway ride from Junction Boulevard in Corona to 61st Street in Woodside.

In a warehouse in Woodside, he gets an assignment from his boss, climbs onto a truck and goes out with a crew of workers, most of them Italian immigrants. On the coldest days he is often outside. In Playa Dorada he helped build the condominiums. Now, he rips up floor boards in a Jamaica storefront on a street frequented by drug addicts, mixes cement outside a refurbished church in Astoria, builds walls in another new building in Astoria, where the apartments will be rented out by yuppies who can't afford Manhattan. Balding, with a moustache and an impish face, he is smaller than his co-workers in the same way that Mauricio is among the shortest in his class. But Javier is muscular and when he carries a board or a slab of sheetrock or a bucket of cement his hips and legs move as though he were dancing a merengue.

"Physically I feel fine," he says. "But the loneliness. This is not a home now. Soon it will be." The loneliness he feels is for family. He has many friends, all Dominicans, and on Sundays they pile into his apartment to eat oranges and play one furiously fast game of dominoes after another.

He often moves through an entire day without speaking any of the few words of English he knows. At work, his contractor boss, gives the morning instructions in a combination of Italian, Spanish and English. "They're all immigrants, too," he says. "But they came here 20 years ago. From Italy. On this job I have a better chance of learning Italian than English." On the subway, if he's feeling friendly, he can chat with other Spanish-speaking people. In Corona, the shopkeepers all speak Spanish; many of them are Dominicans. Javier says he will try to learn English when his wife arrives. And, he is adamant that Elizabeth must learn. "Tell Eliza to take care, study a lot and pay attention to English," he wrote home. "People value that here. If I don't have a brilliant job it is because of the language."

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Javier may think in Spanish but his thoughts are about the American dream. He says he is working so that he can afford a good education for his children. He would like to have a large vacation house in Camu, possibly with a swimming pool. In the United States he would like to live in Garden City, where he once worked cleaning offices. Garden City, one of the first planned communities in the United States, is a village of 23,000 people who live in elegant Victorian, colonial and modern homes. The median family income is \$40,139, almost double what Javier now makes, more than 15 times his top salary at home. In the late 1800s there was an attempt to sell homes there only to blue-eyed, blond Protestants. Today, although majority of villagers are Catholic, there are only about 500 Hispanics.

Eliza and Roselia might actually be more suited to a bucolic suburb than the bustle of business and subways in Corona. On Good Friday, Eliza refused to take a walk down to the nearby River Camu, a shallow stream that winds near narrow footpaths and cane fields. She said there would be too many crowds. In Camu, life revolves around the simple routines of farm life and child rearing. At Roselia's

mother's house, particularly on holidays, the women cook large pots of sweet *habichuelas*: kidney beans mixed with milk, sugar, raisins and cookies.

On Good Friday, with a white scarf wrapped around her head, Roselia stirred a pot of *habichuelas* on an outdoor fire made from the coals her father brought from the mountain. "Yes. I am excited already. But life here is sweet. There I don't know." Later, she asked a visitor from New York where she could buy clothes in the city. Her eyes glowed when she heard all the answers. She talked about finding a computer school for Eliza, about the way Mauricia

was picking up English. Maybe Cristian would study more in an American school.

A few days later she boiled fresh cow's milk in her own *casita* and reminded herself that in Corona it will come out of cartons. The balance sheet was spinning in her head. The rains had come again and knocked down a neighbor's animal pen. A pig came walking down the road; a sow followed. Roselia is a farm woman. Animals are food sources, but they are also mirrors of human behavior. She looks to them for answers. "First the husband came, then the wife," she said about the pigs. "First Javier, then me."

'We Have Arrived'

The Sweet
Sadness Of
A Partial
Reunion

In April, Newsday began a year-long look at the immigration of one family, the Almontes, from a farming community in the Dominican Republic to New York City. Javier Almonte arrived in New York three years ago, leaving his wife and three children behind. Now, he, his wife and one child have been reunited. Here is the second part of their story.

By Barbara Fischkin

Javier Almonte wore the gold medallion on a chain around his neck, a symbol of the prosperity he had found as a construction worker in Queens. At the end of April he sent it home to the Dominican Republic, to his son, Mauricio. It would work as a talisman, keep the 11-year-old from feeling abandoned and depressed. Mauricio's mother was also leaving for New York. Javier hoped the charm would help the boy understand that time and distance could not sever his connection to his parents. *What's mine is yours, son. Someday you will bring this back to me in America.*

Mauricio wore the medallion, engraved with Javier's name, on the day his mother, Roselia, left to join his father. He went to the airport so that he could see her up until the last minute. He did not want to cry. To keep himself busy he played with the chain, watched airplanes, drank orange soda, anything to give the impression he was feeling casual.

But the distractions, the poses, even the medallion failed. When the tears came, Mauricio ran upstairs to a water fountain and tried to wipe them away with his hands and a thin stream of water. The more he wiped; the more he cried. Defeated, he walked back down to the group of friends and relatives who surrounded Roselia. He was shaking. He stood with his head twisted away from his mother so he would not cry into her eyes. But his body was molded so that he was still very close to her, his head on her shoulder, her hand on his head.

Mauricio's sisters, Elizabeth, 16, and Cristian, 14, stopped in the middle of their own farewells, concerned about their baby brother. Elizabeth was going to America with her mother. Cristian, like Mauricio, would have to stay home. The U.S. government had refused to give the two younger children visas. Cristian, being older, was better able to cope with the situation. Roselia felt as terrible about leaving her as Mauricio. But Mauricio's tears were so overwhelming that he was all she could see.

"I want to go home," Mauricio whispered to his mother, when, after 15 minutes, he was still crying. "It is better for me to go."

Nine hours later, at 2:30 a.m., after a flight that had been delayed until late into the night, Roselia walked into the kitchen of her husband's ground-floor apartment in Corona. By American standards it had only the basics. But for Roselia, who had left a palm-thatched hut the afternoon before, it was her first refrigerator, her first gas oven, her first linoleum floor, her first telephone, her first glass windows. Javier would have to show her how to work the screens.

"Eliza," said Roselia, turning to her daughter. "We have arrived."

She put her hand on the stove: "If only Mauri could see this. He would like it very much."

Elizabeth Almonte went to sleep in the freshly made twin bed her father had moved from his bedroom into the living room so that he could be alone with his wife — he had been home to visit only twice in three years. Elizabeth slept well. She could not remember another time when she did not have to share

a bed with a parent, a sister or a cousin. Roselia did not sleep well.

"I dreamed about Mauricio," she said. "I woke up thinking Mauricio was with me. But it was Javier, instead. That is fine. Javier is wonderful. He is just like he was before. There is no difference in him. But I am worried about Mauricio."

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On May 3, Roselia Almonte, 35, a wife and mother from Camaguey, a hilly farming village of 1,500, stepped off a Dominicana Airlines jet at Kennedy Airport and into a city where immigrants have come for more than three centuries to make better lives for themselves. Today they are factory workers, fruit sellers, newsstand vendors, taxi drivers, maids, waiters, lawyers, doctors, nurses and accountants. Most recently, they have come from Jamaica, Haiti, Taiwan, Korea, India, Pakistan, Mexico, Russia — and the Dominican Republic. Last year individuals from that small Caribbean country received more immigrant visas than any other group of foreigners moving to the New York area.

This year, overall, there are expected to be more than 100,000 new legal immigrants in New York City; more than 500,000 nationwide. This represents only a fraction of those hoping to come. Waiting lists in some countries — just for an appointment with a visa officer — can be years long and not everyone interviewed qualifies to come. Prospective immigrants usually need close relatives who are U.S. citizens or legal residents and proof they will not need public assistance. Because of the restrictions, many more foreigners come illegally, sneaking past borders and immigration officers. Others enter legally as tourists and overstay their visas.

A lot of immigrants find themselves in the same position as Roselia — separated from members of their families. Javier Almonte, Roselia's 43-year-old husband, was able to get a visa in 1982 because his sister, who emigrated 20 years ago, is a U.S. citizen. It took more than three years, during which time he had to prove he could earn a living, before the U.S. Consulate in Santo Domingo would issue visas for

any other members of his family. Even then, only Roselia and his oldest child, Elizabeth, were permitted to come.

That decision was made by a visa officer at the U.S. Consulate in Santo Domingo, which often separates families for economic reasons. The officer, according to his supervisor, was unconvinced that Javier could support all his children or that, this year, he will make as much money as he, and his boss, say — about \$24,000. In New York City, a rookie cop makes \$24,500; in September, a school teacher with five years experience and a master's degree will make \$24,954.

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For Roselia and Elizabeth their last week in the Dominican Republic was a classic mixture: sweet, sad and hectic.

There were days when they were so busy with preparations they didn't have time to think about the future. "All Roselia is doing is buying, buying, buying," said her mother, Fermina. Mostly, Roselia bought things for Javier that would remind him of home. Dominican rum, Dominican caramels, the yellow cheese that is made in the northern coastal region that includes Camu.

The women hired two seamstresses to make their traveling outfits, pleated, floral-printed cotton suits, identical except for their color. Blue for Roselia, pink for Elizabeth. Elizabeth had her hair cut in what she said was an American style because she had seen it in a Puerto Rican magazine.

Following instructions from her father, who had gone to America with new false teeth, she had an eyetooth capped and a bridge put into the space where her decayed molar used to be. Roselia spent most of her last night in the Dominican Republic under the only dryer in a beauty shop in the nearby city of Puerto Plata. Then she went to see her nieces, Flor and China, who painted her fingernails and toenails red while they all engaged in a discreet version of locker-room talk. "I guess Javier won't be looking at my nails," agreed Roselia.

In quieter moments Elizabeth thought about leaving not only her sister and brother but the school friends she had known since childhood. When she went to say goodbye to those friends she sat with her arms around them for hours. "Your hair will get much nicer in New York," promised one. "The cold air is better for it."

Roselia worried about leaving her children.

Fermina Gonzalez, 50, Roselia's mother, has been married since she was 14 and has the common sense of experience. She lives down the road from Roselia and during the last days of April she tried repeatedly to reassure her daughter. She promised she would look after the children. Cristian would sleep at her grandparents' house, in the same bed as her grandmother, while Mauricio would remain in the hut with an uncle and eat with Fermina. "I am happy about your going," said Fermina. "Very, very happy. And I will come to visit. I want to see all those big buildings. You will be happy too — once your husband has you in his arms!"

Cristian also tried to convince her
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mother that she would be all right.

She has said that if her father could make as much money in Camu as Corona — and if the whole family could be together — she would much prefer staying in the Dominican Republic to emigrating.

Mauricio broke Roselia's heart.

He is a thin, curly-haired, timid little boy. He is good at reading and writing but often too shy to answer questions. Yet he does attach himself quickly to people, even to strangers, giving bear hugs that seem to plead for attention. "Mauricio," Roselia has said, "misses his father very much." With Javier in America, the boy's grandfather, Victor Gonzalez, has become Mauricio's local role model, his man to emulate on a day-to-day basis.

Victor goes to work on a white horse. Tall in the saddle, a pistol nonchalantly holstered to his waist, he crosses the rocky beds of the River Camu so that he can survey his 186 acres of sugarcane fields and pasture land. When he comes home in the late afternoon Fermina serves him dinner, without sitting down herself.

A man, Mauricio was also taught to believe, does not cry, even if his mother is leaving him. He couldn't keep himself from crying. So he tried only to cry when people weren't around. But as his mother's departure date drew closer that became impossible, too.

Elizabeth found Mauricio at the kitchen table one afternoon. He was trying to hide his face in the English picture dictionary he has been using to teach himself the language. His cheeks were wet. "Ay, Eliza, I feel so terribly sad," he told his sister.

On Roselia's last night at Camu he could not take his eyes off her. He watched while she packed. He went with her when she had her hair done and positioned himself in a corner so he had a good view of her.

They returned to Camu after midnight. Mauricio took off everything except his white briefs, lifted up the mosquito net and climbed into the bed he shared with his mother for the last time. He sniffled twice. "No Mauri! No!" Roselia said, afraid that his tears might break her. He listened. But an hour later the roosters of Camu began to crow. At 4 a.m., Mauricio was wide awake again. He nudged his mother and told her that he was sick. His throat hurt. Roselia noticed a drop of blood in her son's ear.

Mauricio went home from the airport with his relatives. Roselia stood by the baggage counter, staring out into the parking lot until she could no longer see her son. At first, he was all she could think about. She hoped her mother would take him to a doctor who would look at his ear.

The flight was delayed. Roselia and Elizabeth ate french fries in the airport cafeteria. They watched a Venezuelan soap opera. They took a nap and mussed their new suits and hairdos. Mechanics wheeled an acetylene torch out to the plane to fix the landing gear. Then, they didn't use it. Finally, at 10 p.m., four hours late, the plane took off. It was Roselia's and Elizabeth's first flight.

"Are you sure they are safe?" Elizabeth had asked days earlier about airplanes. By the time the plane left, she was so tired she forgot her fears. She took her seat and started reading a magazine article about videos. Roselia, in her exhaustion, was frightened. To make matters worse the gadgets

and procedures confounded her. She did not know how to work her seat belt or food tray.

Just after 1 a.m., Elizabeth awoke from her second nap. She had the window seat. Below her were more lights than she had ever seen. The lights of New York City.

Despite Roselia's confusion on the airplane, she went through immigration and customs like a pro, answering for herself and her daughter. The two were among the first of 569 new immigrants to pass through Kennedy Airport that day.

In one hand Roselia clutched two red Dominican passports, two white American visas and two brown envelopes containing a variety of other documents including copies of birth and medical records.

The officer spoke no Spanish. Elizabeth speaks only a few words of English; Roselia none at all. But she had known beforehand, from friends and relatives who had also emigrated, that her papers would be scrutinized at the airport to make sure she had not bought or stolen her visa. When the officer pointed her in the direction of a large room, she understood. "That's because it's my first time," she said.

They walked in just as handcuffs were being put on a handsome young

Dominican who had been pushing a large red suitcase on a dolly. "He had a bad passport," said one of the immigration officers. "Take it easy on him, guys," said another.

Elizabeth was watching so intently that she did not hear her name the first time it was called. She was thinking about her own situation: *She does not forget how lucky she has been. Twenty years ago her aunt, Javier's sister Marta, emigrated. Marta was able to bring over Javier and now Javier could do the same for her, her mother and, maybe someday, for her brother and sister. In recent months, Radio Puerto Plata and Dominican television have played a merengue about "Elena," a prostitute who cannot get a visa and leaves without one. She goes to New York, starts dealing cocaine and is killed on the subway. Elizabeth could not hear the song without worrying about a friend of hers who bought a visa in Puerto Plata and went to Brooklyn. "Eliza," she told her. "I had to do it. I'm not like you. I'm an orphan. I don't have anyone to bring me over."*

"Elizabeth Almonte," the officer called out again. She followed her mother up to his window. He quickly scanned the visas, the passports, the documents in the brown envelope. He took prints of their index fingers to be sent to Arlington, Texas, for processing. In six months, Roselia and Elizabeth will receive their "alien registration receipts," or "green cards," as they are still called, although they are now salmon-colored.

Roselia and Elizabeth went on to customs and passed through without any problems. "No. No frutas," Roselia

had said with confidence. A porter appeared. He pointed at their two oversized suitcases. "Like burros!" he said. He spoke with an accent — he knew all about the ways immigrants travel. Eliza and Roselia, their energy renewed by his friendly familiarity, laughed as they followed him through the doors — American doors, large, metallic, electronically operated.

Javier was on the other side. He looked as though the anticipation had frozen him; as though he had spent the last three years waiting in that very spot. His mouth smiled; his eyes stared, mesmerized.

"Ay! *Que Bueno!*" he shouted. "Ay, *que bueno, que bueno, que bueno, que bueno.*" How good!

He took his wife in both arms. Then he let go with one and reached out for his daughter.

"Ay! *Que Bueno!*"

He buttoned Roselia into a purple velveteen blazer borrowed from his sister. There was a red wool one for Elizabeth. Javier had known the women would come without warm clothes. They stepped out into the New York City air, the warmth of May tempered by a predawn chill.

They had many things to discuss. Their three-year separation. Mauricio and Cristian. The wonder of New

York. The strangeness of New York.

"Ay!" said Roselia. "I'm freezing." For the moment, it was all she could say.

* * *

As their first days in the United States grew into a week, Roselia and Elizabeth agreed that a hot shower is one of the benefits of America.

They arrived on Friday night. On Wednesday evening they counted and discovered that the two of them had taken a total of 21 showers in five days.

"I take three a day," said Roselia, a bit embarrassed by her excess. "One in the morning, one now and a little one before I go to bed."

In Camu, the water was cold and the women would wash using a hand basin in a tin shed behind their hut. Roselia liked her new shower so much that she used it to wash Javier's underwear. Elizabeth used the telephone almost as much as the shower. She rushed up to it whenever it rang. If she missed the first ring she would wait till the second to pick it up. She thought it would work only if she answered it on a ring.

Elizabeth liked the world outside the apartment. She loved it even though she found street signs confusing and the subways even worse. She had never traveled on trains before and she wondered why the exits were in different places at each station, why trains with the same letters went in different directions.

After she took her first subway ride, with her mother to the Social Security office, she reported back to Javier:

"Papi. I bought two tokens. I gave them 20 pesos, 20 dollars. The man gave me \$18 and two tokens. The two

tokens I gave to Mami. Then I walked, quickly, right into the exit door! The man who changed the tokens, he was looking at me. He laughed. Nothing more. I didn't understand. I thought, 'I won't do the same thing the next time.' . . . Papi, how do I get to Manhattan?"

"Eliza," said Javier. "When I went to Manhattan I got lost. You get lost, that's how you find it. To know New York you have to get lost."

"Papi, I got lost today trying to find the Social Security office."

"Eliza, that is the way you will learn where you are going."

Eliza wrote home to Cristian: "You are going to love the *sobuey*." She told her it was pronounced "sobuey."

During her first week, Elizabeth put aside her long-range goals — learning English and going to computer school — and became a tourist. For her the sights of New York included neighborhood *bodegas*, larger than any she had seen at home, as well as skyscrapers. She was as impressed with the laundromat where her father took her as she was by the diamonds and emeralds in the Fifth Avenue window of Cartier. Escalators were great; she had never seen them before.

She went first to 42nd Street because in a scene from "*Los Años Pasan*," — "The Years Pass," her favorite soap opera — two lovers have a reconciliation there. It wasn't what she imagined. "I don't like this. Too many dirty movies," she said.

"I have seen buildings like this in magazines and films," she said, standing on Seventh Avenue by Times Square. "But never real ones. I am surprised. They are very grand, very pretty. There's a bank and offices and stores in that one. I never imagined all that in one building."

Javier took her to the laundromat around the corner from their apartment. She had seen washing machines at a nursing home in Puerto Plata. But she had never used one. She stared at the wash cycle.

"Papi, does it really get all the soap out?"

"Sí, Eliza," said Javier, beaming with pride.

"It's very modern."

"Yes, Eliza. America is very comfortable."

She vowed to show her mother how to work the machines and, when she got a job, to buy her something from Cartier, preferably the jewels in the window.

Roselia was far less enthusiastic. Her first week she did not leave the neighborhood, except to go with Elizabeth to the Social Security office in Jackson Heights. She went to the supermarket with a neighbor and with Javier's brother, Ernesto. She went to the drugstore with Javier. She said that was enough.

She wanted a Social Security number so that she could get a job and, she hoped, convince the U.S. Consulate that she and Javier together could also support Mauricio and Cristian. But after one three-stop ride on the Flushing line from Junction Boulevard to 74th Street and a half-hour in the Social Security office, Roselia said she was not sure she would ever be able to travel alone in New York.

Elizabeth had led the way. She and Roselia walked the few blocks from their apartment to the subway — Javier had shown her that. But at the steps to the el, she hesitated. She did not know which entrance, on which one of the four corners of Roosevelt Avenue, to take. She walked by three

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and stopped. "I am too smart just to stay here," she said out loud. She went up. After walking through the exit sign she pointed Roselia to the turnstile. She approached a large elderly woman with red hair and a blue dress. "Dona," she said, using the respectful Spanish appellation. "How do I get to 74th Street?" The woman spoke Spanish and answered Elizabeth.

On the platform Roselia clung to the bannister. On the train, Eliza hesitated again at 74th Street but got herself and her mother out the door before it closed. On the street, as she explained to her father, she got lost trying to find the office. "These people don't speak Spanish," she said, after unsuccessfully trying to ask for directions.

In the office, there was a security guard who did speak Spanish who provided Roselia and Elizabeth with forms in their own language. But they had not filled out many forms before — Roselia had had help with her visa application. One question pertained to race. Elizabeth read down the list: Asian, Hispanic, Negro or black, North American Indian or Alaskan native, White. She did not understand, although it said so on the form, that the question was voluntary. And, she did not know how to answer it.

In the Dominican Republic, families in which everyone is a different color are the norm. Roselia and Elizabeth are dark brown, Javier is a lighter shade, Cristian and Mauricio even lighter. A man overheard Elizabeth discussing the question with her mother. He was a Dominican from Santiago. "Just write Hispanic," he advised. "In America everyone who speaks Spanish is Hispanic."

"That was horrible," Roselia said when she got home. "It's a lot of work to go out around here when you don't know where you're going."

* * *

Roselia began to put her mark on what had been a man's apartment. Now, the stove was never without food: rice and sausage, rice and milk, rice with chicken, fried bananas. She did her sightseeing by looking out her windows, one in the kitchen, the other in the living room. She saw Queens-style two-family red brick homes, more cars than even in Puerto Plata, fewer motorcycles. She liked to look at the laundry hanging in the backyard of one of those two family homes.

"They hang it out here like in Camu," she said. "That makes me feel happy. It makes me think of Camu."

Javier thought she should go out more. He thought she should learn about the city before she got a job. Roselia pointed out that it was only her first week. "And it's not like me to go out a lot," she added, dressed in a blue housecoat, her pony tail held up with a white ribbon. "I didn't do it at home or here. I didn't go out to the discotheques or the restaurants in Puerto Plata. I don't know why. I just don't like it. Yes, I feel a little sad. But not very."

Javier did not press the issue. He was so happy to have a wife at home, to have someone to kiss when he came in the door, to have dinner waiting. In the mornings, at 6:30, before he left to report to the Woodside contractor who employs him, Roselia would now make him breakfast, a cheese sandwich. Before she had come he used to pay his next-door neighbor to cook him dinner. But there were some nights when he had to fend for himself. "I didn't like cooking at all," he says. One day he came home early, at 4:10 p.m., and Roselia rejoiced.

Elizabeth said she knew why her mother did not want to go out. "She says she'll go after a week. Now she is just thinking about Mauricio and Cristian. She doesn't have peace of mind."

Roselia spoke to Cristian, Mauricio and her mother on the phone the first Sunday she was in New York. She thought Mauricio was crying. But he said he wasn't. "Don't worry about him," said her mother. "I took him to the doctor. He just has to get his ear cleaned out. It's nothing serious."

Roselia said she missed not only her children but the flowers of Camu, the country atmosphere, the way she could sometimes use the animals to explain things. In Camu during a rainstorm she had watched a sow walk down a road after a pig and realized that lots of women follow their husbands to strange places. A few days before she left, some brown chicks had hopped into her sitting room. She imagined them taking care of Mauricio after she had gone. "They," she had said, "are Mauricio's brothers and sisters."

The Almontes' Youngest Adjust To New York

In April, Newsday began a yearlong look at the immigration of one family, the Almontes, from a farming community in the Dominican Republic to New York. Javier Almonte arrived here three years ago, leaving his wife, Roselia, and three children behind. Roselia and one daughter arrived May 3. Due to some unexpected assistance, the two other children — initially denied visas — were allowed to join their parents May 30.

By Barbara Fischkin

Mauricio Almonte looked down from the observation deck of the Empire State Building, convinced he could not get any higher without an airplane. When the towers of the World Trade Center were pointed out in the distant fog, his 11-year-old face contorted with astonishment. It had been six days since he left his palm hut in the Dominican Republic for an apartment in Corona, Queens, and he was collecting surprises, confirmations — and disappointments — as though they were baseball cards. When he bought bubble gum it came with baseball stickers, not cards, and that was a surprise, too.

In Central Park he climbed a rock, stood on tiptoes, stretched his long skinny arms. The tops of the skyscrapers still seemed miles away. He looked — up this time — at an American flag that flew from a skyscraper beyond the General Motors Building, the ornate trim of the Plaza Hotel, a sign for the "Essex House," that confused him because he could not imagine that a house could be so big. He was so happy that English phrases tumbled from his mouth, a page from a parched grammar book became a song: "It's okay! . . . Let's go! . . . So long!

See you tomorrow!"

Suddenly he reverted to Spanish.

"Mira! Policia!"

He was watching his first drug arrest in America.

At home he had seen men put in handcuffs for stealing cows, calves, chickens and turkeys. Mauricio had never seen a drug dealer before. But he had heard the adults of his village talking about the troubles of New York City.

"Is it marijuana?" he wondered out loud.

His sister, Cristian, who had come to America

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with him, was sitting on the grass, involved in her own, solitary kind of sightseeing. Her own surprises and disappointments. Her eyes were fixed on a bag lady drinking water from a juice carton she had found in a garbage can. "La senora," moaned Cristian, her eyebrows knotted in a troubled expression. "I wonder if she's crazy. It is sad to see her alone like that. Nothing here resembles home."

* * *

For Cristian, 14, it was an unhappy moment. But generally she and Mauricio were feeling better than they had in months.

In May, just after school finished, they had said goodbye to their mother, Roselia, and their elder sister, Elizabeth, 16, not knowing when they would see them again. Roselia, 35, and Elizabeth had been granted immigrant visas and they were leaving Camu, their small village on the northern coast of the Dominican Republic, to move to America. Javier Almonte, Roselia's husband and the children's father, lived in Queens and was employed as a construction worker.

An officer at the U.S. consulate in Santo Domingo had given Roselia and Elizabeth visas in February. But Cristian and Mauricio were turned down because the officer did not believe Javier's claims that he could support his children in America, or that his salary had just been raised to about \$24,000 a year. Roselia was heartbroken. The officer told her to reapply for the children after she had been in the United States for three months — if she found a job.

Cristian moved into her grandmother's house, which is down the road from the Almonte's *casita*, their thatched palm hut. She sent sad letters to New York — "I feel so much pain that I can't be with my mother on Mother's Day." After Roselia's departure Cristian got her report card — the marks she had earned during the weeks her mother and sister were preparing to leave. She failed five of her nine subjects. Cristian explained she did not like her teachers — or the school she and Mauricio attended in the nearby city of Puerto Plata. She said there was too much math and science; she preferred literature. But she failed literature.

Mauricio ate at his grandmother's but slept with his 16-year-old uncle in the hut. Without his mother and sisters, the *casita* developed the cold look of a bachelor apartment. Mauricio thought only about going to New York and that was reflected, in a different way, on his report card. His best mark — 90 — was in English. A few weeks earlier, Mauricio's teacher had noticed that he was trying even harder than usual, as if a visa would be his reward. He knew he was too shy. So he started speaking up in class. Every morning he would greet his teacher with a rousing "Buenos dias, Senora!" She worried about how he would make it through the summer if he didn't get a visa.

While Mauricio was daydreaming about skyscrapers and his mother's hugs, Gary Ackerman, a Democratic congressman from Queens, was reading about him and his sister. Ackerman, a round, bearded, sometimes gruff New Yorker, likes to do good deeds — and concedes he also likes the publicity they bring him. The congressman, in an unusual move, called the U.S. consulate and demanded visas for Cristian and Mauricio immediately. Barbara Tobias, the acting consul general, balked, saying there were 2,300 applicants ahead of them and she did not think they should get special treatment "because they know congressman Ackerman." Tobias says, although she refuses to be specific, that Ackerman exerted what she perceived at the time to be "excessive pressure." So she complied.

Ackerman may have gone out of his way to help people from his district who are the subjects of a newspaper series. But the consulate, it appears, did not, at first, do enough for the Almontes. Tobias conceded that Cristian and Mauricio could have qualified for visas in February, when they were denied them. But their mother had not submitted enough evidence to prove that her 43-year-old husband made as much as he said he did. In May one of Ackerman's aides flew to Santo Domingo with pay stubs reflecting Javier's raise, a letter from his boss, a Woodside contractor named Peter Paolo, and a copy of the *Newsday* series.

Roselia could have provided all but the series in February and started the re-application process for her youngest children then. But the officer never told her she could do that. Tobias said that many prospective immigrants who come to the consulate are denied immigrant visas, even though they could

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qualify, because they do not understand what type of evidence they need.

Mauricio and Cristian left Camu on May 30. Their grandmother put on her best pink dress and went to the airport where she cried and gave them loud kisses meant to last. Like Roselia and Elizabeth, Mauricio and Cristian were taking their first flight. Days earlier Mauricio had seen a photograph of his mother and sister straphanging on a New York City subway and remarked, "That's them on the plane."

"We are approaching Juan Kennedy Airport," the pilot announced in Spanish. "Juan Kennedy," said Mauricio. "He was an American president who was killed." Before dark, the children were in their parents' arms.

* * *

With the arrival of Cristian and Mauricio, life returned to normal for the Almontes — and it improved. Roselia thrived. Being a mother is all she has known since she was 18. Without all her children she rarely went out; she seemed depressed much of the time. Now she is talking about looking for work and practicing on the sewing machine Javier bought her. She went to an English class and said she would go again. "This is very important," she said. "I won't learn all of English. But I'll learn a little. A few words." No one noticed the difference in her more than Javier. "It's very different here now than when she arrived," he said, one evening as he ate the dinner of rice, sausage and fried plantains his wife served him.

Roselia's confidence, her ability to joke and be playful, returned. One evening she sat on the couch drinking a thick papaya *battido*, a milkshake Javier had made her in their new blender. "Javier?" she asked, a mischievous smile on her face. "Did you have other women here before I came?" "Of course not!" answered her husband. The look on Roselia's face said she would not have asked the question if she had been afraid of the answer.

Cristian and Mauricio lapped up their parents' affection, hugging them and sitting next to them whenever they could. Mauricio was disappointed because Roselia told him he could no longer sleep with her, the way he had in their soft double bed in Camu. "Mami says I have to learn how to become a man," was his woebegone explanation. But he soon realized that there was no lack of attention during the day and now he had two parents to turn to. In the evenings he would snuggle next to Roselia as she watched Spanish soap operas. He would rub his hand up and down his father's chest, as if to make sure he was real.

Before her younger siblings arrived, Elizabeth started learning how to get around in New York City. Her Aunt Marta came to visit from North Bergen, N.J., and when she left to go home, Elizabeth went with her, as far as the Port Authority Bus Terminal. Marta showed her niece where to catch the

bus to North Bergen so she could come visit her. It was encouraging. The bus driver spoke Spanish. The only confused passenger was a gray-haired American woman who was having a hard time getting anyone, Marta, Elizabeth or the busdriver, to understand what it was she wanted. Two weeks later, Elizabeth took her mother to Marta's house without getting lost. She used a technique familiar to world travelers as well as immigrants. "The same driver I saw that day with Marta was there. He said, 'Where are you going?' I said, 'New Jersey.' Then I showed him a note."

Elizabeth's friend Alexis, a classmate from home whom she insists is *not* her boyfriend, told her to take her brother and sister to Central Park and the Empire State Building. Alexis is a seasoned New Yorker. He has lived in Brooklyn since January.

Cristian and Mauricio dutifully followed their older sister around Manhattan. "Pray to your saint when you cross the street," she admonished. "It is more modern here but more dangerous." Cristian sometimes mimicked Elizabeth when she gave orders. "I'll know more than her soon," she vowed. Elizabeth remained unfazed. "I have been in New York a month and already I know how to go to the store, go to the supermarket, get on the subway and know where to get off, go to the laundry. If this continues I will make a lot of progress."

In the midst of their happiness, the Almontes also had new rules to learn, prompted by new customs, conveniences and restrictions. Roselia called Javier over to her kitchen window to show him a bird. Roselia thought it was pretty. Javier wanted to make sure that was all she thought. "He told me they don't hunt birds in Corona," Roselia said. "You can't even throw a stone at them." Elizabeth spent hours talking on the phone to Alexis. Javier told her Alexis could not call after 11 p.m. Javier needed his sleep. In addition to building walls, mixing cement and carrying heavy loads, he now had to look for a new apartment. His landlady had told him that the two-bedroom apartment he and his brother, Ernesto, had rented for \$600 a month was meant for two people. Now, with Ernesto, there were six. Javier knew how hard it was going to be to find a new, affordable place. He already had looked.

* * *

School, they all agreed, was the most important thing the children had to do. "Fall in love with a career before you fall in love with a man," Javier advised Elizabeth. He was being practical. The first step was learning English.

A recent study by Douglas Gurak, a sociologist at the Hispanic Research Center at Fordham University, found that Dominicans who speak better English earn more. Mauricio arrived in America on a Friday night. By Monday he was missing his school and his schoolmates and was so anxious to learn English that he read every sign he saw. On Tuesday he and

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Cristian walked to the school around the corner.

Across 99th Street, a boy in a Mets uniform was throwing a softball against a brick building. Mauricio did not recognize the uniform. But he knew the game. Baseball is as popular in the Dominican Republic as the United States. The boy missed the ball, it rolled into the gutter. Mauricio stepped in front of a parked car, retrieved it, threw it back. A smile took over his face. It was the same in Queens as Puerto Plata. The boy missed the ball again. Mauricio threw it back. Then he followed his sister into PS 19.

The door was hard to open. It was metal, painted brown — vintage New York City elementary school. Mauricio and Cristian had started school in a four-room palm shack in Camu with thin wooden doors, shuttered windows and a calendar with a picture of a blonde baby who looked like no one they knew. Their school in Puerto Plata was a sprawl of classrooms. The hallways were open to the air, there were no heavy doors. The lobby of PS 19 was dark. A fat policeman with very pale face stood next to a petite woman in a sweatshirt. They were discussing a neighborhood drug problem. The woman turned to Mauricio and Cristian and spoke in Spanish. She told them they could sit in on the last three weeks of a morning English class. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 9 to 10.

"We will have to bring our marks here to the teacher. And our passports and visas right?" Mauricio asked his sister when they were outside.

Cristian looked ill at the mention of marks. "And our notebooks," she agreed. "We're very lucky."

The next morning the children arrived a few minutes before nine, their faces still puffy with sleep. Roselia came with them, carrying their visas and passports. No one asked to see the documents. Ada McGuire, an energetic Cuban with dark, flashing eyes, introduced herself to Roselia as the teacher, and invited her to join the class. They were led into a large cafeteria that echoed with the voices of more than 30 students seated at long lunch tables. The students were men and women. Roselia — and Cristian and Mauricio — had been put into an adult education class.

"Where are you going on vacation?" Ada McGuire asked a student.

"Home, to the Dominican Republic," the woman answered. Roselia smiled.

"Are you going home to Vietnam?" the teacher asked another student. She said she was never going back there.

"She's not going back to Vietnam. I'm not going back to Cuba. We will stay here," continued McGuire.

Mauricio began mouthing the few English words he could catch. Soon Roselia joined him and finally Cristian. Mauricio wondered about the boy in the Mets uniform.

* * *

Elizabeth walked up Junction Boulevard to the Louis Armstrong Middle School, where she heard there were three-hour evening English lessons for adults. She was supposed to take a test to see what level class she should attend. There were already students waiting outside, sitting on a ledge opposite a mural of the school's namesake, who had lived in Corona. The mural behind them looked like a precursor of a Benetton advertisement, smiling children of different colors and nationalities. The students on the ledge were Dominican, Guatemalan and Peruvian. One man was from Czechoslovakia. Elizabeth was in the right place.

"You're all here for English?" exclaimed a horri-

fied woman in white pants who tests new students. Carmela Bowden, an assistant teacher, was in her office, surrounded by 29 potential students, including Elizabeth — and two babies. She has a perpetual problem in this neighborhood of immigrants: too many students and not enough classes. She selected 20 from the crowd.

Elizabeth, who had been selected, did not understand. Neither did a number of the others, most of whom speak Spanish. Bowden only speaks English. She brought the group into a classroom and gave them forms to fill out, also in English. "I wish I could *habla espanol*," she moaned before she left the room. Those who spoke some English helped those who did not. There were misunderstandings. Bowden called a student into her office for a test. "Next," she shouted. Half the classroom got up and started walking.

Bowden said she feels students learn English better if their teachers do not speak their language, a theory espoused by other educators. But she added that she wishes she could explain what is going on to the people she tests. When it was Elizabeth's turn, the tester showed her a series of drawings.

"This boy is John," Bowden explained. "Is John sitting on the bed?"

"Is John sitting on the bed?" Elizabeth repeated slowly.

She was assigned to the beginner's class. "If they repeat the question instead of answering it, they don't understand," Bowden said. "I know she's bright. I can see her thinking in her own language. They try so hard. Sometimes I have a grown man sitting here and he's shaking. My problem is they don't understand it doesn't matter what level their English is, they'll be placed. They don't have to jump through some hoop. I just want to see how much they know. Sometimes when the testing is over you want to be able to calm them down a bit. But I can't do that."

Elizabeth could not have been happier. "They don't speak Spanish. I like that. I like that. Everything will be in English. I will have to learn a lot."

The next week she took her first class. Her teacher was Marty Kellerman, a soft-spoken man who

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teaches elementary school creative writing during the day.

"Where are you from?" he asked Elizabeth, in front of the class.

"From Santo Domingo," she answered, in English. Dominicans often use the capital's name to describe the whole country.

"A whole sentence," Kellerman instructed.

"I'm from in Santo Domingo," Elizabeth said.

"Not in. Just from."

"I'm from Santo Domingo."

"What is your profession?"

"I am no profession."

Kellerman wrote "I am not working," on the blackboard. Elizabeth copied it down.

"Another word for not working is unemployed," he told her. "This means you have no job. You could say I'm unemployed."

"I'm," said Elizabeth, who dreams of being a computer programmer. She faltered on the next word. The more advanced students helped her.

"Un-em-ploy-ed," she said, syllable by syllable.

Kellerman led the class in a round of applause.

* * *

The Almontes are growing American roots. Dominican immigrants often come here intending to return home rich. Javier has that dream. But he also imagines a substantial American connection for him and his family. He would like to build a house in Garden City, L.I., and have a vacation home in Camu. In one respect, the Almontes' roots have been given a head start. They have already had an American relative, who died in 1978. He is buried in Long Island National Cemetery in Pinelawn.

Javier's sister Marta, who brought him and their three siblings to the United States, has been here 20 years. She used to work in a Spanish restaurant in Manhattan. After she became a citizen she married one of her customers, a Jewish man named Murray Gordon. He was 30 years older than Marta and died at the age of 73. His tombstone says he was a corporal during World War II. Marta says she thinks he was in the CIA.

On a Sunday afternoon, just after the anniversary of her husband's death, she took Ernesto, Javier and the children to see the grave. "I want them to know where to bury me," she explained.

For the Almontes the trip to the cemetery was an outing, a chance to see more of the large scale American way of life. In Camu their relatives are buried in a small cemetery in the hills, close to the local *bruja*, a mystic who cures illnesses and tells women if their husbands are unfaithful. Pinelawn sprawls for 364 acres. Marta crossed herself over her late husband's simple marker, adorned only with a Star of David. "Queda con Dios," Ernesto Almonte said to the spirit of the brother-in-law none of the family had ever met. Rest with God, Murray Gordon.

Javier stood with Mauricio amid the seemingly endless rows of tombstones, memorials to thousands of soldiers and their wives. He hugged and kissed his son. "You are in America, Man!"

NEWSDAY, SUNDAY, JUNE 22, 1986

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Dealing With the Realities Bureaucracies, Barriers and Bills

By Barbara Fischkin

Elizabeth, Cristian and Mauricio Almonte spent the Fourth of July in Corona, watching television in the living room of their hot, ground-floor apartment. Usually the three siblings, new immigrants from the Dominican Republic, were awed by their new country, thrilled by the simplest American pleasures. But on this, the quintessential American holiday, they didn't even have the heart to take a walk in the park. It had been a bad week. Their landlady raised the rent to \$800 a month, their father was in a bad mood, their mother was not sleeping well. They might have to move to New Jersey.

Javier and Roselia Almonte, the children's parents, had left in the morning to take a subway and bus to Union City, where they were supposed to look at a cheaper apartment. Elizabeth, 16, stayed home with her two younger siblings and cooked a breakfast of bananas and *avena instantanea*, oatmeal from the local bodega. It has the same picture of a smiling Quaker on the package as the English version. Cristian, 14, did the dishes and they watched a soap opera on Spanish television: *Ligia Elena, pregnant with Nacho's baby, caught him kissing her best friend*. The sisters giggled in mock horror. Mauricio, 11, sang along with the commercials. "*Todo comienza cuando le doy Tang.*" An ode to the powdered breakfast drink.

Outside, music punctuated by firecrackers shimmied down the streets. Salsa, merengue and rock came from cars on their way to Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, the old World's Fairgrounds, where other families, many of them Dominicans like the Almontes, were spending the holiday. Around the corner, on Junction Boulevard, videos were half-price and McDonald's had run out of ketchup. *Hamburgers dobles con queso* — double cheeseburgers — were selling fast.

As the American flag and the Statue of Liberty flashed across their television screen, Elizabeth, Cristian and Mauricio worried that they might have to move to New Jersey. The two youngest had just enrolled in a neighborhood summer school; Elizabeth was applying to LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City. It was too soon to learn another neighborhood, or the way to another bodega. "I wish I could go into Manhattan today and see the statue," Cristian said. "But Mami and Papi had to go out and look at that apartment."

"Things like this are natural in
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NEWSPDAY, SUNDAY, JUNE 22, 1986

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The realities of moving to New York City had begun to hit Elizabeth. She had come to America dreaming that she would attend college and become a computer programmer. Now she was beginning to see that just applying to college in a strange country, away from old friends who could share their own troubles, could be a deflating experience.

She had to listen to advice she hated. Her Aunt Maria, who works in Manhattan and has four daughters, all older than Elizabeth, told her niece to repeat her last year of high school in the United States. She had to learn a new language, and she was too young for an American college. In August she would be 17. Claire Press, a community coordinator who works at the Louis Armstrong Middle School in Corona, where Elizabeth was taking adult-education English classes, said the same thing.

Elizabeth's starry eyes became intractable, determined. The determination would protect the dreams that had produced the stars. "I am going to college," she said.

"I am very young because I've been going to school since I was very young. It's not my fault that Americans don't finish high school until they are 18 or 19. That's the fault of their parents." Elizabeth has a low opinion of American parents.

"I saw people smoking drugs outside of Louis Armstrong. They were smoking cigarettes, but not regular cigarettes. I think teenagers here smoke drugs because their parents don't talk to them."

Unlike her sister, Cristian, and many of their friends, Elizabeth had yearned for an education since she was a toddler. She might have had something in common with Isaac Bashevis Singer's Yentl, who masqueraded as a boy so she could go to school. Or Peig Sayers, a well-known Irish storyteller who described herself as a little girl with "a great turn for books." Sayers was 4 when she begged an older friend to take her to school. Elizabeth was the same age when she asked her Uncle Julio to take her to the *Escuela Primaria de Camu*. The school still stands. It is a crudely constructed shack of palm, probably not much more sophisticated than the one-room schoolhouse Peig Sayers attended on the Dingle Peninsula in the 19th century.

Elizabeth was too young for the primary school. Instead, a friend of Roselia's, who ran Camu's version of a preschool from her own *casita*, invited Elizabeth to attend. At age 6 she entered the primary school and finished first and second grades in one year.

Elizabeth had heard about LaGuardia Community College from a friend of the family, who told her she could take classes in Spanish there while she was learning English. (In reality, students such as

Elizabeth would generally take courses in which teachers use both English and Spanish.) She had a lot of questions. She went twice to LaGuardia and once to the city university system's office of admissions services in Manhattan. She found two counselors who spoke Spanish and, dutifully, told them both that her aunt had suggested she return to high school. "I hated high school," said the counselor at LaGuardia. It was settled: If she returned to the Dominican Republic and passed the exams she had failed, she could apply to LaGuardia.

At home, Elizabeth examined the papers she had collected: Two identical green application forms, two booklets in English and Spanish; explaining city university programs; two financial-aid applications; and a booklet explaining the applications. "Wherever I go they give me an application," she moaned.

She was overwhelmed — with the bureaucracy

and the language. She was managing in her English class. When the teacher asked, "What do you see on the subway?" She stumbled, then answered, "A sign that says 'No smoking on the train.'" She could not fill out an application without help. She waited on line at the financial-aid office at LaGuardia so that she could talk to yet another Spanish-speaking counselor. "Suddenly everybody started yelling 'fire, fire, fire,'" said Elizabeth. A woman next to her explained that they had to leave the building. Elizabeth went home, not understanding that she had just participated in a fire drill. A few hours later, she went back. She was told she could not apply for financial assistance without a photocopy of her father's income-tax statement. Her father, she told them, had sent his only copy to the U.S. Consulate in Santo Domingo so that she could get her visa. She didn't know what to do.

Elizabeth's worries were compounded by her anxiety about her diploma. "No one at home passes everything," she explained. "It's because we have so many subjects." She picked up a book and began studying the poetry of Jose Marti, the 19th-century Cuban writer. This time a failure would be expensive.

* * *

Chapter one: Mauricio, a boy.

Never in my life would I have been able to imagine what New York would really be like. A few times, at home in the Dominican Republic, I thought about what New York could be like and a few times I imagined a New York that was like a city which had many castles and palaces and that also had princes and kings. I never could have imagined what New York was really like.

Mauricio had started keeping a diary. He, too, was learning about the realities of New York. There were skyscrapers instead of palaces. That was all right. Not everyone was rich — his father wasn't. That didn't bother him, except he wanted a bicycle and it didn't look as if he was going to get one.

But his adventure was turning out well. In the spring, when it looked as if it might be months or years before he got a visa, his father had sent him a gold medallion to bring him luck and keep him from feeling lonely. It was inscribed with the letters of Javier's name. Javier did not take the medallion back when Mauricio arrived in New York. Instead, he gave his son another; this one had an engraving of Jesus Christ on it. For Mauricio, they both seemed to work magic, making good things better.

He was fascinated by a squirrel that ran up a maple tree near his house. "It looks like a rat," he said. Javier took him to the zoo at Flushing Meadows, where he saw buffalo and sea lions. In June he had started English classes at PS 19 around the corner. He was happy to be learning, but upset because he had been put in an adult-education class. In July he and Cristian started a summer tutorial program at Leonardo da Vinci Intermediate School, which he probably will attend in the fall. The classroom was packed with other youngsters, many of them with the same problems as Cristian and Mauricio. They were newcomers who spoke little English. The teacher, Francisco Olivares, was Dominican and he taught mathematics in Spanish. There was also an English class with another teacher. Olivares told the students they would take trips on Tuesdays and Thursdays so they could get to know New York. They would be going to the Aquarium, the United Nations and, maybe, the Statue of Liberty.

"Bring your lunch those days," he told them. "But just a simple sandwich. There's no need to bring meat. Or *habichuelas*." The class giggled. Mauricio and Cristian had loved *habichuelas*, a drink made with kidney beans, milk and sugar, since they were babies.

Olivares warned his students that they had to respect him. But he was warm; he knew what kind of comfort they needed.

"The first year is hard for all of us here," he said. "You miss your family at home a lot."

On June 10, they went to the United Nations. Mauricio and Cristian saw the Security Council, the General Assembly, objects salvaged from Nagasaki after it was bombed and a display of photographs from underprivileged countries. Mauricio stood in front of one: It showed a teacher in a tropical setting, standing outdoors with laundry hanging over her head. Her students sat on rickety wooden chairs.

"In what areas does the UN help people?" asked the Spanish-speaking guide. "Education," volunteered Mauricio. Yes, he said later, the photograph had reminded him of Camu.

* * *

If only the medallions would work for Javier. On July 4, he and Roselia didn't get home from New Jersey until after 5. It was a wasted trip. Javier's sister, Marta, who lives in North Bergen, had made the appointment for them. But the landlady they were supposed to see never showed up. Another week passed and they still had not found an apartment. Javier appealed to his own landlady, with Joaquina's son acting as an interpreter. He told her he was looking for another place to live. She told him he could stay at least another month. Instead of \$800, she would charge him \$750. He could manage that for a while. Roselia had just gotten a call, and her job was going to start.

"I am looking, looking, looking," Javier said. "I can pay that rent for a few months. But not for many."

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THE MOVE TO AMERICA

A CHRONICLE OF HOPE

A Family Between Two Worlds

Looking Back, Plowing Ahead

In April, Newsday began a year-long look at the immigration of one family, the Almontes, from a farming community in the Dominican Republic to New York. Javier Almonte arrived here three years ago, leaving his wife, Roselia, and three children behind. By the end of May they had all joined him in his Corona apartment. In this, the fifth installment, 16-year-old Elizabeth Almonte prepares to enter an American college, her younger siblings finish summer school and their mother finds, and quits, her first job.

By Barbara Fischkin

Elizabeth Almonte stood at the kitchen sink and stared down the drain. "I'm not happy," she muttered to a stack of wet dishes. "I'm going shopping."

She had studied the discount stores on Junction Boulevard with teenage devotion. Robbins' was her favorite. There was no place back home that sold such great clothes so cheap. She bought a pair of skin-tight black pants for \$14.99, then walked down the block to a smaller shop where \$1.99 T-shirts were hanging on a sidewalk rack. There was one with purple letters that said, "New York, a helluva town." "I need this," she insisted, counting her change.

Earlier in the summer Elizabeth had gone back to her small village in the Dominican Republic for a short visit. It had been almost a month since she had returned to New York, but she couldn't stop daydreaming about how good it had been to see her girlfriends, her grandparents, her Uncle Julio who took her to classes at his university in San Pedro de Macoris. She was beginning to view life as her middle-aged mother did, wondering if the sweet familiarity of her own country might be better than the opportunities of the United States. It was giving her a headache. She went home and tried on her pants.

Elizabeth went back to Camu on July 13, after having lived in the United States for 10 weeks and one day. She had gotten word that, just before leaving for America in May, she had failed her literature and algebra finals at the Liceo Jose Dubeau in Puerto Plata. She found out later, however, that her teacher had given her the wrong algebra test. Unless she went back and took the exams over she would not get a diploma. She had applied to LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City for the fall semester; without a diploma, she would be rejected.

Most immigrants go home and brag — about a job, a bank account, a nicely furnished apartment. Elizabeth got off the plane at the Puerto Plata Airport feeling a little silly about her minor accomplishments. She had been to a variety of New York City tourist attractions, including the New York Hilton, where Fernandito Villalona, her country's premier young singing star, had stayed. She knew

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enough English to ask for simple directions: "Hello, mister. Do you speak Spanish? No? Okay. Where is the Third Avenue with 49th Street?"

But in the village where she had grown up, no one cared. She was greeted with cries and bear hugs, as if she had been gone for decades. She was grabbed by her arms and rocked back and forth. Her cheeks were kissed, her clothes admired. Victor Gonzalez, her grandfather, poured her a capful of rum and with wet, proud, happy eyes told her that she had gotten very skinny in America. Twenty years before, Elizabeth's Aunt Marta had come back from America and received compliments on her girth. Now, thin is beautiful in Camu.

After the festivities, Elizabeth went to Jose Dubeau, a half-hour's drive away.

"You have been a good and respectful student," Luis Felipe Perez, the principal, told her. "I want to help you so you can study in the United States. So I am going to give you a special kind of test, the kind they give in the universities. It's called an open-book test."

Elizabeth took the tests in the library, sitting at a wooden desk, her back to a wall of shelves filled with 779 books — fewer than one for each of the school's 900 students. In New York City's public schools, about 85 percent of high school seniors graduate. At Jose Dubeau, about half the class makes it. Felipe, which is what students call the principal, wanted to make sure Elizabeth would be among them.

He hovered over her as she wrote, sometimes showing her where in the textbook she could find the answers she needed. The literature test had 15 true-false questions, six matching questions and no essays. The algebra test, handwritten on a sheet of pink paper, had nine problems. Elizabeth left out two. Felipe said that did not matter and passed her.

She returned to Corona after two weeks and fantasized about going to school with her Uncle Julio. "I liked his school a lot," she said. "If only they had computer courses, I would go there. I would know people there."

As a child, Elizabeth had a tense determination to learn, the kind of passion that is glorified in literature. Perhaps because of the scant resources of Dominican schools, she grew up to be only an average student — but one who still wanted the best education she could get. Now, memories of home were getting in her way, nostalgia and sentiment were battering her ambition. She celebrated her 17th birthday, and made a lot of trips to Junction Boulevard to cheer herself up. Gradually, she started to remember why she had wanted to come to the United States so desperately. She talked to herself; talked herself out of her depression.

By the end of August, when her letter of acceptance arrived, she was ready.

"Dear LaGuardia Student: Congratulations! You have been accepted to LaGuardia Community College pending the completion of your admission's file."

"I won't be going home for a long time now," she said with resolve. "It's not important. I will get more out of a school here than there. I feel very happy now."

* * *
Cristian and Mauricio Almonte, Elizabeth's younger siblings, had already gotten more out of school in America than they could have dreamed of at Jose Dubeau. They spent the summer going to classes at Leonardo DaVinci Intermediate School, also in Corona. They learned mathematics and a little English and went on a lot of trips around New York City. It was part of a special, \$250,000 federally funded program for 825 young immigrants, run by School District 24 in Queens. By the time the program ended in mid-August, Cristian and Mauricio had been to the United Nations, the Bronx Zoo, the New York Aquarium, the South Street Seaport, the Richmondtown Restoration — and the Statue of Liberty, where their teacher decided it was not worth a three-hour wait to climb the statue. Their father, Javier, a 43-year-old construction worker, was amazed by all the attention immigrant children receive. Before they arrived, he had spent three years alone in the United States trying to put together a life, without much help from outside the Dominican community. "You've already seen more than I have," he told the children. "But I think you like the trips better than the classes."

Cristian, 14, and Mauricio, who turned 12 over the summer, loved the trips. They loved the socializing even more. It was good to be with other children, particularly those who understood what they had

gone through to get to America. In February, the two siblings had expected to get visas so they could join their father here. But due to a bureaucratic foul-up, they were refused. In May, they watched as Elizabeth and their mother, Roselia, left for America without them. Then, suddenly, at the end of the month, Javier's congressman intervened and in less than a week, the children were whisked off to New York.

Cristian and Mauricio's summer classes were filled with children suffering from culture shock, including some who had also been separated from their parents. One delicate-featured little girl from Colombia had waited five years to join her mother. There were students from China, whose heads bounced back and forth as they listened to the English of their teachers and the Spanish of their classmates.

The flexibility of youth helped Cristian and Mauricio, and they grew more comfortable here. Cristian had been labeled a poor student in the Dominican Republic. Her teachers compared her unfavorably to Elizabeth, and because their expectations were low, she didn't try very hard. Francisco Olivares, the teacher at Leonardo DaVinci, had never met Elizabeth. "In the beginning, when Cristian came, she didn't know fractions or decimals," he said. "But she picked it right up."

She also made friends. Julissa Castro, a chubby, English-speaking Dominican who wore pink lipstick and blue toreador pants, became her guide. On trips, she and Cristian walked hand-in-hand. When Cristian's long hair became too hot on her neck, Julissa helped her put it up in a bun.

Mauricio's shyness also faded, even though it was obvious he was still affected by the separation from his father. He was learning English almost as quickly as Elizabeth. His most complicated sentences were about Javier: "I went to the park with my father. It was a beautiful day." When Javier was not around, Mauricio clung to any adult male who would pay attention to him. On trips he stayed close to "Olivares." In the classroom he sat in the front row. But he also befriended a classmate, another young Dominican named Pedro. Pedro was even more timid than Mauricio.

On the last day of class, Olivares, also a Dominican, gave a stern speech in Spanish.

"It is very important to finish school. You leave school and you get a job in a store making \$100 a week and you think, 'Four-hundred dollars a month! That's terrific!' A lot of my friends did that. When they're 21 or 22 they get married and have children and maybe they get a raise to \$125 a week. That means they're making \$500 a month. Here, that isn't even enough to pay the rent."

Mauricio and Cristian understood. In July their landlady had raised the rent from \$600 to \$750 a month.

Olivares ended by playing Spanish music on his guitar, so that his students' last memory of summer school would be a pleasant one. He played "Guanatanamera," a poem by Cuban writer Jose Marti set to music. Even gringos know the words.

"Yo soy un hombre sincero," sang Olivares.

Jim Thompson, the program's supervisor, stuck his head in the door.

"Yo soy un hombre sincero," Thompson echoed.

"Guaaan taaaan a meeerrr a," sang the giggling class, Cristian and Mauricio included.

* * *

For Roselia Almonte, the children's mother, life in America has been an emotional obstacle course. At first she was confronted with her own sadness. Being a wife and mother had been her full-time job since she was 18. With Cristian and Mauricio left behind in the Dominican Republic, she was stripped of half her duties. She felt so bad she refused to go out. When the two children arrived, it was as if her power had been renewed; she could manage anything. But by the end of the summer she was accustomed to having them with her again. She looked around, realized that she was in a very strange place and began to feel helpless all over again.

In July she had worked for a short time taking care of an elderly woman. Cristian and Mauricio became latchkey children and didn't seem to mind. Their mother was earning money and that was good for the family. On Roselia's first morning, Elizabeth showed her mother how to get to the woman's apart-

ment building, two subway stops away. After that, Roselia rode the train alone, always cowering close to the doors, never positive that she would be able to get through the crowds quickly enough, that the doors would open, that the train would stop in the same place, that the whole experience wouldn't kill her altogether. She earned \$130 a week for six eight-hour days. After two weeks she quit, complaining more about the actual working conditions than the salary or the subway. She said she still felt pains from an operation she'd had several years ago to remove a kidney stone.

"I told the daughter she should look for someone else to take care of her mother," Roselia explained after her last day. "And when I went this morning they already had a Colombian woman there. I didn't like that kind of work at all. The woman is very fat. Very, very fat and I was all alone with her. I had to dress her and bathe her and it was too much for me because of my operation. My doctor told me not to do heavy lifting. In the evenings, when I left, she would cry out from her door: 'Roselia, Roselia, don't leave me.' I would like to work for someone who can walk."

Roselia had her own family, her own problems. She couldn't be bothered by an old woman crying out into the night for her. She had left Camu saying she was going to find a job. At first she thought that if she was working it would help get visas for Cristian and Mauricio. But even after they came, she still said she wanted to work, to help Javier pay the rent and Elizabeth's tuition. Yet now she was making it clear by her actions that she was not going to take just any job.

When Javier first came to the United States he was under more pressure. He had to make money or he would not be able to bring over his family. He is a skilled carpenter, but his first job was cleaning an office building for minimum wage because it was all he could get.

Roselia did not feel the same urgency, or the same need to succeed in America. She felt that supporting their family was primarily Javier's responsibility. Also, she had been happy in the Dominican Republic. She came to the United States because her husband was here. It had not been her idea to run after the American dream.

She stayed home. For two weeks she babysat for a friend's little boy. She spent her days cleaning, watching television and cooking. She is a wonderful cook and would taste her chicken, rice and plantains while they simmered. Sometimes she also tried the airline food her brother-in-law Ernesto brought home on plastic trays from his job as a maintenance worker at LaGuardia Airport. Javier, when he arrived between 5 and 6, was given a lavish meal. Roselia served, but did not sit down and join him. By that time she was too full to eat.

In the evenings she watched Spanish-language news programs and soap operas on the family's large

color television set, the first television she has owned.

* * *

Javier had also been depressed — about the rent. The landlady had raised it because she wanted them to move. She felt the Almontes had crammed too many people into their two-bedroom apartment. He tried to find a cheaper place to live, but without much luck. In August, he paid the \$750 and went to see the woman who had been his landlady when he was alone in America.

She told him she might have a place he could rent in a few months. After that he stopped moping. Being optimistic was more natural for him. He and Elizabeth were alike.

He still loved America. It was capitalism that brought him here and he believed in it more than ever. "I think if a landlord can get someone to pay a high rent, then he should charge it. Anyone who wants to work in this country can. You couldn't say the same thing for my country. But here you can."

He didn't blame politicians for the high rents in New York City. But he was realistic about them. "You know that everywhere, in every part of the world, politics is merely friendship. You come and say you are working for a political party and ask me to vote for you and I say I will to help you. That's the system. That's politics."

Sunday is Javier's only day off. He tried to have as much fun as possible. There were no trips to the beach. He does not own a car or have a driver's license, and taking the subway to Coney Island did not occur to him. But there were long days in neighborhood parks, and Roselia's sister Ramona took them to her home in Paterson, N.J., to the falls over the Passaic River and to Garret Mountain Park.

Javier drank Heinekens with Ramona's husband, ate lots of roast chicken, rested his bones from six days of physical labor and watched his children. Roselia went along, although she said she did not feel well and did not seem to be having a good time. Her apartment is the only place in America where she feels truly safe. Cristian and Mauricio inspected new sights — a football field, a gravestone outside a castle museum, the rickety docks by a muddy lake — with their usual wide eyes.

Elizabeth tried another American activity. She collected soda cans and bottles from the garbage cans and roads. She said it was for fun, not profit — at least not her own. She was bringing them home for a neighbor to redeem.

Learning the ABCs of the USA

In April, Newsday began a year-long look at the immigration of one family, the Almontes, from a farming community in the Dominican Republic to New York. Javier Almonte arrived here three years ago, leaving his wife, Roselia, and three children behind. By the end of May they had all joined him in Corona, Queens. In this, the sixth installment, the Almonte children enter school and the family moves to a new apartment.

By Barbara Fischkin

Mauricio Almonte stood among a horde of adolescents and looked up four stories at the glistening white bricks of the junior high. "Everyone is very American," the 12-year-old thought. "The building looks bigger than it did this summer." In his pocket he had a pencil sharpener attached to a miniature globe, purchased in honor of the first day of school. It was supposed to give him confidence. But his swagger, an imitation teenage swagger, faltered. He felt like a brand-new immigrant again; a child.

He saw a boy he knew from summer school, where there had been so many fewer students, all of them foreigners like him. That boy had come with his mother. Mauricio heard the first bell. Doors opened, children grabbed their briefcases and knapsacks and rushed inside. In the Dominican Republic, Mauricio had sat in humid, noisy classrooms, illuminated by one or two bare lightbulbs, and dreamed about this — walking into the big building, his first day of formal education in the United States.

He couldn't do it. He picked up his his Adidas book bag and went home.

"There was a long line. Everyone else was with someone bigger, a brother or a mother," he told his Uncle Ernesto, who was drinking espresso in the kitchen of their Coroná, Queens, apartment. "I thought I wouldn't be able to go in alone."

Roselia Almonte, Mauricio's mother, had gone shopping, assuming that her son would be fine in school. In the three months since he arrived he had learned American ways quickly.

Ernesto sent his nephew back. Mauricio found his class — Seven Bilingual-Two — outside the auditorium.

"Are you new here, too?" he asked the boy behind him.

"Si," answered Waldir Gianni Sepulveaa Moiza.

"Do you know English?"

"No."

"Me neither," said Mauricio.

Registering for the seventh grade had not been easy. On the Wednesday after Labor Day, Mauricio and his mother brought his passport, visa and his last report card from the Dominican Republic to the office at the Leonardo Da Vinci Intermediate School in Corona. The woman in charge, gray-haired and grandmotherly in a pink smock, told him he also needed proof that he had received the proper vaccinations. "But I have *vacuna*," Mauricio insisted, speaking the combination English-Spanish which was slowly be-

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coming his new language. He rolled up his shirtsleeve to show a bumpy scar.

Rosefia had no medical records for her children. Only vague recollections. "I think you all had diphtheria, whooping cough, tetanus and flu when you were two. I think you had those a lot of years," she said. The woman gave her the address of two free clinics in Queens.

She took Mauricio and his 14-year-old sister, Cristian, to the one in Jamaica, where they waited for three hours. "I wouldn't mind another kind of vaccine," said Mauricio, fidgeting. "One that would prevent *all* my problems."

On Sunday, the day before school started, there was another surprise. Mauricio's father woke him at 6 a.m. "We are moving today," Javier Almonte explained. "My friend is here with the truck." Their new apartment was in the neighborhood, just across Junction Boulevard. But the next morning Mauricio still had to concentrate as he walked what was now 12 instead of 7 blocks to school. He had new turns to take.

By the time lunch period arrived he was exhausted. He ate chicken nuggets, an orange and his first potato knish — he tried to scoop the filling out with a spoon, then realized he could eat it whole, with his hands. When he finished he put his head on the cafeteria table and closed his eyes.

The secretaries at Leonardo Da Vinci had sent Cristian to John Bowne High School in Flushing. She explained that her family would be moving, although at the time she did not know whether it would be in weeks or days. She was told that her new apartment was in the Newtown High School district.

A teacher's aide suggested that she stay out of school until after the move, then register at Newtown. "Truthfully what does it matter if she waits three weeks? She'll only be learning English the first semester." The woman spoke English; Cristian did not understand. She was sent to a guidance counselor, who took her to the assistant principal.

Through an interpreter he told Cristian that she could register at Bowne and transfer to Newtown in January. She could also stay at Bowne until she finished high school. Or, she could get a letter from her new landlady and see if Newtown would accept her right away.

Cristian was delighted. In the Dominican Republic she didn't have choices. She decided to register at Bowne. "I want to go here. Everyone is very nice."

That evening she and Javier went on a test run: She would have to take a subway and a bus to get to school. Javier, who had lived in the United States for three years before his wife and children arrived last spring, conducted lessons. "Remember to show your pass to the driver," he said. "I can do it," Cristian assured him. "How do I tell them to stop the bus?"

"I'm the only one who doesn't know which school to go to," Elizabeth Almonte moaned. At 17, she is the oldest Almonte sibling. In July she had gone back to Puerto Plata in the Dominican Republic to take over two of her high school finals so that she would be accepted at LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City. The school had been recommended by a friend of her parents' who also lives in Corona, a woman who had gone to elementary school with Javier back in Camu, their small mountain village. Now, another

friend, who had gone to LaGuardia, was saying that Elizabeth did not know enough English even for the school's bilingual classes.

Javier told Elizabeth to go to registration. But he was balking at the idea of paying \$500 a quarter for classes his daughter might not understand. "She had lived less than a year in the United States she had to pay non-resident rates at the city college. Perhaps the school would only permit her to take English in the beginning. Javier was she could learn English for less money; if she went to John Bowne with Cristian she could learn it for free. When her father groused, Elizabeth renounces letters from her high school friend who had just started college in the Dominican Republic. "It's her friends back home who are putting these ideas of college into her head," Javier said. "I think she is dreaming."

Elizabeth had tried to apply for financial assistance from the college all summer. But the bureaucracy had been too much for her. In June, a woman in the LaGuardia financial aid office told her she needed a photocopy of her father's income tax

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statement. "Papi doesn't have one," she said.

From Puerto Plata she called the U.S. Consulate in Santo Domingo to see if it had a copy of the tax statement Javier sent with his family's visa applications. The women who handled such matters was on vacation.

When Elizabeth returned to New York she was so nervous about getting her school application in on time that she forgot about her financial aid application. In late August, a secretary at LaGuardia asked Elizabeth if her father's accountant might have a copy. No one in the Almonte family had thought of that. Just went to see the accountant the next day. But by then it was too late to ask for assistance before the fall semester began.

On registration day Elizabeth told Olga Vega, the last in a succession of college counselors she has consulted since June, about her problems. Vega conceded that because Elizabeth also had to study English it would probably take her three instead of two years to graduate. But the counselor seemed very anxious for Elizabeth to attend. She told her there was no guarantee

she would learn enough English in high school to push her ahead at LaGuardia. She helped Elizabeth get a tuition deferralment so that she only had to pay \$150 until she received an answer on her financial aid application in November. That satisfied Javier.

* * *

By mid-September, all the Almonte children were in American schools, in bilingual programs that have been the source of much controversy among educators and politicians.

Elizabeth was taking English, a freshman-orientation class with a teacher who spoke Spanish to her, and a basic mathematics class taught in Spanish. Cristian and Mauricio were learning English from teachers who tried not to use Spanish in class. Most of their other subjects were like Elizabeth's mathematics class. They were taught in Spanish but their teachers, some more than others, tried to repeat the names of different terms, concepts and objects — laboratory instruments, continents and rules of logic, for example — in English.

Mauricio was also taking a shop class, with a teacher who spoke almost no Spanish. An election for class foreman was held. Mauricio raised his hand for the most popular candidate but he said later he had not understood.

What he knew about elections came from the Dominican Republic, where they are drawn-out, corrupt affairs in which some disagreements are settled with weapons. During the weeks leading up to last May's presidential elections at least 15 people were killed; it took days to count the ballots. In Mauricio's shop class the candidates were politely nominated, elected and certified as winners in 10 minutes. Mauricio had never heard of voting in the classroom.

Cristian's gym teacher also did not speak Spanish. She asked another student, a senior who had come from the Dominican Republic as an infant, to translate. "I'll teach her English while I'm at it," the student announced.

The Almontes loved school.

Elizabeth was relieved that she could find her way around the different LaGuardia buildings. She thought her mathematics class was simple, except when the teacher used English.

Cristian, who turned 15 in late September, had to repeat the ninth grade because she failed so many subjects in her Dominican school. Still, she looked young compared to many of her classmates. They had fluffy, permed, punky hair. Cristian wore hers in a braid or ponytail with a ribbon. On the bus, girls with large, fashionable earrings and short, tight skirts kissed boy-friends who had crosses dangling from their own ears. Cristian, who put on a different colored pair of plastic heart-shaped earrings each morning — she and Elizabeth had bought a package of twelve for a dollar — did not seem to notice the differences.

School was "maravillosa." From the window of her social studies class she could hear chickens clucking. John Bowne has an agriculture department and four acres of land where corn, berries, vegetables and flowers grow. Last year the school had the second largest Future Farmers of America organization in the state. "It feels just like home," Cristian said when she visited the farm, not noticing Queens College in the background.

Mauricio also had to repeat a year of school. He was too young for the eighth grade and he realized that. After the first day, his jitters disap-

peared. He learned, quickly, how to operate a looseleaf binder, fold a book cover and run through the halls when it was time to change classes. Frank Olivares, his math teacher from summer school, taught him again. Mauricio's hand shot up often in that class.

* * *

The Almonte siblings had learned a little English during the summer. Elizabeth had gone to adult education classes. Cristian and Mauricio had attended a summer school program for immigrants at Leonardo Da Vinci. As the weather became colder, the new words they had heard during July jelled into sentences, sentences that sometimes contained both languages. Educators elegantly refer to that as "code-switching," a sign, they say, that children are starting to think in English.

They were excited about English; it was a new toy. "I am dying to learn English," Cristian said. "There are only two languages — Spanish and English." After school she would come home, put a spoon in a pint of ice cream and sit down to watch an American soap opera. Mauricio watched American cartoons. He often repeated, or tried to repeat, the expressions of his favorite characters. "Sordibomon!" he shouted out one afternoon, raising his arm above his head. In Spanish, he explained he was mimicking men with rapiers. "Swords above, men!" was what he meant.

Mauricio tried hard in his English class, even though, along with his new friend Waldir, whom he had met the

first day, he was put into the least advanced group in the class. Waldir had come from Colombia two months earlier. One afternoon their teacher, Rosanna Fisher, gave the others words to use in sentences: "century," "liquid," "flowers," and "tomorrow," among others. Then she turned to Mauricio and Waldir:

"My name is?"

"Your name is Mrs. Fisher," Mauricio said.

"Waldir, what is his name?" she continued, pointing to Mauricio.

Waldir paused, looking frightened.

"His . . . name . . . is . . . Mauricio!"

"Excellent!" said Fisher, snapping the word like a rubber band.

* * *

Javier and Roselia Almonte lived their lives those weeks in September around the excitement of their children. They were busy with their own activities. But they did not speak much about them.

Roselia went to see a neighborhood woman who ran a small clothing factory. The woman, an Ecuadorian, said she would let Roselia try out for a job and pay her by the piece. While the children were in school, Roselia sewed purple woolen jackets for women in size 44.

The construction company Javier worked for had finished one block of luxury apartments and begun another. Those apartments would cost \$1,500 a month. The new apartment Javier had rented for his family cost \$500. He had found it using his own,

A CHRONICLE OF HOPE

patient, wait-and-see method, which had maddened the landlady who was trying to get him to move.

In August, after looking at a few \$900-a-month places, he went to see Anna Corona, the Dominican woman who had rented him an apartment during the years before his family arrived in Corona. She was giving up her own apartment in the house she owned on 40th Road and moving back to the Dominican Republic to be with her husband, a longshoreman who had lost an arm and a leg in an accident in Manhattan. She wasn't sure when she would be leaving but she had told Javier that sometime in September she would move into a room in the building so he could have the apartment. "It's like family," Javier explained, leaving the impression that some months the rent might be more than \$500, some months less.

The rooms were dark but large. Javier, who on one of his vacations home had built slick cabinets in his mother-in-law's primitive kitchen in Camu, saw possibilities. He wanted to fix, rearrange, polish; revive the wilting lettuce in the small, patchwork backyard garden. The garden had not looked healthy since Anna's husband went back to the Dominican Republic.

Javier and Roselia, who had been sleeping on a twin bed, bought themselves a double bed in celebration of the move. It was the same size as the one they had in their palm hut — now they could sleep as comfortably in their "better life," in New York as they had in the Dominican Republic.

Ernesto went to live in a room in the basement, which meant that Elizabeth, Cristian and Mauricio could share the second bedroom. In the old apartment they had been sleeping in the living room. They still gathered in the living room. The television was there and they did their homework sitting on the couch that used to be Mauricio's bed, which stood in front of piles of furniture Anna still had to move.

One evening after dinner Javier entertained friends at the kitchen table; he loved to dispense good-natured advice. In between there were jokes, followed by laughter, followed by other serious discussions.

Suddenly he put his finger to his lip and pointed to the living-room couch where Mauricio sat, his loose-leaf on his lap, mathematics textbook at his side. The boy was concentrating, biting his lip when he thought he might be stumped by a problem. He was oblivious to the chatter in the kitchen, to the television. Javier, who had missed the years when his son turned 9, 10 and 11, looked like a tycoon who had just made more money.

"Look at him," Javier said. "I never, ever saw him do anything like that at home. I never saw him study like that at home."

Mauricio's reward came two weeks later. His teachers decided he and his friend Waldir were too smart for their classes, the ones in Spanish, at least. They were moving up — to Seven Bilingual One.

Convincing Roselia to Remain

Kids Adapt, Dad Stoic, Mom Sad

In April, Newsday began a year-long look at the immigration of one family, the Almontes, from a farming community in the Dominican Republic to New York. Javier Almonte arrived almost four years ago, leaving his wife Roselia and three children behind. In early May, Roselia and their eldest daughter Elizabeth, now 17, joined him in Corona. Cristian and Mauricio, the two younger children, followed at the end of the month. The last installment described Roselia's new job in a sweatshop near her home. In this, the eighth, Roselia contemplates leaving the United States, Mauricio celebrates Halloween and Elizabeth struggles with English.

By Barbara Fischkin

In New York City, the Almonte family still lives by its old country creed, the same gentle, uncomplicated beliefs that have sustained them for years. Be good to your neighbors, accept life's difficulties. Do not acknowledge a bad situation until it becomes too obviously horrible to ignore. For weeks Roselia Almonte had seemed seriously unhappy — depressed enough, perhaps, to leave America and go back to the Dominican Republic. But amongst themselves and in front of friends and relatives, the Almontes only hinted at that possibility with vague comments

and looks. There were no discussions, no opportunities to chew or analyze.

In the living room, surrounded by her children, Roselia would only say that, if they could all be together in Camu, their small mountain village on the country's lush northern coast, she would rather live there. But, alone with her husband, during a moment when she was feeling particularly morose, the unspoken had finally come out. Roselia told Javier that she wished she could go home.

The 43-year-old carpenter did not panic. His wife was only temporarily distraught. She did not mean what she said. He was sure of that, sure he

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knew how to make her feel better.

He understood that Roselia was being dragged down by her job. She worked in a small sewing factory near their apartment, a sweatshop. The owner was now permitting her to leave early some afternoons; paying \$30 extra for Saturdays. But Roselia still was often making less than the minimum wage, \$130 for what could be a 49-hour week. She took little pride in her work.

It was different with Javier. Since May, when Roselia and the children had come to live with him in America, he had helped complete one block of luxury apartments in Astoria, practically finished a second in Woodside. Javier works on a construction crew. He is just an employee, he will not profit from high sales. But his chest puffs after each job is done. Each one adds to his repertoire. Before he came to the United States he built resort condominiums in Puerto Plata; now he feels as though he is building New York City. "These will go for \$1,500 a month," he crowed one day from the top floor of the Astoria project. If the rent checks were being made out to "Javier Almonte," he could not have sounded more pleased. Roselia had no monuments to testify to her accomplishments. The skirts, shirts and jackets that she helped to sew, iron or pin were sent out to larger companies as soon as they were ready.

The weather made things worse. To Roselia, the cold was vicious and strange, unlike anything she had ever experienced. She felt even less ambitious about going out to look for a new job. She did not understand the sad, nostalgic, sometimes claustrophobic feeling that comes over people when afternoons abruptly become dark, freezing nights.

There were constant reminders of her past life. The news on Spanish television mentioned the Dominican Republic. Friends and relatives were taking trips back home, buying tickets in advance for Christmas. One day her younger sister, Ramona, called to say that she, too, would be going to Camu.

On a Saturday after work, Roselia Almonte walked into her apartment wrapped in a hand-me-down beige trenchcoat, her hair pulled back in a careless ponytail, her hands clutching plastic bags filled with tomatoes, pears and apples from Top Tomato, a produce market on Roosevelt Avenue. From the living room she could see that Ramona had arrived from New Jersey and was already at the stove, tasting the *sancocho*, Roselin's specialty, a soupy yellow stew made with beef, potatoes and yucca.

Although they were different creatures — Ramona was wearing white boots, skin-tight blue jeans, a stylishly oversized rose-colored blouse — and they did not always approve of one another, Roselia was happy to see her younger sister. She had not been happy about much lately.

In the kitchen, they hugged. Ramona was leaving the next day. Her three adolescent sons still lived in Camu with their grandmother. At the end of

November she would take the children, Segundo, Eduoard and Alexis, to Santo Domingo. The boys had been called for their *cita*, their appointment, one with a U.S. consular officer who would decide whether to grant them the immigrant visas that would permit them to move to America and live with their mother and her third husband, a handsome Puerto Rican taxi driver named Lazaro.

"I don't feel well," said Ramona. "I'm very nauseous. I'll have to leave soon."

"Buena suerte!" cried Roselia, as she hugged her sister goodbye, only minutes after they had greeted. "Good luck! Tell everyone that we are fine. Make sure they know about this new apartment. Make sure they have the address!"

As Ramona walked out the front door, Roselia could see that her sister had put her name on the back of the orange jacket she wore. It was the same jacket that all the drivers at Lazaro's taxi company wore. Roselia remembered that Lazaro had his own car. A big red car with cartoon stickers pasted on the glove compartment. "Ramona won't have any trouble with her visas," Roselin assured herself. Her husband has a good job. And he has a car.

"Does your husband have a car?" Roselia remembered the visa officer had asked her that at her own *cita* last February.

"No," she had replied, shaking.

Later he told her that her two youngest, Cristian, 14, and Mauricio, who was then 11, would not be given visas.

Months later Roselia summoned her courage and with her then-16-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, went to America without them. A few weeks later a congressman helped them to prove that Javier was making as much as he claimed — \$24,000-a-year, enough to support his family in America — and the children were permitted to emigrate. The question about the car may

or may not have been asked randomly. But Roselia believed that Americans thought the same as Dominicans. A car is a good indicator of money. In Camu, if a new Toyota came barreling down the dirt roads, people lined up and stared with a mixture of curiosity and envy. At the consulate they asked if you had a car before issuing a visa.

Roselia was happy for her sister. But still melancholy. Javier realized he had to do something. He brought her flowers. He went to a shop in Jackson Heights and bought her a low-waisted, calf-length blue dress with padded shoulders. It cost \$55 and looked more like something Ramona would wear. Roselia loved it. She decided to save it for the Thanksgiving dinner they were planning. It would be their first Thanksgiving. Javier felt relieved. Again, he had been right. Don't let a problem get too complicated. Solve it simply. For the time being, Roselia was not going anywhere.

She knew, herself, that returning would cause too many complications. What would she do with the children? She couldn't take them out of school. And yet she would find it frighteningly difficult, if not impossible, to leave them again. The memories of Mauricio crying at the airport were still too fresh. Children were the best things anyone could have in their lives, she thought. Her own children could change her mood in a minute. Roselia knew that many American women now waited until they were well into their 30s before having families, preferring their careers. Roselia could not understand that.

* * *

On the night of Oct. 31 she had come home from work in a bedraggled state, but the scene she saw when she opened the front door made her laugh with more enthusiasm than she had shown in weeks. China, her 22-year-old niece, had painted her face with

freckles and was wearing a glittering bandit mask. That was wonderful. But, as usual, it was Mauricio who really thrilled her. He popped out of the bedroom wearing a rubberized witch mask. The witch had a cobra growing out of her head. The cobra had a light bulb attached to it. When Mauricio connected the battery the cobra flashed on and off.

"Trick! Treat!" the 12-year-old said to his mother, in English.

Mauricio had been waiting for Halloween ever since the end of May, when he had first come to America and his Uncle Ernesto had told him about it. To the boy it sounded just like *el veintisiete de febrero*, — Feb. 27, Dominican Independence Day. In Puerto Plata, *el Malecon*, the road that spans the sea, is packed with people eating, drinking, dancing and fighting. Girls paint their faces, boys dress up as *diablos*, young devils who lit unsuspecting adults with round paper balloons. Mauricio had not had the heart to wear a costume since his father had gone to America. He felt as though there would be no one to admire him. But on Halloween, living in America with Javier, he was determined. He was going trick-or-treating. Maribel Corona, their Dominican landlady's 22-year-old daughter, had agreed to take him. China and Cristian would come along to watch. Javier, who had come home before Roselia, had already tried on the boy's mask and gone upstairs to see if the neighbors would recognize him.

Mauricio ran into the street with Maribel following behind him. She had lived in the United States since she was a child and has often guided the Almontes through new American rituals. She explained the way American libraries worked to Mauricio, took him to get him his first library card, helped him to fill it out. She showed Elizabeth and Cristian how to dress

stylishly for their first winter by layering sweaters over shirts. Once she even offered to take Elizabeth dancing at the Palladium. But Javier refused to permit it.

Mauricio hopped up the steps of the first house. His cobra witch head was flashing. To himself he practiced the words — *trick or treat, trick or treat.*

No one answered the door. No answer at the second house, either. Cristian reported that eggs were being thrown down the block. Mauricio ducked down a side street.

"Mauricio!" shouted Maribel. "Try this house. My friends live there."

Maribel's friends did not answer their door either. Mauricio was getting desperate. "Let's go there," he shouted back, pointing to a house across the street. "The lights are on." As soon as he got there, the lights went off.

"Maybe we can go to the bodega?" the boy offered, not exactly understanding the rules. "They have lots of candy there."

"I guess we came out too late," said Maribel. "Nobody wants to open their doors." It was 6:15.

Mauricio was about to give up, to return home with an empty paper bag, when he spotted an open door across from the bodega. A Chinese man was handing out *chupetes* — lollipops — to other trick or treaters, the first compatriots Mauricio had seen. The man shut the door. Mauricio dashed over and rang the bell again. The man answered again.

"Trick or treat," said Mauricio.

Back on the sidewalk he looked in his bag, pretending to be surprised.

The night was over. "At least the last people opened their door," said Mauricio.

He went home to show his parents his bounty. "*Mira! Chupetes. Dos chupetes! Orange and green.*"

* * *

Halloween was on a Friday night. The weekend progressed in its typical fashion. After work on Saturday Javier came home and sat down. On the job he is always moving, hanging walls and molding, mixing cement, moving heavy machinery, stopping only to get a cup of heavily sugared coffee from the truck, a ham-and-cheese or meatloaf sandwich from the deli. Mauricio bent down to take off his father's boots. Javier never has to ask for this to be done. At the most he signals by raising his legs. One of his three children, usually Mauricio, responds.

If there are no household chores after work, Javier will move to the black recliner in the living room, drink a beer, or more often a lemonade, and discuss the news on Spanish television. At home he prefers to rest his muscles and exercise his brain. Although he quit school at 15 he is not shy about offering his views on a myriad of subjects: places he will never see, people too powerful for him to meet; what makes a good marriage, who makes a good father.

"I don't have a perfect marriage," he said one afternoon, gearing up for another pronouncement. "But who does? We understand one another and that is what is important. It is important

that a husband and wife understand one another and that they do not argue in front of the children. If they have a disagreement they should go into another room and quietly discuss it. Children pick up everything."

On weekends, walking down the Corona streets with his family, he sometimes comments on the multiethnic neighborhood around them. There are Spanish restaurants, Chinese restaurants, a Chinese restaurant with a menu in Spanish. Further away, on Northern Boulevard, where the neighborhood is predominantly black, voices from evening prayer meetings can be heard on the street.

The Almonte children came to the United States both scornful and petrified of people whose skin is just a few shades darker than their own mulatto coloring. It was something they had brought with them from their grandfather's farm, where they were taught to keep a distance from the Haitian migrant workers. Haitians come to the Dominican Republic — not a rich country but better off than their own — to look for work, particularly when it is time to cut the sugar cane. Although they never seemed to be able to get close enough to talk, the Almonte children, as well as Roselia, believed that the Haitians smelled funny.

In America, Javier does not attempt to perpetuate the old prejudices in his children. If anything, he is more critical of his fellow Dominicans, as well as other immigrants, derisive of what he sees as their *pecadillos*, unfair with generalizations. Late one Sunday afternoon, while the weather still was warm, he and his family were walking in the park at Flushing Meadows. They stopped and looked out over a knoll covered with picnickers eating *chorizos* — sausages, to the tables where on summer nights, in the years before his family arrived, Javier would play dominoes with other Dominican men until almost midnight, to the cement walk where a friend had been playing merengue on his guitar, to the Chinese, Indian and Hispanic youngsters riding their skateboards, trying to look American.

All Javier saw was the litter. "Just look at all that garbage," he cried, convinced somehow that none of it was American litter. "Americans are different. You wouldn't find Americans throwing garbage around like that."

Javier views immigration as a responsibility. He has no patience for those who treat it casually, who come expecting gold in the streets, unprepared for less. "You wouldn't cook a piece of meat without looking at it first. You have to know before you come here what you are going to do. You can't just come here and go see a friend or a cousin and say, 'I am here.' Many immigrants from all the countries — and the Latins are certainly the same — they come here and all they want is a car because everyone has a car. I have other things that are more important than a car."

* * *
For Mauricio Halloween was a respite from what was a very serious life for a 12-year-old. He spends most of his

free time doing his homework, trying to learn English — and it shows. Of all the Almonte siblings, he seems to be doing the best in school. On his first American report card, he received an 85 in English, 90 in a Spanish course designed to make sure that young students in bilingual programs do not forget their language and do learn literature from their own cultures. His lowest mark was in mathematics, which he had never liked that much.

Elizabeth continued with her English and bilingual mathematics classes at LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City. She still was proud to be in college, more or less satisfied that she was making enough friends, although an American student would probably find the experience limiting. All her classes were in one high-rise, the old Executone company building. Her campus was Queens Boulevard. Sometimes, when she left for home in the late afternoon, she would stand on the platform of the elevated Flushing line, look toward Manhattan and think

about how much she wanted to see it at night. She had the same fascination as her father; as a boy in Catu he had dreamed about seeing city lights one day. He remembered that. But he still would not permit his daughter to go dancing with Maribel.

Elizabeth was not doing as well in English as she would have liked. On one of her two English midterms, she wrote: *"It was a history very sad and very interesan. Where Suzanne go to the Lima Airport with your mother. The plane was late and going to Pualcalpa. Went 80 passengers. And take Gate number 5. It was a Chirtmas day. After the plane climb up and up Suzanne found a seat proximity to the window for look at the jungle."*

Considering that Elizabeth had come to the United States six months earlier barely knowing a word of English, that was not terrible. But it certainly was not enough to enable her to take college classes in English. Her teacher had given her a grade of "al-

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Talking Roselia Into Remaining

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most passing," explaining, "I think you can pass at the end of the term if you trust (*confiar*) your own English and make sure you use your exam time carefully and finish both parts." It was becoming more and more obvious to Elizabeth that, as predicted, it was going to take her three years to finish community college. That dampened her spirits. "I don't have time to go to nightclubs," she thought.

Cristian was elated with her report card. Her last semester in the Dominican Republic she had failed five of her nine classes. "Todito," she cried when she received her grades from John Bowne High School in Flushing. "I passed it all." She received a warning in science, but that did not bother her.

It did annoy her, though, that, at home, her efforts did not seem to be enough. Maribel, particularly, thought that Cristian was not practicing English as much as she should be. Cristian was learning how to write the language. But she felt shy saying the words, they felt so uncomfortable in her mouth. Maribel's mother Anna, who had come back from the Dominican Republic for a visit also nagged her. And Anna didn't even speak English herself.

"You have to practice!" she told Cristian. "That's why I don't know English. When somebody has a husband to take care of she doesn't have time to go to school. But I wish now that I had learned English."

Cristian tried to practice more. When, unexpectedly even for her, an English sentence popped out of her mouth, Elizabeth, Mauricio and Maribel would applaud in relief. Javier also wanted her to speak more. But, like Anna, neither he nor Roselia were studying the language. Javier had never enrolled in classes, even though he had said he would after the children came. Roselia never went back to the classes she had taken when she first arrived. She said she was too busy working. An American future — at least an American future in English — that was for the children.