

THE LOTTERY

How a Green Card changes your life.

BY DAN BAUM

Raúl Jara's grandfather tilled a rich man's land on the outskirts of Lima, Peru, until agrarian reform in the nineteen-sixties made four acres of it his. By the time Raúl was born, in 1971, Lima had grown to surround the Jaras' compound, making their walled garden of bananas and bougainvillea an oasis from the increasingly chaotic and polluted capital city. Raúl, an only child, was the first member of his family to go to college, and six times a week he would travel an hour and forty-five minutes by minibus to an oasis of another kind, the campus of Pontificia Catholic University, where he and his fellow engineering students immersed themselves in the elegant exactitude of mathematics. Peruvians like to say that they have the world's best-educated taxi-drivers, because only a fraction of Peruvian college graduates find professional jobs. Raúl was an exception. After graduation, he worked as a teacher of computerized industrial drawing, then as an engineer at a gold mine, until, finally, he was hired at a copper mine set more than thirteen thousand feet up in the Peruvian Andes.

Peru's per-capita gross domestic product is less than that of Namibia or the Dominican Republic, but the Anglo-Australian Tintaya copper mine is a decidedly First World operation. The man-made canyon of the open pit is bordered by a spotless miniature city—neat workers' houses with flowers out front, garden apartments, a chapel, a hotel, a hospital, a health club, and office buildings. The rules of conduct are enforced with the rigor of a military academy: no walking in the street, no crossing outside the zebra stripes, no smoking, and orange vests and hard hats required everywhere. The mine's obsessive rectitude, amid the nearly uninhabited high grassy plains and snow-capped mountains of southeastern Peru, is as anomalous as an oil settlement on Alaska's North Slope, or a moon colony

in a science-fiction story. Engineers at Tintaya work in cubicles, each with a late-model I.B.M. ThinkPad attached to a nineteen-inch L.C.D. monitor, their whiteboards covered with dizzying graphs, parabolas, and complicated equations. When Raúl started at Tintaya as a geotechnical engineer, he examined soil samples and computed the angle at

back to Lima, where his friends and relatives would welcome him with a *pachamanca*, a feast of meats cooked slowly underground.

Though happy in his job, Raúl yearned for a life as orderly as the mine, for a country that funded education and parks, regulated air pollution and noise, and policed its own lawmakers. Once, when Raúl and some other engineers made a road trip to Chile, he noticed that in Peru the driver gleefully exceeded the speed limit, passed on the right, even blew through stop signs, but in Chile he was careful not to speed, and was scrupulous about stop signs and railroad crossings. "They have laws here," the man said. When a colleague went to work in Canada, Raúl asked his



Unlike many immigrants, lottery winners often have no family or job in the States.

which to cut the wall of the pit, and then, as an *ingeniero de costos*, he analyzed the budget and developed new projects. He worked twelve-hour shifts ten days in a row, and earned thirteen hundred dollars a month, almost ten times the minimum wage. During his four days off, he would travel twenty-three hours by bus over rough roads

boss about the possibility of a transfer, but he was told that he didn't speak English well enough.

On one of Raúl's four-day furloughs in the fall of 2002, he was walking in downtown Lima with his girlfriend, Liliana Campos, a willowy beauty with the graceful half-moon nose of her Inca ancestors. Lily, as she is called, was then

twenty-five and living with Raúl's parents while she studied to be a nurse. A red-white-and-blue sign caught their attention: "*Sorteo de Visas!*" Every autumn, storefront businesses decorated with American flags bloom across Lima like rockrose. Tall cardboard signs are taped onto windows or on sandwich boards placed on the sidewalk, festooned with Old Glory, the Statue of Liberty, and exhortatory phrases: "*Lotería de Green Card!*" or simply "*Puedes Ganar!*"—"You Can Win." Raúl and Lily had never given the lottery much thought, but this time they paid a couple of dollars to have their pictures taken and to get some help in filling out forms. Then, like most people who enter a lottery, they forgot all about it.

The official name of the program known as the Green Card Lottery in Peru—and in a hundred and seventy-six other countries—is the Diversity Visa Program. Of the more than two hundred visa types provided by the State Department, it is by far the oddest. While the vast majority of immigrant visas still go to people who suffer persecution or possess strictly prescribed qualifications—relatives already in the U.S., strategic skills, or great wealth—the only requirement for winning the Green Card Lottery, other than good fortune, is a high-school education or two years' experience in one of three hundred and fifty-three career categories ranging from anthropologist to housepainter to poet-and-lyricist. Fifty thousand diversity visas are made available each year; almost six million people applied to the 2005 program.

The lottery began—in the name of diversity—as a way to bring more white people to America. It was, so to speak, a correction to a correction to a correction. The earliest immigration laws, from the late eighteen-eighties, favored Northern Europeans. In 1965, at the height of the civil-rights movement, Congress changed the laws to favor relatives of American citizens or permanent residents, regardless of origin, and Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans began arriving in record numbers, while European immigration plummeted. The shift alarmed many members of Congress, who argued for legislation that would, in the words of Senator Al-

phonse D'Amato, relieve the "painful, and even tragic problems for Irish, Germans, Italians, Poles, and others without immediate family members in the United States." The result, in the early nineteen-nineties, was a series of short-lived diversity-visa programs designed to bring more European immigrants, especially English-speakers, to the United States. From 1992 to 1994, forty per cent of diversity visas were set aside for immigrants from one country: Ireland. When the Irish exception expired, in 1995, Congress decided the lottery should cover the whole world—except those countries thought to be overrepresented in the immigrant pool. That list now includes Mexico, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Haiti, Jamaica, China (not including Hong Kong), Russia, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, Vietnam, the United Kingdom (except Northern Ireland), Poland, and Canada. Winners of the lottery qualify for immediate permanent-resident cards—green cards—which allow them to live and work in the United States as long as they like and to move toward citizenship. Some countries, like Ethiopia and Egypt, had more than six thousand qualified winners last year. Andorra, Liechtenstein, the Pacific island nation of Niue, and the French Southern and Antarctic Territories each had one. The Cocos Islands had two, Suriname had three, and the Seychelles had four.

Whatever the lottery does to diversify the immigrant pool, it is a splendid overseas marketing campaign for the American Dream. That a carpet installer or pipe fitter in Ouagadougou or Yerevan who would otherwise have no hope of emigrating might suddenly be handed a green card is a notion as powerful as that of the orphan who becomes President or the twenty-five-year-old who pulls the right lever in Las Vegas and wins forty million dollars. The odds aren't bad: at a hundred and eighteen to one, they're considerably better than the forty-five-million-to-one odds of winning first prize in the New York Lottery.

But, unlike most immigrants, lottery winners often have neither kin nor a job waiting for them; many show up with no place to live, no English, and no idea of how to find work. "I know people

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who applied, got picked, came, and then went home saying, 'It wasn't what I expected,'" Charles Kuck, an immigration lawyer in Atlanta, told me. "It's like, *boom*, your life has changed completely, and you're on your own."

When Raúl and Lily entered the lottery, the application forms were still on paper and the storefront entrepreneurs didn't earn much more than the street-corner scribes who balance manual typewriters on milk crates and write up wills or lawsuits for a few *soles*. In 2003, the State Department began requiring that applications arrive via the Internet, with a digital picture. These photos can be scanned by facial-recognition software to eliminate multiple entries, and American security agencies can, if they wish, screen for terrorists and other villains. Some critics argued that the Internet requirement would unfairly restrict the immigrant pool to the digitally savvy, but, instead, a new industry appeared. In March, I met Oscar Gomez, sitting by himself at a computer on the top floor of a four-story shopping center near the President's Palace, in Lima. "Imagine this filled with people," Gomez said as we walked into the corridor, which is about seventy feet long. "They come to

me because they don't know what a JPEG is. They show up at five in the morning." Gomez charges about five dollars to take a digital picture, help with the forms, and provide an electronic address. He showed me, behind a filing cabinet, the Stars-and-Stripes-emblazoned sign he places in the corridor during lottery season: "Live, Study and Work Legally in the United States!" and at the bottom, "*Agencia Autorizada*." I asked him what "authorized" meant and he shrugged sheepishly. I asked him whether he'd ever entered the lottery himself. "Every year!" he said.

The seventy-five people who run the lottery work in a converted clothing factory in Williamsburg, Kentucky, using a desktop computer to assign numbers randomly to the electronic applications. The State Department wouldn't allow me to visit the building, and no State Department official would speak about the Diversity Visa Program for the record or venture an opinion on how it serves the national interest. "Ask Congress," one State Department official said. "They created it." A decade after its inception, the Diversity Visa Program remains controversial. A 2002 law blocks the State Department from issuing visitor's visas to citizens of countries deemed

to be supporters of terrorism, but says nothing about immigrant visas. In 2003, between two and four per cent of Green Card Lottery winners came from countries on the list of terrorism sponsors, which includes Libya, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Syria, and Sudan. "If you're Al Qaeda and want to plant someone in the U.S., this is the way," Representative Bob Goodlatte, from Roanoke, Virginia, told me. Goodlatte, a former immigration lawyer, has been trying for years to abolish the Diversity Visa Program. As a member of the House Agriculture Committee, he would prefer guest-worker programs that match migrants to employers. But Goodlatte admits he hasn't made much progress. "We're all descended from immigrants," he said. "There's a definite feeling that we're the land of opportunity and blah-de-blah."

In June of 2003, an envelope from the U.S. State Department arrived at the Jaras' house. The letter was in English and began, "Congratulations!" The news was as stressful as it was pleasing. Although Raúl and Lily were not yet married, she was three months pregnant, and emigrating promised opportunities for the child. But for Raúl the thought of leaving his parents and job was excruciating, and, since he knew little English, his immediate prospects in the U.S. would be limited. He told his father, half hopefully, that there was no guarantee he'd get the visa. The State Department draws a hundred thousand "winning" entries, figuring that at least half will fail to meet the eligibility requirements. In addition to proving that he had a high-school diploma or two years' work experience, Raúl would have to pass a medical exam and do well in an interview at the U.S. Embassy in Lima. But his father had no illusions. Whom would the United States take, if not Raúl? He broke the news to his wife, Elvira, who wept for hours. The lottery rules allow winners to bring spouses and unmarried children under twenty-one, so, five weeks after receiving the letter, Raúl and Lily married.

Many of Raúl's colleagues at the mine were pleased, and a little envious, at his good fortune. "We all think about going," Willmer Cancho, who worked beside Raúl, said. "No matter how good a position you have, you can't insure your chil-

dren's future. You can send them to the best schools, the best universities, but even that is no guarantee, because so few people who graduate get jobs in their profession. My son is two years old. I don't want him following in my footsteps." Jorge Vargas, Raúl's former boss, agreed. "My daughter is fourteen; she goes to the German school because I want her to be able to go to Germany. I love Peru, but I can't guarantee her a future here." The only calculation, for Cancho and Vargas, is the best way to go. But the news that Raúl might suddenly emigrate appalled Orlando Carnero, the soft-spoken, baby-faced operations manager at Tintaya—not only because he would lose a good engineer, but for Raúl's sake. "I told him he's going to end up sweeping floors," Carnero said when I visited the mine last spring. "I thought it was a little crazy, to throw away his education like that. So I told him this: 'Go ahead and see if you like it. I'll give you license for one year; I'll hold your job. See if it's so much better there. See if you like sweeping floors.'"

Lily was nine months pregnant when, in December, 2003, she and Raúl appeared at the U.S. Embassy in Lima. As Raúl's wife, she had to be interviewed, too. The processing fees cost them four hundred and fifty dollars apiece, and the medical exams a hundred dollars each, all nonrefundable should they fail the interview. The consular officer who interviewed them was friendly, and appeared to have made up his mind before they sat down. After a five-hour wait, they received their visas. Two days later, their son, Daniel, was born, and in May they left for the United States. Raúl said to his father as he left for the airport, "I don't know why I'm going."

I met Raúl at nine o'clock one morning last March, four hours after his shift began at Turco's Super Ranch market in Yorktown Heights, New

York, about ten miles east of Peekskill. Raúl, who is thirty-four, is stocky and tea-colored, with the mashed-down, wet-brushed hair of an altar boy and a placid expression that could be read as either formal or wary. He wore a white cloth apron and the boat-shaped paper hat that is the universal badge of the food-service worker. "My immediate boss knows I'm Peruvian; he's Guatemalan," Raúl told me as he ran loaves of bread through a slicer. "But the manager of the store doesn't know what I am, or that I'm educated. He sees a Hispanic. Dark skin, no English; he sees a Hispanic laborer." His face opened in a bright smile, but it was quickly replaced by a vigilant mask. Raúl was earning eight dollars an hour at Turco's bakery, almost the same as his hourly wage in Peru, though his living expenses in America were considerably higher than those he incurred back home. At noon, he would walk across several acres of parking lot to the giant Food Emporium, where he'd put on a parka to spend the next five hours ducking in and out of a walk-in refrigerator, restocking dairy shelves for seven dollars and seventy cents an hour. He and Lily were paying nine hundred dollars a month for the top floor of a listing clapboard house on Main Street in Peekskill: three small rooms painted an alarming shade of pea-soup green. A relative of Raúl's had settled in Peekskill thirty years earlier, but they were still surprised at how many Hispanic immigrants lived there; it's the landscaping-labor hub of the mid-Hudson Valley, where workers are picked up at dawn every day to tend gardens from Ossining to Poughkeepsie.

Raúl hasn't told anyone in Peekskill that he won the lottery. The Ecuadorians, Mexicans, and Venezuelans Raúl meets in La Plazita market most likely think he is, like them, undocumented. He showed me his green card, which he keeps in his wallet, and which is actually a buff yellow with a complicated hologram to prevent forgery. Raúl told me that his life is made more difficult by the many Mexicans in the area—not because they're unfriendly, he is quick to say, but because their expectations are different. Unlike Raúl and Lily, who hope to settle permanently in the U.S., many of the Peekskill Mexicans want to

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work a few years, save money, and return home. "They're willing to live three families to an apartment and work fourteen-hour days," he told me as we ate mutton stew in an Ecuadorian restaurant down the street from their apartment. "So the rest of us Hispanics are expected to compete with that."

Lily is more enthusiastic about the United States. She enjoys being independent and looks forward to when Daniel begins school, so she can make use of her education as a practical nurse. In the meantime, she strolls with Daniel amid the neatly pruned lawns of Depew Park or reads him fairy tales in the Peekskill public library. On Raúl's day off, they dress up and wander through Wal-Mart or the Jefferson Valley Mall. Lily finds the snow and cold of the Hudson Valley less onerous than the infrequent bus service. They had to buy a car—a 1998 Isuzu—and making car payments contributes to the difficulty of their struggle to get ahead. "I knew people in Peru who had lived in the U.S., but when they'd come home, they'd have pride and full pockets," Lily said. "They'd only want to say how great it is here. They don't tell you how they got started. They don't tell you the realities."

Raúl admitted that he considered giving up on the United States when he got the flu last winter. "In Peru, when you're sick, you go to the pharmacist and he mixes up something right there, injects you right there." He grabbed the flesh of his hip and pantomimed an injection. "Here, I got sick and went down to the Hudson Valley Hospital Center. They said, 'All you have is fever. Take Tylenol, take Theraflu, drink a lot of water.' And they sent me home with nothing. I lay here, suffering." But his desire to return to Peru receded with the fever. "It's not the money," he said. "I was living much richer there." The word he uses when discussing why he left Peru is *desorden*—chaos—the terrible combination of the noise and dirt and street crime of Lima, the volatility of the economy, and the corruption of government. Lima sapped his faith in any institution outside of his family, he told me, and made life feel unpredictable. He emigrated, essentially, to be part of a society in which the public sector is respected.

Trading a job at the pinnacle of his profession for menial tasks at supermarkets has been painful. "At least in the short term, my life in the United States is going to be worse than it was in Peru," he said. "But the future for my son is better." He tries not to worry about his godchildren in Lima, whose father "struggles and struggles and can't leave." But he misses his family there. "If I went back, it wouldn't be for the mine. It would be for my parents."

When I visited Raúl's parents, in Lima, the mere mention of the State Department letter made Elvira cry. She set before me a plate of *cuy*, guinea pig roasted in the traditional Peruvian way, with the buck-toothed head on. "Percy's favorite," she said, using her son's middle name, as she and his father usually do. She sat, dabbing her eyes. "What are we to do here, just the two of us, in this big house?" Raúl, Sr., wrenched the cork out of a bottle of sweet Peruvian wine. "I support Percy a hundred per cent," he said gruffly. "What is there here for the little one?"

In April, Raúl and Lily told me that they were going to let pass Orlando Carnero's May deadline to reclaim Raúl's job at the mine. When I called them in late October, they said they'd found a slightly cheaper apartment in Peekskill, and were starting to save money. Raúl is still working in supermarkets, but he and Lily have been studying English, taking turns watching Daniel so they can attend classes two nights a week at Westchester Community College. "I know I'm not going to advance myself if I can't speak English," Raúl said. He has no illusions about getting a mining engineer's job in the United States, but he hopes to find a quality-control job in a factory. In the meantime, they want to stop paying rent and start building equity. A friend in San Antonio, Texas, told them there is plenty of work there, and houses can be bought for as little as eighty thousand dollars—about a third of what a similar house would cost in Peekskill. "There, everybody will really think I'm a Mexican," Raúl said with a laugh. First, though, he will return briefly to Lima. "It's going to be strange to go home, and I'm sure it will be hard to come back," he said. "But I know this is where I have to be." ♦