

"You say Father can get a second wife; but we don't ever want the familiar scent of our mums' beds to change. . . . You say Father is allowed to give Mum a beating once in a while; well, when we grow up we'll show you who needs a beating. . . . When you say I am valued twice as much as my sister, you're essentially asking all of us men to be unchivalrous and we don't like it." —*Antidepressant*

About a foreign reporter who condescended to a group of Iranian women: "May she rest in peace! My grandmother could shoot an apple in half while galloping on horseback. Yet after all these years they think it's amazing that we drive cars!" —*Barhar-Goler*

It's good to travel in a foreign country. It's better to do so with a savvy guide.

Best of all is to do so with a guide who is not only well informed but also well connected, so you can meet a lot of different people. Books help, but they cannot provide the

feeling of meeting people directly. This book can. It elicits something of the same complex emotional response as a prolonged period of face-to-face contact. After you read it, you'll start e-mailing the people who open their hearts to you in its pages.

And you'll be distressed whenever an e-mail bounces back. In April 2003, the regime began doing to bloggers what it was already doing to print and broadcast journalists. By October 2004, writes Alavi, "several Internet journalists and bloggers were [being] held in undisclosed locations awaiting trial," and new laws were being decreed against such "cybercrimes" as "disturbing the public mind." The election of a hardline president in July 2005 could mean further tightening.

These efforts make blogging more difficult and dangerous, but they are unlikely to succeed completely, any more than the Soviet Union's efforts to silence its poets succeeded. Human voices have a way of refusing to be silenced altogether—perhaps because, as the Persian poet Rumi once wrote, "the wine God loves is human honesty."

—*Martha Bayles*

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## The Lives Beside Us

A DISHWASHER AT THE DELI where I worked during graduate school once asked me out for coffee. He'd heard I was a writer interested in life stories, and he wanted to meet me every week

and tell his, starting with the day he was born. Hearing his whole story was the only way anyone could really understand him, he said. No one ever had.

The author of *Orange County Housecleaners*, anthropologist Frank Cancian, a professor emeritus at the University of California, Irvine, offered seven housecleaners, all women, the opportunity to tell their stories. The result is a collection of intimate confessions from strangers who might otherwise sit silently next to us on a bus. Cancian recorded the subjects as they recounted their histories; then he edited the transcripts and added the women's family photographs and pictures he took himself.

These are tales of marital squabbles, family births and deaths, illegal border crossings, religious faith, personal triumphs and shortcomings. "I have to go way back for you to understand . . . where I am today," says Tina Parker, who started cleaning houses at the age of 12, shortly after her Jehovah's Witness mother,

### ORANGE COUNTY HOUSECLEANERS.

By Frank Cancian.  
Univ. of New Mexico  
Press. 116 pp. \$22.95



When Leidi Mejia became pregnant with her daughter Monica, the father abandoned her. The living room walls of their Orange County home are decorated with Monica's tae kwon do and school awards.

believing that the world would end before her daughter could use an education, withdrew her from school. We want to nudge the tellers and ask, "And then what happened?" for they frequently digress, or are reticent about the parts of their lives that remain tender to the touch. Says Leidi Mejia, in a brief and rueful account of her relationship with the father of her second daughter, "When I realized I was pregnant . . . he began to want to go to parties and he didn't take me. I started to lose my figure. And because this bothered him that I was losing my figure, he left my house."

Five of the seven women Cancian interviewed are Latina immigrants who left their families to forge a better life for themselves in the United States. None seems ashamed of the work she does, though some are tired of it, and more than one has tried her hand at other work. Esperanza Mejia, Leidi's sister, trained to become a medical assistant but dropped her plan when her mother died after an American doctor said she was faking her illness. "I told my sister, 'I don't want to work for stupid doctors who could have helped Mother and didn't do it.'"

Perhaps the most surprising thing about *Orange County Housecleaners* is how little the subjects talk

about their work. (You'll read little that echoes Barbara Ehrenreich's acerbic social commentary in *Nickel and Dimed*, her 2001 account of trying to make ends meet with earnings from low-wage jobs.) These women have developed long-standing relationships with many of their clients. They speak highly of their employers, and only obliquely of humiliations or bad treatment. Men and dreams come and go, but dirty houses in Newport Beach remain, providing them with work that offers a measure of freedom and more earning power than most other available jobs.

What the speakers convey is a sense not of the labor that fills their days but of their children's accomplishments and teenage rebellions, of their own new loves and old hurts. Cancian clearly earned the trust of these women, and it's a pity he confined his formal interviews to roughly an hour, for some stories feel as though they've only just gotten under way. But a whole life is as difficult a burden to bear as it is to unload, which is why I told the dishwasher no when he asked to share his story with me. Cancian goes a shorter distance with his subjects, but it's a journey well worth taking.

—Sarah L. Courteau

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