

Ruiz

On Friday nights the restaurant hired a special singer, a Julio Iglesias look-alike in tight black trousers and open collared shirt who sang "Feelings" earnestly to whatever woman he had brought that week and seated near the front of his little stage at the center of the restaurant. He offered a refreshing change of pace from the wandering weekday chorus of the Mariachis in their overblown bullfighter regalia smilingly singing "Guantanamera" and "La Cucaracha." The busboys and waitresses made their way cautiously around the back of the stage, footsteps absorbed by the low-pile carpet, its ornate red and black Moorish tile pattern masking a myriad of ground-in tortilla chips and salsa spills. The waitress from Spain urged, "Andale!" to the busboys as she rushed among the faux stuccoed arches between the different sections of the restaurant, passing along behind the regulars drinking beer in the fat upholstered swivel chairs at the bar.

The staff wore crimson red half-aprons over black polyester trousers, pilled from multiple washings, and collared white shirts interchangeable with a Catholic school girl's uniform, their sensible black shoes dotted with dried tomato seeds from green and red salsa slopped over the edges of little green plastic bowls, which they hurriedly slid across the formica tables or shellacked oak booths. They delivered endless wax-paper-lined, brightly colored plastic baskets overflowing with warm tortilla chips. The chips were kept near the kitchen, in shiny silver warming ovens the size of vending machines, the bottoms dispensing chips rather than candy bars. Next to the chip dispensers the waitstaff stood peering into the kitchen pass-through window, asking about their chili rellenos order or complaining that the tostadas for table 4 were not ready when the enchiladas were. Meanwhile, in and out hurried the busboys grabbing jugs of ice water or cloths to wipe up the spills from the chairs covered in avocado vinyl. All of the workers returned home each night with the odor of tacos and greasy meat in their hair and clothes. Only heavy laundering and showering could erase the evening they had spent in the strip mall restaurant of stucco in a land of red brick somewhere in the midwest.