

**CAPTIVE IN QUEENS: THE NEIGHBORHOOD;**  
**A Neighborhood Was Jarred By Cries of 'the Mute Ones'**

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## **Body**

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In **the neighborhood** they were known as los muditos, **the mute ones**: industrious young people who left **the** house at dawn and did not return until after midnight.

But when they came home, their neighbors knew it. That is when life began on **the** first floor of 37-54 93d Street, a two-story house half a block from **the** No. 7 line in Jackson Heights, **Queens**.

And life among los muditos, neighbors say, was not pretty.

Women ran **crying** through **the** house. Men sat on **the** front steps drinking. Both men and women made loud guttural sounds, like muffled screams. And children **cried** incessantly, but their parents could not hear them.

In **the** mornings, condoms and empty bottles littered **the** front yard.

"**The** screams wouldn't let us sleep," said Luzmari Bohorquez, 42, who lives next door. "And in **the** mornings, **one** of **the** girls often had a black eye."

Cristina Cabrera, 23, who lives upstairs with five other people, said she always knew that at least a dozen immigrants lived downstairs. But she never imagined there would be so many.

**The** police said 44 people lived in **the** house, almost all of them deaf adults who worked for little or no pay for **the** men who brought them to **the** United States from Mexico.

Mrs. Cabrera said it was obvious that her neighbors were going through very hard times. "Some of **the** women would sit on **the** front steps and sob, and I mean sob loudly," she said.

To others on **the** block, los muditos were known for always paying for their groceries and services in dollar bills and for **the** exquisite care they took of their home, often hosing down **the** mess they had left overnight in front of **the** house all **the** way to **the** sidewalk.

They were also known for their sweetness, waving and smiling to people they did not even know.

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Esther Sotamba, one of the owners of the house, said that when she bought it three months ago for \$269,000, the tenants were already living there.

She said that she did not know who was renting the house, and that she always dealt with a man named Alfredo who did not live there and never told her his last name or gave her a telephone number. Police have identified the man as Alfredo Paoletti, also known as Alfredo Rustrian, 37. When Ms. Sotamba wanted to talk to him, she left a note with the tenants, she said.

Ms. Sotamba said she had talked to Alfredo several times because she was concerned that too many people lived there. When she bought the house, she said, she was told there were only 10 tenants. But she visited the house every weekend, and had seen signs that many more people lived there: beds everywhere, many pairs of shoes of different sizes and large, industrial-size cooking pots.

Alfredo, however, told her that many of the people who came to the house actually lived in another house nearby, she said. He explained that they congregated in this house because it was closer to their jobs, Ms. Sotamba said. On July 1, Alfredo agreed that the tenants of the house would move, she said, but he asked for time to look for another place.

At the second address the police went to yesterday, a two-family home at 104-15 34th Avenue, family members who would not give their names said they had owned the building for two years. They said they had rented the upper floor to a group of seven deaf Mexicans, but had little communication with them because they used only sign language.

A 22-year-old family member said that even though he had heard people go in and out "all the time," he did not believe there could have been more than seven people living upstairs. "I would have known," he said. "But I barely heard those people walking around."

The men and women of both houses made a living selling pens and key chains for \$1 each in the subway cars that crisscross Queens. They paid a monthly total of \$1,600 rent for the four-bedroom, one-bath house on 93d Street. They paid punctually on the 22d of each month, Ms. Sotamba said, giving her at least \$1,000 of the total in \$1 bills.

Manuel Jara, a neighbor who lives two houses away, said that the immigrants showed up suddenly one day six months ago. "We used to ask ourselves, where did all these people come from, and what are they doing here, until I saw two of them in the subway, selling things," he said.

Valerio Mena, a tailor who has a shop a few houses away from where they lived, said he was always making alterations for them. They wore secondhand clothes that needed a lot of mending. A few days ago, they left an old purple sweatshirt, a faded blue hooded jacket and some blue and white sheets.

"I feel for them. They were really nice people," Mr. Mena said, neatly folding the immigrants' belongings that he never got to mend. "For a long time there has been a rumor that someone was exploiting them."

Another shopkeeper, Ana Nolasco, said the immigrants had managed to communicate to several neighbors that they worked 18 hours a day or even longer because the man who controlled them, whom they never identified, demanded that they stay away from the house unless they had earned at least \$100 a day. Lately, she said, they had begun wearing the same kind of clothes: colorful T-shirts with a logo that spelled Love in sign language, and jean shorts.

Mrs. Cabrera said she found it difficult to deal with her neighbors because she could not communicate with them. She went downstairs many times to let them know that their babies were crying.

"I pounded on their doors, but they couldn't hear me," she said, "and the babies cried for hours, until they couldn't cry anymore."

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Neighbors said they were not sure whether the men who lived in the house beat the women, or if someone from the outside came in to abuse them, because they never actually saw any of the beatings. But, they said, they are certain that many tears were shed in that house.

Mrs. Cabrera said she once saw a young woman running from the house as if she wanted to get away from two men who were chasing her. The woman pushed the men away, and they finally left her alone. She then sat on the steps at the back of the house, whimpering like a puppy.

The next day, when Mrs. Cabrera asked Alfredo what had happened, he told her that the woman had had a very bad toothache.

## Graphic

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Map of Queens shows the location of 104-15 34th Avenue and of 37-54 93d Street: Officials say 62 people lived in squalor in two houses in Queens. (pg. 25)

## Classification

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