A black plastic garbage bag protects a young worker from toxic wet tobacco leaves.

Kids under 18 can't legally buy cigarettes, but they can—and do—work on tobacco farms. They say the hazards are worth the risk to support their families.

Children of the FIELDS

BY ROBERT ANDREW POWELL

THE SUN HAS YET TO RISE IN rural North Carolina, but the muggy, breezeless weather hints at yet another very hot July day. About a dozen Hispanic boys and girls, ages 12 to 15, slowly emerge from a cluster of mobile homes on the outskirts of town, rubbing their eyes as they whisper goodbyes to their mothers. The kids wear long-sleeved shirts and heavy denim jeans even though temperatures in the tobacco fields, where they work, will approach triple digits. They carry bottles of water and Gatorade in one hand and plastic garbage bags—ad hoc hazmat suits—in the other.

A few minutes before 6 a.m., the soft crunch of gravel announces the arrival of a black SUV driven by a man who works for a tobacco farmer. He'll shuttle the kids to the field, an hour away, and drop them off behind a thick stand of pine trees, hidden from the main road. There's almost no chance that state inspectors will notice the children or check whether they get regular water breaks (they do), have access to bathrooms (they don't), and are legally permitted to work (most aren't).

When the kids get to the field, they poke neck- and armholes in their garbage bags, drape them over their torsos, and pull on disposable plastic gloves. The goal is simple: Avoid touching the tobacco leaves, which can leach nicotine into the skin—especially when tobacco leaves are wet, such as early in the morning, before the sun burns off the dew. The price for repeatedly coming into contact with the toxic chemical—nausea, vomiting, dizziness, headaches, loss of appetite, sleeplessness—is made worse on days when the plants have been sprayed with insecticide to kill off budworms.

Fifteen-year-old Edinson Ramirez explains that when he first started working tobacco, he absently used his shirtsleeve, which had come into contact with the wet leaves, to wipe sweat from his face.

"After lunch, my face started stinging," he says. "It felt like somebody threw hot sauce on me."

Nicotine poisoning is also called green tobacco sickness. All the kids have heard of it, but when asked if they've ever suffered from it, they all say no. Yet when asked specifically about the common symptoms, everyone shares stories. Have you vomited? Yes. Many times. Dizziness, headaches? Sure. Sleeplessness? Every night.

Today, the kids "top" the tobacco by walking up and down row after row of leafy green tobacco plants, plucking off any white, teacup-shaped flowers and tossing them to the ground. Plastic-covered fingers search the base of each stalk for small dwarf leaves called suckers, which, like the flowers, divert nutrients away from the valuable main leaves. With the foreman monitoring the speed at which they work, the kids also pull weeds from around the base of the plant and right any tipsy stalks that have fallen into other rows. When one row is finished, they start down the next. Their shift lasts 12 hours.

"He'll fire your ass" if you miss any suckers or if you go too slowly, says Neftali Cuello, referring to the foreman. Neftali is a crew elder at age 19. She began working in tobacco fields when she was 11.

IN BRAZIL, INDIA, Russia, and other countries, no one under age 18 can legally work in tobacco fields. Yet in the United States, a child as young as 12 needs only a parent's permission to help harvest the plant. By age 14, even that isn't necessary. And while children under age 16 in the United States can be limited to 18 hours a week behind the counter at Starbucks or Walmart, kids of the same age who harvest tobacco have no federal restrictions if school is out of session.

In May 2014, Human Rights Watch published *Tobacco's Hidden Children,* a report based on interviews with more than 100 children ages seven to 17, most of whose parents are Hispanic immigrants, who said they had worked in tobacco farming in the United States in 2012 or 2013. The majority of the children interviewed for the report worked the field primarily during the summer, though a few were migrant workers, traveling year-round alone or with their families to different locations to work. The report outlined the "excessively long hours" children often work and the trouble kids can have collecting even a minimum wage for this work, a repetitive labor that "strains their backs and taxes their muscles." And, according to the report, nearly three quarters of the child workers on tobacco farms who were surveyed experienced symptoms consistent with green tobacco sickness. Human Rights Watch called on tobacco growers to stop using child labor, a call that child advocates and public health experts have been making for decades.

"Children are not small adults," explains Thomas A. Arcury, a professor of family medicine at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center. "Nicotine and pesticides from tobacco can have a long-term negative effect on the kids' developing neurological, reproductive, and musculoskeletal systems."

> MANY OF THE CHILD WORKERS SURVEYED HAD SYMPTOMS CONSISTENT WITH GREEN TOBACCO SICKNESS.

Although many children still work tobacco fields in North Carolina and other states, the report altered the hiring practices of some farmers. Several labor contractors in North Carolina backed off on hiring children this season, a decision that has frustrated, of all people, the kids. The truth is that despite the long hours, possible health effects, and low wages, many kids say they need and want to do this work. And their parents aren't stopping them—in fact, many kids work alongside Mom and Dad.

ONE EVENING, as I drove around central North Carolina, I came across six boys playing soccer on a lumpy patch of grass. Their goalposts were fashioned from snapped tree branches. Each boy told me he'd worked tobacco the previous summer, but this year the boys weren't working at all. "You have

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Workers stand on narrow rafters while hanging tobacco to dry.

to be 18 now," explained Eduardo Cruz, 15. I asked what he was doing instead this summer, and he told me he was doing nothing. Which could be good, in theory. He can play soccer. He can be a kid. Except every one of the boys told me he'd rather be working—that is, he'd rather be helping his family.

Edinson Ramirez began topping tobacco at age 12. "I started working because my mom is a single mom, and I saw how she struggled with money," he says. "She would come home later and later every day. It was hard for her to pay the bills, to have food on the table. So I thought maybe if I went to work, I might help a little bit with the money."

Neftali's mother started working tobacco to support herself and her six kids after she left Neftali's father several years ago. Tobacco has never paid much money, but there weren't many other options for a person in her circumstances. She first brought her kids into the fields so she could watch them when they were out of school.

"She thought we wouldn't last, that we'd see how horrible it is and not come back," Neftali says. "But we kept coming back. Me and my sisters, we wanted to help out."

TODAY, ECONOMIC necessity may be the biggest factor driving kids to work tobacco fields, but the practice is grounded in tradition. Through the 1960s, schools adjusted their schedules so children could help out with planting, topping, and harvesting the plant. At a tobacco farm museum in the town of Kenly, North Carolina, I talked to Mary Cavanaugh, a grandmother who grew up in the state and who worked the fields when she was young. Her memories aren't negative. "Everybody worked the fields," she recalled. "It was how we made our summer money."

> DOUGLAS BELIEVES THAT BIG TOBACCO COMPANIES HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY TO IMPROVE CHILD LABOR PRACTICES.

Tom Young, a former helicopter crew chief for the Air National Guard and now a successful novelist, grew up on a tobacco farm in North Carolina in the 1970s. In an op-ed he wrote last June for *USA Today,* Young respectfully disagreed with the Human Rights Watch request to ban children from tobacco fields. Before he started first grade, Young says, he was driving a tractor and chopping weeds under his father's close supervision. He topped tobacco like Neftali is doing today and helped hang harvested leaves in curing barns. He handled tobacco directly when he and his brother stuffed cured leaves into burlap sacks in preparation for market. His own experience educated him on responsibility, he wrote, and on what it takes to finish a job. Potential exposure to chemicals or heatstroke was mitigated with "plain old common sense." Sit in the shade for a while if you get dizzy. Drink lots of water. Handle tobacco leaves with caution.

"Don't get me wrong: I don't recommend smoking. It'll kill you," Young asserted in his op-ed. "But handling tobacco leaves never hurt me by giving me nicotine poisoning ... I never experienced it and never saw anyone else suffer from it."

The Human Rights Watch report concedes that the long-term effects of nicotine absorption through the skin aren't known. However, it contends that research shows the adverse effects of smoking on adolescent brains and that nonsmoking adult tobacco workers have similar levels of nicotine in their bodies as smokers. "The U.S. government and the states have an obligation to protect children from dangerous and exploitative work," the report concludes.

Clifford Douglas, director at the University of Michigan's Tobacco Research Network, believes that the

big tobacco companies have the power, and the responsibility, to improve child labor practices. "The victims here are mostly poor and largely invisible to the rest of us, but that doesn't mean that they don't need to be protected," Douglas told VICE News in May. Marty Otañez, a University of Colorado assistant anthropology professor and founder of fairtradetobacco.com, thinks that more independent oversight of farm conditions and union representation could help protect migrant and seasonal tobacco workers, especially children. "It's not about just looking at the public health issues of smoking anymore, but taking a holistic approach to holding a company accountable," he told VICE News. "The cost of tobacco is low, but the impact is huge."

THE SUN IS STILL shining at 7 p.m., when the shift finally ends. The temperature holds steady at 91 degrees. Neftali collects her daily pay from the foreman. About $85 in cash. She rides back to the trailer park with her mother, her sister, and a couple of the boys from the crew. Even though she's physically tired, she feels amped when she gets home, wide-awake. She forces herself to eat something, though she is not really hungry. She talks to a friend on the phone. She won't get to bed until after midnight. The release of sleep eludes her for a few more hours after that.

"It's really, really bad, how hard it is for me to fall asleep," she admits. "I get only two or three hours at most. Then I have to wake up, and it's time to go again."

The insomnia, the lack of appetite. That sounds like it could be the nicotine. She shrugs her shoulders. Yeah, maybe. It's hard working in the fields, definitely. But the dangers of tobacco? That's not something she has the luxury of worrying about. R

Robert Andrew Powell wrote "The Psychic, the Novelist, and the $17 Million Scam," for the March 2014 issue of *Reader's Digest*.

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