ings. Apart from the clothes they wear, all that many have left are their belts.

Some migrants realize, sitting on the bus, that they can take no more. They are out of money. They have passed through cold, heat, hunger. They slump in their seats, weak. Often something tragic has broken their willpower: a violent assault, a rape, or a fall from a train. They no longer believe it's possible to reach America.

Others have been on the bus dozens of times. They vow to keep trying, no matter what. They rest on the bus, recharging for the road ahead. They plot how they will try again, using knowledge gained from previous attempts.

There are twenty migrants on Enrique's bus, and they are depressed. They talk of giving up, heading back to El Salvador or Nicaragua. For long stretches, the bus is quiet, save for the rattle of the muffler.

In spite of everything, Enrique has failed again—he will not reach the United States this time, either. He tells himself over and over that he'll just have to try again.

THREE

Facing the Beast

Enrique wades chest-deep across a river. He is five feet tall and stoop-shouldered and cannot swim. The logo on his cap boasts hollowly, NO FEAR.

The river, the Río Suchiate, forms the border. Behind him is Guatemala. Ahead is Mexico, with its southernmost state of Chiapas. *"Ahora nos enfrentamos a la bestia,"* migrants say when they enter Chiapas. "Now we face the beast."

Painfully, Enrique, seventeen years old, has learned a lot about "the beast." In Chiapas, bandits will be out to rob him, police will try to shake him down, and street gangs might kill him. But he will take those risks, because he needs to find his mother.

This is Enrique's eighth attempt to reach *el Norte.* First, always, comes the beast. About Chiapas, Enrique has discovered several important things.

In Chiapas, do not take buses, which must pass through nine permanent immigration checkpoints. A freight train faces checkpoints as well, but Enrique can jump off as it brakes, and if he runs fast enough, he might sneak around and meet the train on the other side.

In Chiapas, never ride alone. His best odds are at night or in fog, when Enrique can see immigration agents' flashlights but they cannot see him. Storms are best, even when they bring lightning and he is riding on a tank car full of gas; rain keeps immigration agents indoors.

In Chiapas, do not trust anyone in authority and beware even the ordinary residents, who tend to dislike migrants.

Once the Río Suchiate is safely behind him, Enrique beds down for the night in a cemetery near the depot in the town of Tapachula, tucking the NO FEAR cap beneath him so it will not be stolen.

On previous trips, Enrique slept close to the train station, which is several blocks from the cemetery. Once, he rested in a clump of grass next to the dilapidated depot. Another time, he found an abandoned house nearby. He lay down a scrap of cardboard and used another piece as a blanket to keep mosquitoes away. From there, he could watch for trains leaving for the north. Missing one meant waiting two or three days for the next train.

But Enrique has been caught twice near the depot in police sweeps. The officers seal off surrounding streets and leave little room for escape.

The cemetery, Enrique decides, is a better bet. He is close enough to hear diesel engines growl and horns blare whenever a train pulls out but far enough to avoid police who hover around the station looking for migrants. Enrique hopes there will be a train tomorrow. He stuffs a few rags under his head for a pillow and slips into sleep.

"Wake up." The warning is only a whisper, but Enrique hears it. The words are from a gangster sleeping next to him, on top of a mausoleum.

Five pickups have coasted silently up to the cemetery with their lights out, filled with municipal police. Now, just before dawn, the officers start moving in. "Spread out!" They stride through a tangled maze of pathways, fanning out among the graves, carrying AR15 rifles, 12-gauge shotguns, and .38-caliber pistols.

The cemetery is beautiful. The moon is yellow. The sky is midnight blue. Enrique can see stars around the ceiba trees shrouding the headstones. Crosses, entire crypts, are painted periwinkle, neon green, purple. Wind touches the tree branches, and they murmur in the gathering light. A bigger gust moves the vast limbs, and the sound builds slowly until the wind commands the branches to dance and the leaves to titter. The burial ground greets the sun with a symphony.

Police radios crackle. Enrique peeks over the edge of the mausoleum.

The graveyard might be beautiful, but it is filled with peril. A seventeen-year-old girl waiting for a train was dragged out among the headstones three years ago, then raped and murdered. The year before that, a young man's forehead was beaten in with a metal tube. Before that, a rag was stuffed into a young woman's mouth and she was raped, then beaten to death with stones.

But Enrique has found four members of the Mara Salvatrucha gang, who use the graveyard as their hideout. On an earlier trip, he had met El Brujo, one of their comrades. They

will provide protection, even in the darkest corners of this burial ground, where migrants pile excrement, old clothes, and sardine cans, where visitors leave candles burning on top of tombs, and where a witch comes to sacrifice chickens. Without these gangsters, Enrique would never venture here, behind the black iron gates.

In this migrant dormitory, he has washed his mouth with urine, a home remedy for his still aching, broken teeth. He has passed up graves covered by foot-high rectangular blocks, called *mesas,* with triangular headstones that would make good pillows. Instead, he has chosen the roof of the mausoleum, a one-room crypt holding the remains of four members of the Conchalitos family, the owners of a local restaurant. He and Big Daddy, fifteen, of the Mara Salvatrucha have settled on top. One stucco wall is tagged, in aerosol spray, MARA SALVATRUCHA and EL YAGA, a local leader.

But these words provide no protection against what he and Big Daddy see happening below. The police, in blue uniforms, are encircling them and thirty-odd additional migrants who have spent the night among the dead. Some of the migrants are trying to run, stampeding among the graves. Enrique knows that is futile; the last time he tried running from the police in the cemetery, he was caught and deported.

He and Big Daddy flatten themselves on the mausoleum roof.

Enrique tries not to breathe.

But some of the police look their way. Enrique and Big Daddy pretend that the officers do not notice them.

Then Big Daddy sees one of the policemen peer up over the edge of the crypt and straight at him. Big Daddy can't help himself. He giggles.

"Get down," the officer says.

There is no escape. Enrique and the others are marched off to the Tapachula jail. "Name? Age? Where are you from?" They are led through four metal doors into a courtyard, then into three small cells. Stink wafts from toilet pits. Men and boys press against the metal bars, trying to get fresh air.

Finally, everyone is taken to a jail next door, run by *la migra.* The jail has several holding cells, rooms with concrete benches and iron doors. Each cell is packed. The agents take Enrique and about twenty others to a patio. As they mill about, a rumor circulates: a train is leaving at 10 A.M.

"I can't miss it," Enrique says to himself.

He sees an old bicycle leaning against the patio wall. Now he watches *la migra* carefully. When they are distracted, he climbs on top of the bicycle. Other migrants hoist him higher. He grabs a water pipe and pulls himself over the wall and onto the roof of an adjoining house. He jumps to the ground. His head pounds; it is still swollen from being battered.

But he is free.

Enrique runs back to the cemetery, a way station for migrants. At sunup on any given day, it seems as uninhabited as a country graveyard. But then, at the first rumble of a departing train and the hiss of air from its brake lines, it erupts with life. Dozens of migrants, children among them, emerge from the bushes, from behind the ceiba trees, and from among the tombs.

They run on trails between the graves and dash headlong down the slope. A sewage canal, twenty feet wide, separates them from the rails. They jump across seven stones in the canal, from one to another, over a nauseating stream of black. They gather on the other side, shaking the water from their feet. Now they are only yards from the rail bed.

On this day, March 26, 2000, Enrique is among them. He

sprints alongside rolling freight cars and focuses on his footing. The roadbed slants down at 45 degrees on both sides. It is scattered with rocks as big as his fist. He cannot maintain his balance and keep up, so he aims his tattered tennis shoes at the railroad ties. Spaced every few feet, the ties have been soaked with creosote, and they are slippery.

Here the locomotives accelerate. Sometimes they reach 25 miles per hour. Enrique knows he must heave himself up onto a car before the train comes to an orange bridge that crosses the Coatán River, just beyond the end of the cemetery. He has learned to make his move early, before the train gathers speed.

Most freight cars have two ladders on a side, each next to a set of wheels. Enrique always chooses a ladder at the front. If he misses and his feet land on the rails, he still has an instant to jerk them away before the back wheels arrive. But if he runs too slowly, the ladder will yank him forward and send him sprawling. Then the front wheels, or the back ones, could take an arm, a leg, perhaps his life.

"Se lo comió el tren," other migrants will say. "The train ate him up."

Already, Enrique has four jagged scars on his shins from frenzied efforts to board trains.

The lowest rung of the ladder is waist-high. When the train leans away, it is higher. If it banks a curve, the wheels kick up hot white sparks, burning Enrique's skin. He has learned that if he considers all of this too long, he will fall behind—and the train will pass him by. This time, he trots alongside a gray hopper car. He grabs one of its ladders, summons all of his strength, and pulls himself up. One foot finds the bottom rung, then the other.

He is aboard.

Enrique looks ahead on the train. Men and boys are hanging on to the sides of tank cars, trying to find a spot to sit or stand. Some of the youngsters could not land their feet on the ladders and have pulled themselves up rung by rung on their knees, which are bruised and bloodied.

Suddenly, Enrique hears screams. Three cars away, a boy, twelve or thirteen years old, has managed to grab the bottom rung of a ladder on a fuel tanker, but he cannot haul himself up. Air rushing beneath the train is sucking his legs under the car. It is tugging at him harder, drawing his feet toward the wheels.

"Pull yourself up!" a man says.

"Don't let go!" another man shouts. He and others crawl along the top of the train to a nearby car. They shout again. They hope to reach the boy's car before he is so exhausted he must let go. By then, his tired arms would have little strength left to push away from the train's wheels.

The boy dangles from the ladder. He struggles to keep his grip. Carefully, the men crawl down and reach for him. Slowly, they lift him up. The rungs batter his legs, but he is alive. He still has his feet.

GETTING ABOARD

There are no women on board the train today; it is too dangerous. There are several children, some much younger than Enrique. One is only eleven. He is among the 20 to 30 percent of those boarding the trains in Tapachula who are fifteen or under, by estimate of Grupo Beta, a government migrant rights group in Chiapas. This eleven-year-old tells Enrique that he,

too, was left behind with his grandmother in Honduras. He, too, is going alone to find his mother in the United States. He tells Enrique that he is frantic to see her.

Enrique has encountered children as young as nine. Some speak only with big brown eyes or a smile. Others talk openly about their mothers: "I felt alone. I only talked to her on the phone. I didn't like that. I want to see her. When I see her, I'm going to hug her a lot, with everything I have."

Enrique guesses there are more than two hundred migrants on board, a tiny army of them who charged out of the cemetery with nothing but their cunning. Arrayed against them is *la migra,* along with crooked police, street gangsters, and bandits. They wage what a priest at a migrant shelter calls *la guerra sin nombre,* the war with no name. Chiapas, he says, "is a cemetery with no crosses, where people die without even getting a prayer." A 1999 human rights report said that migrants trying to make it through Chiapas face "an authentic race against time and death."

All of this is nothing, however, against Enrique's longing for his mother, who left him behind eleven years ago. Although his efforts to survive often force her out of his mind, at times he thinks of her with a loneliness that is overwhelming. He remembers when she would call Honduras from the United States, the concern in her voice, how she would not hang up before saying, "I love you. I miss you."

Enrique considers carefully. Which freight car will he ride on? This time he will be more cautious than before.

Boxcars are the tallest. Their ladders do not go all the way up. *Migra* agents would be less likely to climb to the top. And he could lie flat on the roof and hide. From there he could see the agents approaching, and if they started to climb up, he could jump to another car and run.

But boxcars are dangerous. They have little on top to hold on to. Inside a boxcar might be better. But police, railroad security agents, or *la migra* could bar the doors, trapping him inside.

Another migrant, Darwin Zepeda López, recounts what can happen in a locked boxcar.

Coyotes, or smugglers, mistook him for a paying customer and herded him along with their clients toward four boxcars, their doors open. Then they loaded him and about forty of the others into one of the cars. Zepeda, twenty-two, says he heard the metal doors slide, then clang shut. The smugglers locked them in from the outside, so the boxcar would not look suspicious. It was April 2000 in southern Mexico, and the outdoor temperature was climbing past 100 degrees. Inside, the car was turning into an oven.

As the train rolled north, the migrants drank their water bottles dry. The air in the car turned rank with sweat. Zepeda could hardly breathe. People began screaming and shouting for help. Some knelt and pleaded with God to stop the train.

Fistfights broke out in his boxcar as the riders jockeyed to suck fresh air through tiny rust holes over the doors. After four hours, he says, a woman with asthma begged for water, then slumped to the floor, unconscious. Others pried open her mouth and tried to give her the few drops they could find. Finally, they left her for dead. Some stood on her to reach the highest airholes.

In the next five hours, before immigration agents and Mexican soldiers stopped the train and opened the doors, Zepeda saw seven migrants fall to the floor. The boxcar, he says, looked like a rolling morgue.

Enrique looks elsewhere. A good place to hide could be under the cars, up between the axles, balancing on a foot-wide iron shock absorber. But Enrique might be too big to fit. Be-

sides, trains kick up rocks. Worse, if his arms grew tired or if he fell asleep, he would drop directly under the wheels. He tells himself, "That's crazy."

He could sit on a round compressor at the end of some hoppers, his feet dangling just above the train wheels. Or stand on a tiny ledge, barely big enough for his feet, on the end of other hopper cars. His hands would turn numb and callous after hours of hanging on.

Enrique settles for the top of a hopper. He finds one that is full, making it more stable. He holds on to a grate running along the rim. From his perch fourteen feet up, he can see anyone approaching on either side of the tracks up ahead or from another car. Below, at each end, the hopper's wheels are exposed: shiny metal, three feet in diameter, five inches thick, churning. He stays as far away as he can.

He doesn't carry anything that might keep him from running fast. At most, if it is exceptionally hot, he ties a nylon string on an empty plastic bottle, wraps it around his arm, and fills the bottle with water when he can.

Some migrants climb on board with a toothbrush tucked into a pocket. A few allow themselves a small reminder of family. One father wraps his eight-year-old daughter's favorite hair band around his wrist. Others bring a small Bible with telephone numbers, penciled in the margins, of their mothers or fathers or other relatives in the United States. Maybe nail clippers, a rosary, or a scapular with a tiny drawing of San Cristóbal, the patron saint of travelers, or of San Judas Tadeo, the patron saint of desperate situations.

As usual, the train lurches hard from side to side. Enrique holds on with both hands. Occasionally, the train speeds up or slows down, smashing couplers together and jarring him backward or forward. The wheels rumble, screech, and clang. Sometimes each car rocks the other way from the ones ahead and behind. *El Gusano de Hierro,* some migrants call it. The Iron Worm.

In Chiapas, the tracks are twenty years old. Some of the ties sink, especially during the rainy season, when the roadbed turns soggy and soft. Grass grows over the rails, making them slippery.

When the cars round a bend, they feel as if they might overturn. Enrique's train runs only a few times a week, but it averages three derailments a month—seventeen accidents in a particularly bad month—by the count of Jorge Reinoso, chief of operations for Ferrocarriles Chiapas-Mayab, the railroad. One year before, a hopper like Enrique's overturned with a load of sand, burying three migrants alive. In another spot, six hoppers tumbled over. One migrant was crushed between the train car and a bridge the train was crossing. Another migrant was found dead downstream. The cars' rusty remains are scattered, upside down, next to the tracks. Enrique was once on a train that derailed. His car lurched so violently that he briefly thought of jumping off to save himself. Enrique rarely lets himself admit fear, but he is scared that his car might tip. *El Tren de la Muerte,* some migrants call it. The Train of Death.

Others cast the train in a more positive light. They believe it has a noble purpose. Sometimes, the train tops are packed with migrants. They face north, toward a new land, a never-ending exodus. *El Tren Peregrino,* they call it. The Pilgrim's Train.

Enrique is struck by the magic of the train—its power and its ability to take him to his mother. To him, it is *El Caballo de Hierro.* The Iron Horse.

The train picks up speed. It passes a brown river that smells of sewage. Then a dark form emerges ahead. Migrants at the front of the train, nearest to the locomotive, call back a warning over the train's deafening din. They sound an alarm, migrant to migrant, car to car. *"¡Rama!"* the migrants yell. "Branch!" They duck.

Enrique grips the hopper. To avoid the branches, he sways from side to side. All of the riders sway in unison, ducking the same branches—left, then right. One moment of carelessness—a glance down at a watch, a look toward the back of the train at the wrong time—and the branches will hurl them into the air. Matilda de la Rosa, who lives by the tracks, recalls a migrant who came to her door with an eyeball hanging on his cheek. He cupped it near his face, in his right hand. He told her, "The train ripped out my eye."

A DREADED STOP

Each time the train slows, Enrique goes on high alert for *la migra.* Migrants wake one another and begin climbing down to prepare to jump. They lean outward, trying to glimpse what is causing the train to change pace. Is it another false alarm? Sometimes, an oncoming train forces the engineer to pull off onto a siding. A migrant, moving from car to car, can inadvertently step on the pressurized brake line that runs the length of the train. Other migrants, frustrated by the train's pace, disconnect the brake line on purpose. The conductor must stop to fix the problem. A bad curve can also cause a train to slow. If the train speeds up again, everyone climbs back up. The movement down and up the ladders looks like a strangely choreographed two-step.

But slowing down at Huixtla, with its red-and-yellow depot,

can mean only one thing: coming up is La Arrocera, one of the most dreaded immigration checkpoints in Mexico. Of the half-dozen checkpoints Enrique has eluded in southern Mexico, he fears La Arrocera most.

Immigration agents picked this place, named after two rice warehouses, because it is so isolated. There are acres of open cattle range and few houses or busy streets where migrants can hide. Usually, half of those aboard are caught by *migra* agents.

Enrique has defied La Arrocera before. On his last attempt, he lay flat on top of a hopper. It was night. *Migra* agents' flashlight beams danced over his car several times. Enrique held his breath. The train pushed forward.

This time, he arrives in the heat of noon. Tension builds. Some migrants stand on top of the train, straining to see the *migra* agents up ahead. The first migrants who spot twenty agents down the tracks scream a warning to the others: *"Bájense!* Get down!" As the train brakes, they jump.

The train lurches sideways. Enrique leaps from car to car, finally landing on a boxcar. The train stops. He lies flat, face-down, arms spread-eagle, hoping *la migra* won't see him. But several agents do.

"¡Bájate, puto! Get down, you whore!"

"No! I'm not coming down!"

There is no ladder all the way to the top. The only way up is to straddle their legs across two adjoining boxcars, using the horizontal ridges on the ends of the cars to inch higher. Maybe they won't come up after him.

"Get down!"

"No!"

The agents summon reinforcements. One starts to climb up. Enrique scrambles to his feet and races along the top of the

train, soaring across the four-foot gaps between cars. As he runs, three agents follow on the ground, pelting him with rocks and sticks, an experience many migrants say they have here. Stones clang against the metal. Enrique flees from car to car, more than twenty in all, struggling to keep his footing each time he leaps from a hopper to a fuel tanker, which is lower and has a rounded top.

He is running out of train. He will have to go around La Arrocera alone. It may be suicidal, but he has no choice. More stones ping off the train. Enrique scurries down a ladder and sprints into the bushes.

"*¡Alto! ¡Alto!* Stop!" the agents shout.

As Enrique runs, he hears what he thinks are gunshots behind him.

Except in extraordinary circumstances, Mexican immigration agents are barred from carrying firearms. According to a retired agent, however, most have .38-caliber pistols. Some of the shelter workers tell of migrants hit by bullets. Others tell of torture. Before long, Enrique will meet a man whose chest is pockmarked with cigarette burns. The man tells him that a *migra* agent at La Arrocera branded him.

In the scrub brush, though, Enrique worries less about agents than about *madrinas* with machetes. The name for these men is a play on words: these civilians help the authorities, as a *madrina,* or godmother, would, and administer *madrizas,* or savage beatings. Human rights activists and some police agencies say the *madrinas* commit some of the worst atrocities—rapes and torture—and are allowed by authorities to keep a portion of what they steal.

Sometimes, a *madrina* rides the train and pretends to be a migrant. The *madrina* radios ahead to report how many migrants are aboard and where they are hidden so agents will know which cars to target when they stop the train. *Migra* agents wear green uniforms. Enrique can't distinguish *madrinas,* who wear plain clothes.

Enrique runs on. He crawls under a barbed-wire fence, then under a double strand of smooth wire. It is electrified. At night, Guillermina Gálvez López, whose wooden hut fronts the rails at La Arrocera, hears the trains and, not long afterward, the piercing screams of migrants, wet from the swampy grass, who run into the wire.

"Help me! Help me!" they wail.

Ten times in ten months, train riders have carried to her front door men and boys without arms, legs, or heads. Often they are injured as they try to outrun the agents and get onto and off of moving trains.

Migrants hide their money. Some stitch it into the seams of their pants. Others put a bit in their shoes, a bit in their shirts, and a coin or two in their mouths. Still others bag it in plastic and tuck it into intimate places. Some roll it up and slip it into their walking sticks. Others hollow out mangoes, drop their pesos inside, then pretend to be eating the fruit.

Enrique figures he doesn't have enough money to bother.

Enrique knows he has plunged deep into bandit territory. At least three, maybe five swarms of robbers, some with Uzis, some on drugs, patrol the three-mile dirt paths that migrants must use to go around La Arrocera, authorities say.

Migrants describe similar experiences. "Don't run, or we'll kill you," bandits yell. Strip off your clothes. Lay facedown on the ground. Bandits edge their machetes against migrants' throats or ears as they disrobe. Keep quiet, they are told. Don't look up. One bandit splits open waistbands, collars, and cuffs

looking for hidden money. They keep belts, watches, and shoes. Migrants who resist are beaten or killed. Everyone gets a final warning: "If you say anything to the authorities, we will find you and kill you." Local residents see groups of migrants walking down dirt roads naked, stripped of everything.

There's El Cantil, a tall, skinny man named after a particularly agile and poisonous snake. El Cochero leads ten bandits. La Mano de Seda, the Hand of Silk, is known for his mastery at robbing people. La Mara Valiente lives in the nearby town of Buenos Aires and operates where the tracks cross Reforma Ranch.

After the day's robberies, bandits retire to the neighboring town of Huixtla to drink and visit prostitutes. At the Quinto Patio, with its hot pink façade, a sign beckons: LADIES DANCE. There are La Embajada nightclub, Los Piños, Las Brisas, and the Bar El Noa Noa, which advertises pole dancers.

The bandits are so well known and seem to operate with such impunity that Mario Campos Gutiérrez, a supervisor with Grupo Beta Sur, thinks the authorities collaborate. Many of the bandits, Campos says, are current or former police officers. If they are arrested, they pay bribes and are quickly released. Witness statements against them mysteriously disappear. Migrants can't wait around for months until the trial. Bandits long ago intimidated any La Arrocera residents who considered testifying.

"If you say anything, they kill you. Better to keep your mouth shut," says Antonio, a local elderly man, who is afraid to give his last name. An ice cream vendor near La Arrocera adds, "If you turn them in, they get out, and they come after you. They operate by light of day. There is no law here."

The last time Enrique sneaked past La Arrocera, he was

lucky because he was careful. He stuck with a band of street gangsters. Bandits try to avoid gangsters, who are probably armed, preferring easier prey. Enrique and the gangsters ran past a group of Mexican men standing by the tracks, machetes at their sides. The men looked at them intently but did not move or attack.

This time he is alone. He focuses on the thought that will make him run the fastest: "I cannot miss the train."

If he misses the one he just left, he knows he will be a sitting duck, waiting for days in the bushes and the tall grass until another one comes.

Enrique races so fast he feels the blood pounding at his temples. The ground is wet, slippery. The grass, growing in three-foot tentacles, lassos his feet. He stumbles, gets up, and keeps running. He passes an abandoned brick house. Half the roof is gone.

The house is notorious. Not long before, Grupo Beta found a bed of bricks inside, covered with emerald green leaves from a plant that looked like a bird-of-paradise—and two soiled pairs of panties crumpled on the dirt floor. Women are raped here, most recently a sixteen-year-old assaulted repeatedly over three days.

Many are gang-raped, including a Salvadoran woman, four months pregnant, who was assaulted at gunpoint by thirteen bandits along the railroad tracks to the south. They arrive at local hospitals with severe internal hemorrhaging and long scratch marks on their buttocks. Some get pregnant. A few go mad. In one Chiapas shelter, one raped woman paces, her arms tightly crossed in front of her, a blank stare on her face. At another shelter, a woman spends hours each day in the shower, trying to cleanse herself of the attack.

Nearly one in six migrant girls detained by authorities in Texas says she has been sexually assaulted during her journey, according to a 1997 University of Houston study. Some girls journeying north cut off their hair, strap their breasts, and try to pass for boys. Others scrawl on their chests, TENGO SIDA. "I have AIDS."

Enrique does not stop. He reaches the Cuil bridge, where the railroad spans a forty-foot stream of murky brown water. This, migrants and Grupo Beta Sur officers say, is the most dangerous spot. El Cantil's group of bandits often lays in wait here. Bandits haul mattresses up into nearby trees, eat lunch, and wait for their prey. They use local children as lookouts, who race forward on their bicycles to tell the bandits when migrants are drawing near. As migrants cross the bridge, the bandits drop out of the limbs and surround them. Other robbers hide along the tracks above and below the bridge, which is thick with bushes and vines. One fishes in the river or cuts grass with a machete, like a fieldworker, and whistles to the others to set a trap.

Just a month before, bandits ambushed five Salvadorans as they crossed the bridge at 4 A.M. They tried to run. The bandits shot one in the back. Four months later, three Salvadorans and a Mexican, all in their twenties, were killed. The Salvadorans, their hands tied behind them, were shot in the head. The Mexican was stabbed. All they had left was their underwear. A local resident counts forty migrants felled here by bandits, some hacked to death with a machete.

Enrique dashes across the bridge and keeps running. Mountains stand to his right. The ground is so wet that farmers grow rice between their rows of corn. He can feel heat and humidity rising from the loamy earth. It saps his energy, but he runs on. Finally, he stops, doubled over, panting.

He is not sure why, but he has survived La Arrocera. Maybe it was his extra caution, maybe it was his decision to run, maybe it was his attempt to lie flat and hide atop the boxcar, which delayed his getting off the train and gave the bandits an opportunity to target migrants ahead of him.

He is desperate for water. He spots a house.

The people inside are not likely to give him any. Chiapas is fed up with Central American migrants, says Hugo Ángeles Cruz, a professor and migration expert at El Colegio de la Frontera Sur in Tapachula. They are poorer than Mexicans, and they are seen as backward and ignorant. People think they bring disease, prostitution, and crime and take away jobs. At checkpoints, they bring gunfire, as well. Residents fear that the shots *migra* agents fire into the air to get migrants to surrender could fall on a child playing outside. Some migrants cannot be trusted. People in Chiapas talk of being robbed by migrants with guns and knives. They tell of an older woman who welcomed a migrant into her home and was beaten to death with an iron pipe. And of a man who sold chickens in a market and was kind to outsiders. He gave three Salvadorans a place to sleep and work killing and plucking birds. The Salvadorans robbed him and slit his throat.

Boys like Enrique are called "stinking undocumented." They are cursed, taunted. Dogs are set upon them. Barefoot children throw rocks at them. Some use slingshots. "Go to work!" "Get out! Get out!"

Drinking water can be impossible to come by. Migrants filter ditch sewage through T-shirts. Finding food can be just as difficult. Enrique is counting: in some places, people at seven of every ten houses turn him away.

"No," they say. "We haven't cooked today. We don't have any tortillas. Try somewhere else."

"No, boy, we don't have anything here."

Many La Arrocera residents lock themselves inside their homes when they hear the train coming. "I'm afraid," says local housewife Amelia López Gamboa, who corrals her family inside her one-room brick house and bars the door.

Sometimes it is worse: people in the houses turn the migrants in.

Enrique sees another migrant who has managed to make it around La Arrocera. He, too, needs water badly, but he doesn't dare ask. He is afraid of walking into a trap. To migrants, begging in Chiapas is like walking up to a loaded gun.

"I'll go," Enrique says. "If they catch someone, it will be me."

Enrique also knows he is less likely to frighten people if he begs alone.

He approaches a house and speaks softly, his head slightly bowed. "I'm hungry. Can you spare a taco? Some water?" The woman inside sees injuries from the train-top beating he took during his last attempt to go north. "What happened?" she asks. She gives him water, bread, and beans. The other migrant comes nearer. She gives him food, too.

A horn blows. Enrique runs to the tracks. He looks all around, trying to spot *migra* agents, who sometimes race ahead in their trucks to catch migrants as they reboard. Other migrants who have survived La Arrocera come out of the bushes. They sprint alongside the train and reach for the ladders on the freight cars.

Sometimes, train drivers back up the locomotive and get a running start. They accelerate to prevent migrants from reboarding up ahead. This time, though, the train isn't going full throttle.

Enrique climbs up onto a hopper. The train picks up speed. For the moment, he relaxes.

A DECISION

Back in Honduras, María Isabel is tense. She is bent on going to search for Enrique. Maybe she will find him along the way, in Mexico. If not, she will continue on to the United States. She and a friend have set a date to start the journey together.

Two days before the rendezvous, María Isabel confesses the plan to her aunt Gloria. She first gets Gloria's promise not to tell anyone, especially María Isabel's strict mother, Eva. "I'm going to the United States," María Isabel says.

Gloria finds a good-bye letter under María Isabel's mattress. "I'm leaving with a friend to find Enrique in Mexico," she writes. She bequeaths her stuffed toys to Gloria's fourteen-year-old daughter. The letter makes Gloria realize that María Isabel is serious.

That night, Gloria is so upset, her heart flutters. She can't sleep. The next morning, she confides in her daughter, Karla Yamileth Chávez. Karla immediately confronts María Isabel. "Are you crazy? You want to die along the way?" If you are pregnant, you could lose the child on the road, Karla says. She sends across town for María Isabel's mother.

Eva berates her daughter. "What are you thinking? If you have problems, come home. We'll manage."

María Isabel listens in silence. She is sorry she made the plan. When her travel companion arrives on the appointed day, María Isabel sends her away. But the reactions to her plan have only emphasized in her own mind how much danger Enrique is in.

STAYING AWAKE

The Iron Worm squeaks, groans, and clanks—black tankers, rust-colored boxcars, and gray hoppers winding north on a single track that parallels the Pacific coast. Off to the right are hillsides covered with coffee plants. Cornstalks grow up against the rails. The train moves through a sea of plantain trees, lush and tropical.

By early afternoon, it is 105 degrees. Enrique's palms burn when he holds on to the hopper. He risks riding no-hands. Finally, he strips off his shirt and sits on it. The locomotive blows warm diesel smoke. People burn trash by the rails, sending up more heat and a searing stench. Many migrants have had their caps stolen, so they wrap their heads in T-shirts. They gaze enviously at villagers cooling themselves in streams and washing off after a day of fieldwork and at others who doze in hammocks slung in shady spots near adobe and cinder-block homes. The train cars sway from side to side, up and down, like bobbing ice cubes.

Enrique's head throbs. The sun reflects off the metal. It stings his eyes, and his skin tingles. It drains the little energy he has left. He moves around the car, chasing patches of shade. For a while, he stands on a narrow ledge at the end of a fuel tanker. It is just inches above the wheels. He cannot let himself fall asleep; one good shake of the train, and he would tumble off.

Moreover, the Mara Salvatrucha street gangsters, some deported from Los Angeles, always prowl the train tops looking for sleepers. Many MS gangsters settle in Chiapas after committing crimes in the United States and being expelled to their home countries in Central America. The police in Chiapas are more forgiving of gangs than those in El Salvador or Honduras. "There, the police don't arrest you. They kill you," says José Eduardo Avilés, twenty-five, who was deported from Los Angeles to El Salvador and settled in Chiapas along the tracks.

The MS control the tops of freight trains operating north of the Río Suchiate, where many migrants going to the United States begin their trek through Mexico. They rob migrants riding the trains. Migrants, who are often afraid to press charges, make ideal victims.

About two hundred street gangsters in Chiapas share the rolling criminal enterprise. Father Flor María Rigoni, the priest at the Albergue Belén migrant shelter, counts nineteen groups. Each controls a specific part of the train route and certain stations. Periodically, the groups meet to decide who gets what.

"We ask for money to take people to the U.S. on top of our trains," says Jorge Mauricio Mendoza Pineda, twenty-four, describing what he and his Mara Salvatrucha gang do in Chiapas. "They give me their money. If people treat me well, I treat them well. If they don't, I don't. . . . If someone says, 'Please don't kill me,' I won't listen."

Before the train leaves, the gangsters roam the Tapachula depot, eyeing which migrants are buying food and where they stash their cash afterward. They try to get friendly with the migrants, telling them they have already done the train ride. Maybe they can offer tips? Many of the gangsters wear white plastic rosaries around their necks so the migrants will be less suspicious. They ask, "Where are you from? Where are you going? Do you have any money?"

Ten or twenty board the train, armed with machetes, knives, bats, lead pipes, and pistols. When the train gains speed, they surround a group of migrants. They tell them: hand over your money or die. Drugs embolden them. The gangsters carry

marijuana and rocks of crack cocaine in the headbands of their baseball caps. A train engineer, Emilio Canteros Méndez, often sees the armed gangs through his rearview mirror. Fights erupt on top of the boxcars. Migrants who anger the gangsters because they don't have money or resist are regularly tossed off the moving train or left dead on the tops of the cars, to be discovered by train workers at the next stop.

Gangsters' warnings to migrants not to go to the police are ruthlessly enforced. Julio César Cancino Gálvez, with Grupo Beta Sur, recalls how a group of about thirty migrants at the Tapachula train station asked him why the authorities weren't clamping down on the gangsters. Cancino told them they needed witnesses. He urged the migrants to step forward and report abuses. One nineteen-year-old Honduran in the crowd spoke up. He described his assailant in detail.

Hours later, the Red Cross asked Cancino if he could help an injured migrant. It was the same Honduran teenager. His right ribs were broken. His entire chest and face were badly bruised. He spoke slowly, in a whisper, clasping his chest. Two gangsters had overheard his description and kicked him mercilessly. "Next time, we kill you," the gangsters told him. The teenager, afraid for his life, asked to be deported.

Many of the migrants on Enrique's train huddle together, hoping for safety in numbers. They watch for anyone with tattoos, especially gangsters who have skulls inked around their ankles—one skull, police say, for every person they have killed. Some wear black knit hats they can pull down over their faces. Their brutality is legendary. Migrants tell of nine gangsters who hurled a man off their train, then forced two boys to have sex together or be thrown off, too.

Enrique has heard of the most dangerous gangsters: El Indio, who claims the Guatemalan side of the Mexican border;

Blackie, a chubby Salvadoran with dark skin and MS tattooed on his forehead, whose territory stretches from the border to Arriaga in northern Chiapas; and El Yaga, Porkie, and Homeboy.

During his first attempts north, a chance meeting saved Enrique from the worst of the gangs. As he set out on his trip, he noticed another teenager, a gangster named El Brujo, at the bus station in Honduras waiting to go to the Mexican border. Enrique doesn't like gangs. But as the two spent hours traveling through Honduras and Guatemala together, they became friends. On their first train ride through Chiapas, El Brujo introduced Enrique to a dozen other MS members, among them Big Daddy, who is skinny and short; El Chino (the Chinaman), who has slanted eyes; and El Payaso (the Clown), who has a big mouth and eyes. On subsequent trips, when he was deported, he always stuck with one of these gang members to protect himself from any attacks.

On his seventh trip, the convenient relationship ends. He is on the train with El Brujo and two other MS gangsters, who are carrying machetes. One of them is upset because a member of the rival 18th Street gang has stolen his shirt during a train stop in Chiapas. The MS gangsters decide to retaliate and throw the gangster off the train. Enrique refuses to participate, creating a rift. "If you are MS, you have to kill 18th Streeters. And if you are 18th Street, you must kill MS. I wasn't like that," Enrique says.

After the fight with his friends, halfway through Chiapas, the gang members stop riding with Enrique. That night, without their protection, the six men beat him on top of the train. Now, for a second time, he is alone on a train. He must stay alert.

Some migrants, after days without sleep, nap on their feet,

using belts or shirts to strap themselves to posts at the ends of the hoppers. Others get off the train and stretch out across the rails, using one as a footrest and the other as a pillow. They believe it is the only way to catch sleep and not miss the next train—they trust that the vibrations from the locomotive will wake them. Some also believe, mistakenly, that snakes cannot slither over the rails, so they sleep there for protection. Exhausted, many sleep so soundly they do not hear the trains bearing down on them: the earsplitting horn, the screaming brakes. They lose limbs and are sometimes decapitated. By the time they see the migrants on the rails, train drivers know they don't have enough distance to stop the train. Many say they simply ask God for forgiveness and drive on.

Enrique allows himself to doze only on trains farther north, where the gangsters no longer control the tops of the trains. There, he jams his body into the crevice on top of a hopper, next to the trapdoors used to fill the car. Or he waits until the train rounds a curve, giving him a good view of all of the cars. He spots a boxcar with its door open. When the train slows, he jumps off and races to the boxcar, jumping inside for a quick nap.

In Chiapas, most train riders struggle to stay awake. Dagoberto Hernández Aguilar uses the memory of his first train ride to stay up. Two teenagers on top of a nearby boxcar dozed. The train suddenly lurched forward. The two slid off. He is not sure if they survived. He chants one sentence to himself, over and over, as he rides north: "It could have been me." Migrants take amphetamines, slap their own faces, do squats, talk to one another about how much money they'll make in the United States, tell jokes, pour drops of alcohol into their eyes, and sing. At 4 A.M. the train sounds like a chorus.

Today, Enrique is terrified of another beating. Every time someone new jumps onto his car, he tenses. Fear, he realizes, helps to keep him awake, so he decides to induce it. He climbs to the top of the tank car and takes a running leap. With arms spread, as if he were flying, he jumps to one swaying boxcar, then to another. Some have four- to five-foot gaps. Others are nine feet apart.

The train passes into northern Chiapas. Enrique sees men with hoes tending their corn and women inside their kitchens patting tortillas into shape. Cowboys ride past and smile. Fieldworkers wave their machetes and cheer the migrants on: *"Qué bueno!"* Mountains draw closer. Plantain fields soften into cow pastures. Enrique's train slows to a crawl. Monarch butterflies flutter alongside, overtaking his car.

As the sun sets and the oppressive heat breaks, he hears crickets and frogs begin their music and join the migrant chorus. The moon rises. Thousands of fireflies flicker around the train. Stars come out to shine, so many they seem jammed together, brilliant points of light all across the sky.

The train nears San Ramón, close to the northern state line. It is past midnight now, and the judicial police are probably asleep. Train crews say this is where the police stage their biggest shakedowns. One conductor says the officers, fifteen at a time, stop the trains. They grab fleeing migrants by their shirts. The conductor has heard them say, "If you move, I'll kill you. I'll break you in two." Then, "Give us what you've got, or we send you back."

At nearby Arriaga, the chief of the judicial police, or Agencia Federal de Investigación, denies that his agents stop trains in San Ramón and rob migrants. The chief, Sixto Juárez, suggests that any robbing is done by gangsters or bandits who impersonate judicial officers.

Enrique has been caught here before. He had taken his

shoes off to dry blistered feet. Barefoot, he couldn't outrun the police. Today, his feet are still damp from his race around La Arrocera. But he has left his shoes on, ready to bolt.

Enrique greets the dawn without incident. The stars recede. The sky lightens behind the mountains to the east, and mist rises off the fields on both sides of the tracks. Men trot by on burros with tin milk containers strapped to their saddles, starting their morning deliveries.

Enrique figures that one in ten migrants makes it this far. Mario Campos Gutiérrez, supervisor of Grupo Beta Sur, estimates that half eventually get here—after repeated attempts. One migrant says, "I've done the most difficult part." Another: "When I get to this point, I begin to sing hallelujah."

Enrique puts Chiapas behind him. He still has far to go, but he has faced the beast eight times now, and he has lived through it. It is an achievement, and he is proud of it.

DEVOURED

Many migrants who first set out on the train with Enrique have been caught and deported. Others have fared worse; they are left broken by Chiapas. These migrants don't talk of The Pilgrim's Train, or of The Iron Horse. They have another name for the train: *El Tren Devorador.* The Train That Devours.

At the rate of nearly one every other day, the Red Cross estimates, U.S.-bound Central American migrants who ride freight trains lose arms, legs, hands, or feet. The estimate, offered by Martin Edwin Rabanales Luttman, chief of training for the Red Cross ambulance corps in Tapachula, is for the Mexican state of Chiapas alone. It does not count those who die instantly when they are cut in half or decapitated.

They fall from the trains for a variety of reasons. Some fall asleep and roll off; others are thrown by the street gangs who control the train tops. Because the migrants try to fool authorities and pass themselves off as Mexican, they carry no identification. If they die, their bodies are lowered, nameless, into common graves. In Tapachula, they end up down a hole in the cemetery with fetuses and stillborn babies.

At Arriaga, in northern Chiapas, snapshots of the dead are placed in a black book on Police Chief Reyder Cruz Toledo's desk. Some pictures are so new that he hasn't pasted them in yet.

In most photos, the eyes are open.

The chief keeps the book handy, hoping someone will identify the bodies. No one, he says, ever comes to look.

Carlos Roberto Díaz Osorto, seventeen, of Honduras, had almost crossed Chiapas. Carlos lies in bed number 1 of the trauma unit at Hospital Civil in the town of Arriaga in southern Mexico. Four days before he was brought in, Carlos had seen a man get both legs cut off by a freight train. But he had pushed fear out of his mind. He was going to the United States to find work.

At a curve near Arriaga, where the trains brake, Carlos raced alongside, asking himself, "Should I get on or not?" His cousins grabbed on to the sixth car from the end. Carlos panicked. Would he be left behind?

The train came to a bridge. Carlos did not give up. He crossed the span, jumping from one railroad tie to another. His shoelaces were loose. His left shoe flew off. Then his right shoe. He reached for a ladder on a fuel tanker, but the car was moving too fast, and he let go. He grabbed a railing.

The tanker jerked hard. Carlos held on, but he could feel air rushing beneath the car, sucking his legs in, close to the

wheels. His fingers uncurled. He tried to bounce his feet off the wheels and push away. But as he let go, the air pulled him in. The wheels flattened his right foot, then sliced through his left leg above the knee.

"Help me! Help me! It hurts!" he screamed. He began to pant, to sweat, to ask for water, not sure anyone could hear him.

Paramedics from the Mexican Red Cross found him lying by the tracks. He had lost nearly a third of his blood, but the hot rails had cauterized many of his arteries. The medics applied two tourniquets. A doctor cut his bones, then sealed each artery and vein. He stretched skin over the openings and sutured them shut. Sometimes there are no drugs available to stave off infection, but Carlos was lucky. The Red Cross located some penicillin.

Many migrants who lose limbs to the train end up back in Tapachula, a dozen blocks from the depot where they first boarded the train, at the Shelter of Jesus the Good Shepherd. The shelter director, Olga Sánchez Martínez, tries to heal migrants left deeply wounded by the beast.

Olga is a petite middle-aged woman with silky black hair that touches her hips and a simple white rosary strung around her neck. She is always in motion, impatient to find solutions to problems. She buys blood and medicine so migrants won't die. She nurses them until they can be taken back home. "No one tells me something can't be done. Everything can be cured. Nothing is impossible," Olga says.

Says the hospital surgeon, José Luis Solórzano, "Without her, a lot of patients would have died."

At the hospital, almost all tell Olga they wish the beast would have killed them rather than leave them like this. They seethe. They curse God. Why didn't he protect them? They

curse Olga. Their eyes speak fear. Who will ever marry them like this? How will they ever work, much less till a field again? "Let me die," they say, pushing Olga away. They tell her not to dress their stumps and wounds. They refuse to eat. Some try to hang themselves.

She perches on a corner of their hospital beds. She strokes their hair. She tells them that God has spared them for a reason. "If he wanted, he could have killed you. But he didn't. He left your eyes open," she says. When you are in this much pain and despair, she tells them, there is only one place to find strength. "God has a plan for you," she says. "You will learn to live—in a different way."

Then she tells them a story about herself.

When I was seven, she begins, I had an intestinal disease that went untreated for lack of money to buy medicine. It wrecked havoc on my insides. From then, off and on, I was gravely ill. At eighteen, I temporarily went blind and mute and had boils on my arms. My hair fell out. For thirty-eight days, I lay in a coma—sixty-six pounds of skin and bones. A year later, when I was well enough to work at a tortilla factory, a machine tore two fingertips off my left hand. She holds out her hand to the migrant. Plagued by constant stomach pain, so weak I couldn't get out of bed for months at a time, she tells them, I tried to slit my wrists.

In 1990, a doctor told me I had cancer and months left to live. I had two small children who would be left with my husband, who was once a womanizing alcoholic.

I was never very religious, but that day I went to church. I kneeled. I prayed. "They say there is a God. Why don't you cure me? Let me see my children grow, if only a little bit?" I made a pact: heal me, and I will help others.

The migrants listen.

She tells them she studied the Bible. It told her to help the weak, the hungry. She began visiting patients at a local public hospital. One year later, she saw a thirteen-year-old Salvadoran boy who had lost both legs trying to board a train. She walked home in tears. How, she asked God, could he be so cruel? The hospital pushed the penniless migrant out before he was healed. Olga brought the boy to recuperate at her humble home. Three days later, there was another young Salvadoran at the hospital who had lost both arms. "Don't feel alone. I will help you," she told him. She brought him home, too.

She taught herself, watching doctors, how to dress their wounds. Soon she had twenty-four migrants at home, so many she could barely open her front door. She moved the furniture outside so everyone could fit. Olga's husband helped dress and wash boys without arms. Olga begged money for food, medicine, and wheelchairs and to get migrants home. In 1999, she opened a shelter for injured migrants in a tiny former tortilla factory someone lent her.

As she finishes, she leans forward. She tells them she has never had a serious illness since she made her pledge in church that day. "God," she says, "has never left me alone."

She reaches out with her mangled hand. "God needs you. He doesn't need you with all your limbs. He needs your heart. You have much to give."

She confesses it has not been easy. Each day, at least one new wounded migrant passes through the shelter's lime green doors. They are logged into an intake book with their names and notations on which body parts they are missing or how they were otherwise injured. She has treated more than 1,500 wounded migrants since the shelter opened. It is a never-

ending stream. Those who don't fit in the four bedrooms' fifteen beds sleep in a long hallway on the floor.

She works for free, from dawn until late at night, seven days a week, to obtain money for food, units of blood, medicine, prostheses, and a scrap of land to build a permanent shelter. She sells tacos, pork rinds, cakes, chopped fruit, and donated bread in front of the hospital. Occasionally, a few churches in Chiapas let her solicit donations. She goes from car to car, begging, with a picture of a mutilated migrant she's trying to help and the prescription she must fill. People often tell her she's crazy to help foreigners who rob and murder and that she should help Mexicans instead.

Each Sunday she rises at 4 A.M. to head up into the mountains to a spot near an outdoor market. There, she sells used clothes people donate. It is still dark when she arrives. She dumps six big bags of used clothes onto the narrow sidewalk. She neatly lines up little bags of beans, sugar, and laundry soap—items a local grocery store donates because the packages are damaged and cannot be sold. When customers pause by the big pile of clothes, Olga madly paws through it, holding up items, hoping something will catch their fancy.

"Clothes for one, two pesos!" she yells.

A ragtag group helps her: the owner of a local hotel, a fertilizer salesman, a woman who sells children's clothing, a hardware store operator. A recovering alcoholic drives her around in his rickety truck. Together, they take injured migrants back to their hometowns in Central America when going by bus isn't feasible. A private doctor donates his time to reconstruct a boy's foot if Olga provides the materials for the operation. Olga and a church friend, Marilú Hernández Hernández, beg outside seven churches in five different towns. If a migrant is bleeding

to death and there is no money to buy blood, they go to the tracks, even in the middle of the night, and plead for migrants to give theirs for free.

She's always running short on money. Medicine for one amputee costs $300. Sometimes there is no food for the migrants; she must ration antibiotics and not give patients a full dose; she runs out of gauze and must use boiled rags instead. Each pair of artificial legs costs at least $2,000. When she visits an orthopedic doctor, Jorge Luis Antonio Álvarez, who makes artificial limbs, she slides a few photos across his desk of the migrants she needs fitted, knowing she still owes him $4,500 for jobs he's already done. She pays little by little. Most migrants must leave the shelter before she can afford to buy them limbs. This is what pains her most.

Sometimes, she loses her patience with God. Some migrants, too battered by the beast, die. At times, Olga can't quickly come up with the money to buy the blood or medicine they need to fight for their lives. "What do you want me to do?" she asks God angrily. A thirteen-year-old girl was raped by the tracks and left with a broken neck and shattered hips. She could not move or talk. She buried that girl and thirty-nine others. She tries to buy them each a wooden coffin so they can be lowered into the ground with some dignity. But most slowly recuperate under Olga's care.

Each day, Olga begins at dawn at the city's drab public general hospital. Today, as she enters the emergency room, a social worker in a pink frock rushes up to Olga. The worker looks relieved.

"Señora Olguita, you have new clients," she says.

"Migrants?" Olga asks.

The social worker nods.

In room 2 she sees Andrea Razgado Pérez, a teenager, who has lost her right foot. Olga tells her she knows she fears her husband will see her as damaged goods and leave her. Olga says, "There's nothing you can't do if you have will." She describes a migrant who lost both legs but cooked for everyone in the shelter. She set up a chopping block across the armrests of her wheelchair. Andrea listens, sobbing. "Don't cry," Olga tells her. "This is the beginning of a new life. Nothing has been taken from you. God wants people who are useful. You must keep going forward. You have your hands. You must go forward and trust in God."

Olga heads to the shelter, which is full of people maimed by the train.

Tránsito Encarnación Martínes Hernández lost both feet. Olga has promised to get the young man prostheses, which cost $1,800. "You are going to walk again," she said. He has waited months at the shelter. He cannot bear the thought of going back to his small town in Honduras, where he won't be able to walk the hilly dirt paths, grow beans or corn or coffee, or play soccer with friends. He must start over, someplace new. "I ask God that I be able to walk, to learn a job that I can do this way." He waits, knowing that Olga is his best chance of ever being able to get the legs.

Leti Isabela Mejía Yanes sits on her bed. A single mother, she has an angular face and soft curly brown hair. She has lost both legs. In Honduras, Leti and her three children ate once a day—usually two pieces of bread with a watery cup of coffee. The youngest got only one piece of bread and breast milk. Sometimes, when her children cried with hunger, she scrounged together enough to buy a bit of tortilla dough and mixed it into a big glass of water to fill their bellies.

Her children begged her not to go. Her nine-year-old boy told her he would rather quit school and start working. "I already know how to write my name!" he pleaded. She left Marlon, eleven; Melvin, nine; and Daniel, one and a half, with relatives. When she walked away, Daniel still hadn't learned to talk. Olga, who found Leti at the hospital, brought her two liters of blood and antibiotics. At the shelter, she gave her painkillers and took out her stitches. At first Leti wanted to die. Now she wants to get better and see her children again. She sits in bed, embroidering a pillowcase with a drawing of Cinderella wearing a ballroom gown. She will wait here, sewing, until Olga can buy her legs, too.

Olga bathes people. She cooks. She gives them pills for pain. She cheerleads, watching with joy as they take their first steps with a prosthesis. She is impatient with those who wallow in pity. She coaxes them past the shelter's threshold to go to the ocean, which most have never seen. She places them on the sand, where waves can lap at their stumps.

Each day, she tends to their wounds. Each night, at 7 P.M., she races to church for Mass. She kneels before an altar with a bronze lamb, two winged angels, and a wooden carving of Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper. She clasps her hands and closes her eyes. She prays. She tells God what she did that day. She thanks God for giving her strength to get through the day's travails. She asks him for ideas on how to make money to pay for medicines and prostheses. She asks for ten more years of life so she can build a permanent shelter for injured migrants. She ends each prayer the same way: "You are the one who makes this work possible."

Each night, when she hears the train whistle, she asks God to protect the migrants from the trains and the assaults. She prays that the beast not bring so many to her door.

Others who don't make it as far as Enrique are broken by Chiapas in a different way. They have been raped.

A bandit with a cobra tattoo marches Wendy into a cornfield. She is seventeen and the only woman among eleven Central Americans trying to sneak around a Mexican immigration checkpoint at Huehuetán in Chiapas. The man with the cobra tattoo and four other bandits have been lying in wait.

A Central American man tries to bolt. One of the bandits broadsides him three times with the flat blade of a machete. The bandits tell the nine other men, including Wendy's husband, to strip to their underwear, then lie facedown on the ground. A bandit searches their clothing for cash.

Then, say Wendy's husband and the other Central Americans, the man with the cobra tattoo on his arm orders Wendy to remove her pants. She refuses. He throws her to the ground and places the tip of his machete against her stomach.

She begins to cry. He puts the edge of the blade to her throat. She takes off her pants, and he checks them for money. "If you scream," he says, "we cut you to bits." Then he rapes her.

The other bandits curse the men on the ground, then curse their mothers and threaten to castrate them. "What the hell are you doing outside your country?" they say. One by one, during an hour and a half, each of the five bandits goes into the cornfield and rapes Wendy.

Her husband fills with rage. The bandits bring her back, crying. She cannot speak. She vomits, then faints. As they flee, her husband and the others carry Wendy to the checkpoint. She says, trembling, "I want to die." None of the bandits is arrested.

Wendy, from Honduras, is one of a large number of migrant girls who say they are raped as they travel north through

Mexico to get to the United States. A 1997 University of Houston study of U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service detainees in Texas shows that nearly one in six says she was sexually assaulted.

The rapes are part of the general denigration and humiliation of Central Americans in Mexico, where the migrants are seen as inferior because they come from less developed countries, says Olivia Ruiz, a cultural anthropologist at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana. The targets, she says, can be either men or women.

OAXACA

Having avoided the fate of many other migrants, Enrique reaches Ixtepec, a southern crossroads in Oaxaca, the next state north, 285 miles into Mexico. As his train squeals to a stop around noon, migrants jump down and look for houses where they can beg for a drink and a bite to eat. *La bestia* might be behind them, but most are still afraid. In these small towns, strangers stick out. Migrants are easy to spot. They wear dirty clothes and smell bad after days or weeks without bathing. Often, they have no socks. Their shoes are battered. They have been bitten by mosquitoes. They look exhausted.

Most of the migrants want to stay on the grassy slope by the tracks where they catch outgoing trains, where they can hide in huisache or mesquite bushes if there is a *migra* raid. Two of them are too frightened to go into town. They offer Enrique 20 pesos and ask him to buy food. If he will bring it back, they will share it with him.

He takes off his yellow shirt, stained and smelling of diesel smoke. Underneath he wears a white one. He puts it on over

the dirty one. Maybe he can pass for someone who lives here. He resolves not to panic if he sees a policeman and to walk as if he knows where he is going.

Blending in is critical. Migrants clip labels off clothes from Central America. Some buy Mexican clothes or ones sporting the name of a Mexican soccer team. Most ditch their backpacks shortly after entering Mexico.

Enrique tries to stay clean by finding bits of cardboard to sleep on. When he gets a bottle of water, he saves a little to wash his arms. If he is near a river or stream, he strips and slips into the water. He begs for clean clothes or scrubs the ones he is wearing and lays them on the riverbank to dry.

He takes the pesos the two migrants have given him and walks down the main street, past a bar, a store, a bank, and a pharmacy. He stops at a barbershop. His hair is curly and far too long. It is an easy tip-off. People here tend to have straighter hair.

He strides purposefully inside.

"¡Órale, jefe!" he says, using a phrase Oaxacans favor. "Hey, chief!" He mutes his flat Central American accent and speaks softly and singsongy, like a Oaxacan. He asks for a short crop, military style. He pays with the last of his own money, careful not to call it *pisto,* as they do back home. That means alcohol up here.

He is mindful about what else he says. *Migra* agents trip people up by asking if the Mexican flag has five stars (the Honduran flag has, but the Mexican flag has none) or by demanding the name of the mortar used to make salsa (*molcajete,* a uniquely Mexican word) or inquiring how much someone weighs. If he replies in pounds, he is from Central America. In Mexico, people use kilograms.

In Guatemala, soda is called *agua.* Here in Mexico, *agua* is

water. A jacket is a *chamarra,* not a *chumpa.* A T-shirt is a *playera,* not a *blusa.*

Migra agents particularly like to test suspected migrants with words that have the same meaning in Mexico and in Central America and sound similar but are not exactly the same. A belt is a *cinto* or a *cincho.* Sideburns are *patillas* or *patitas.*

At one point, Enrique glances into a store window and sees his reflection. It is the first time he has looked at his face since he was beaten. He recoils from what he sees. Scars and bruises. Black and blue. One eyelid droops.

It stops him.

"They really screwed me up," he mutters.

He was five years old when his mother left him. Now he is almost another person. In the window glass, he sees a battered young man, scrawny and disfigured.

It angers him, and it steels his determination to push northward.

FOUR

Gifts and Faith

From the top of his rolling freight car, Enrique sees a figure of Christ.

In the fields of Veracruz, among farmers and their donkeys piled with sugarcane, rises a mountain. It towers over the train he is riding. At the summit stands a statue of Jesus. It is sixty feet tall, dressed in white, with a pink tunic. The statue stretches out both arms. They reach toward Enrique and his fellow wayfarers on top of their rolling freight cars.

Some stare silently. Others whisper a prayer.

It is early April 2000, and they have made it nearly a third of the way up the length of Mexico, a handful of migrants riding on boxcars, tank cars, and hoppers.

Many credit religious faith for their progress. They pray on top of the train cars. At stops, they kneel along the tracks, asking God for help and guidance. They ask him to keep them