NATIONAL BESTSELLER

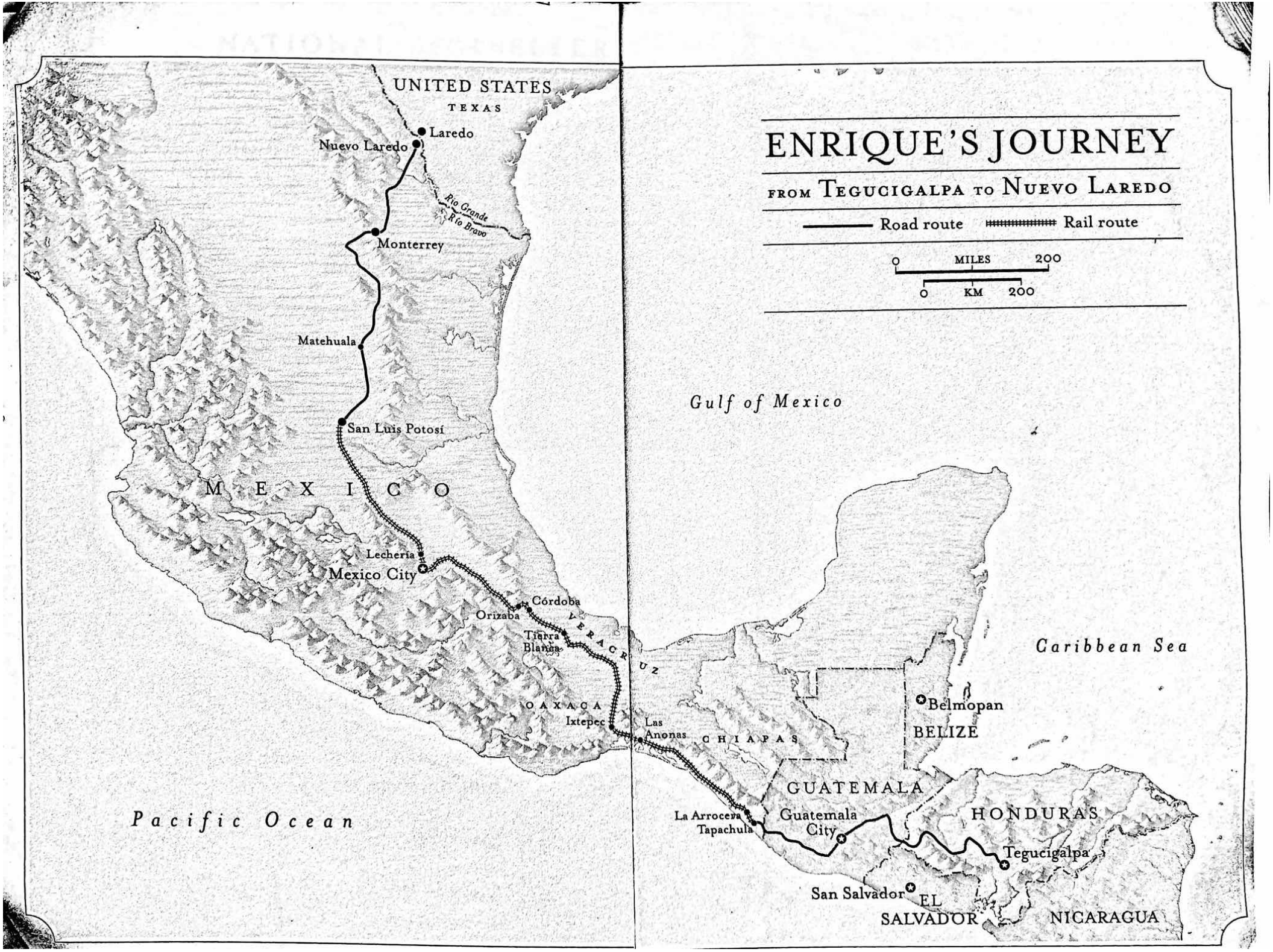
ENRIQUE'S JOURNEY

THE STORY OF A BOY'S DANGEROUS ODYSSEY TO REUNITE WITH HIS MOTHER

Sonia Nazario
Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

With a new Epilogue by the author

"Gripping and harrowing . . . a story begging to be told." *The Christian Science Monitor*


ENRIQUE'S JOURNEY
FROM TEGUCIGALPA TO NUEVO LAREDO
Road route
Rail route
0 MILES 200
0 KM 200
UNITED STATES
TEXAS
Laredo
Nuevo Laredo
Río Grande
Río Bravo
Monterrey
Matehuala
San Luis Potosí
MEXICO
Lecheria
Mexico City
Córdoba
Orizaba
Tierra Blanca
VERACRUZ
OAXACA
Ixtepec
Las Anonas
CHIAPAS
Gulf of Mexico
Caribbean Sea
Belmopan
BELIZE
GUATEMALA
La Arrocera
Tapachula
Guatemala City
HONDURAS
Tegucigalpa
San Salvador
EL SALVADOR
NICARAGUA
Pacific Ocean

PROLOGUE

It is Friday morning, 8 A.M. I hear a key turn in the front-door lock of my Los Angeles home. María del Carmen Ferrez, who cleans my house every other week, opens the door. She walks into the kitchen.

Carmen is petite, intelligent, and works at lightning speed. At this early hour I am usually in a frenzy to get out the door and rush to my office. But on days when Carmen arrives, she and I shift gears. Carmen loiters in the kitchen, tidying things. I circle around her, picking up shoes, newspapers, socks—trying to give her a fighting chance at cleaning the floors. The ritual allows us to be in the same room and talk.

On this morning in 1997, I lean on one side of the kitchen island. Carmen leans on the other side. There is a question, she says, that she has been itching to ask. "Mrs. Sonia, are you ever going to have a baby?"

I'm not sure, I tell her. Carmen has a young son she sometimes brings to watch television while she works. Does she want more children? I ask.

Carmen, always laughing and chatty, is suddenly silent. She stares awkwardly down at the kitchen counter. Then, quietly, she tells me about four other children I never knew existed. These children—two sons and two daughters—are far away, Carmen says, in Guatemala. She left them there when she ventured north as a single mother to work in the United States.

She has been separated from them for twelve years.

Her youngest daughter, Carmen says, was just a year old when she left. She has experienced her oldest boy, Minor, grow up by listening to the deepening timbre of his voice on the telephone. As Carmen unravels the story, she begins to sob.

Twelve years? I react with disbelief. How can a mother leave her children and travel more than two thousand miles away, not knowing when or if she will ever see them again? What drove her to do this?

Carmen dries her tears and explains. Her husband left her for another woman. She worked hard but didn't earn enough to feed four children. "They would ask me for food, and I didn't have it." Many nights, they went to bed without dinner. She lulled them to sleep with advice on how to quell their hunger pangs. "Sleep facedown so your stomach won't growl so much," Carmen said, gently coaxing them to turn over.

She left for the United States out of love. She hoped she could provide her children an escape from their grinding poverty, a chance to attend school beyond the sixth grade. Carmen brags about the clothes, money, and photos she sends her children.

She also acknowledges having made brutal trade-offs. She feels the distance, the lack of affection, when she talks with her children on the telephone. Day after day, as she misses milestones in their lives, her absence leaves deep wounds. When her oldest daughter has her first menstruation, she is frightened. She doesn't understand what is happening to her. Why, the girl asks Carmen, were you not here to explain?

Carmen hasn't been able to save enough for a smuggler to bring them to the United States. Besides, she refuses to subject her children to the dangerous journey. During her own 1985 trek north, Carmen was robbed by her smuggler, who left her without food for three days. Her daughters, she fears, will get raped along the way. Carmen balks at bringing her children into her poor, drug- and crime-infested Los Angeles neighborhood.

As she clicks the dishwasher on, Carmen, concerned that I might disapprove of her choice, tells me that many immigrant women in Los Angeles from Central America or Mexico are just like her—single mothers who left children behind in their home countries.

What's really incomprehensible, she adds, are middle-class or wealthy working mothers in the United States. These women, she says, could tighten their belts, stay at home, spend all their time with their children. Instead, they devote most of their waking hours and energy to careers, with little left for the children. Why, she asks, with disbelief on her face, would anyone do that?

The following year, in 1998, unannounced, Carmen's son Minor sets off to find his mother. Carmen left him when he was ten years old. He hitchhikes through Guatemala and Mexico. He begs for food along the way. He shows up on Carmen's doorstep.

He has missed his mother intensely. He could not stand another Christmas or birthday apart. He was tired of what he saw

as his mother's excuses for why they could not be together. He had to know: Did she leave Guatemala because she never truly loved him? How else could he explain why she left?

Minor's friends in Guatemala envied the money and presents Carmen sent. "You have it all. Good clothes. Good tennis shoes," they said. Minor answered, "I'd trade it all for my mother. I never had someone to spoil me. To say: Do this, don't do that, have you eaten? You can never get the love of a mother from someone else."

Minor tells me about his perilous hitchhiking journey. He was threatened and robbed. Still, he says, he was lucky. Each year, thousands of other children going to find their mothers in the United States travel in a much more dangerous way. The children make the journey on top of Mexico's freight trains. They call it *El Tren de la Muerte.* The Train of Death.

A COMMON CHOICE

I was struck by the choice mothers face when they leave their children. How do they make such an impossible decision? Among Latinos, where family is all-important, where for women motherhood is valued far above all else, why are droves of mothers leaving their children? What would I do if I were in their shoes? Would I come to the United States, where I could earn much more money and send cash back to my children? This would mean my sons and daughters could eat more than sugar water for dinner. They could study past the third grade, maybe even finish high school, go on to university classes. Or I could stay by my children's side, relegating another generation to the same misery and poverty I knew so well.

I was also amazed by the dangerous journey these children make to try to be with their mothers. What kind of desperation, I wondered, pushes children as young as seven years old to set out, alone, through such a hostile landscape with nothing but their wits?

The United States is experiencing the largest wave of immigration in its history, a level of newcomers that is once again transforming the country. Each year, an estimated 700,000 immigrants enter the United States illegally. Since 2000, nearly a million additional immigrants annually, on average, have arrived legally, or become legal residents. This wave differs in one respect, at least, from the past. Before, when parents came to the United States and left children behind, it was typically the fathers, often Mexican guest workers called *braceros*, and they left their children with their mothers. In recent decades, the increase in divorce and family disintegration in Latin America has left many single mothers without the means to feed and raise their children. The growing ranks of single mothers paralleled a time when more and more American women began working outside the home. There is an insatiable need in the United States for cheap service and domestic workers. The single Latin American mothers began migrating in large numbers, leaving their children with grandparents, other relatives, or neighbors.

The first wave was in the 1960s and 1970s. Single mothers from a smattering of Caribbean countries—the West Indies, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic—headed to New York City, New England, and Florida to work as nannies and in nursing homes. Later, Central American women flocked to places with the greatest demand: the suburbs of Washington, D.C., Houston, and Los Angeles, where the number of private domestic workers doubled in the 1980s.

Carmen's experience is now common. In Los Angeles, a University of Southern California study showed, 82 percent of live-in nannies and one in four housecleaners are mothers who still have at least one child in their home country. A Harvard University study showed that 85 percent of all immigrant children who eventually end up in the United States spent at least some time separated from a parent in the course of migrating to the United States.

In much of the United States, legitimate concerns about immigration and anti-immigrant measures have had a corrosive side effect: immigrants have been dehumanized and demonized. Their presence in the United States is deemed good or bad, depending on the perspective. Immigrants have been reduced to cost-benefit ratios.

Perhaps by looking at one immigrant—his strengths, his courage, his flaws—his humanity might help illuminate what too often has been a black-and-white discussion. Perhaps, I start thinking, I could take readers on top of these trains and show them what this modern-day immigrant journey is like, especially for children. "This," a Los Angeles woman who helps immigrants told me, "is the adventure story of the twenty-first century."

FEAR AND FLEAS

For a good while, I sat on the idea. As a journalist, I love to get inside the action, watch it unfold, take people inside worlds they might never otherwise see. I wanted to smell, taste, hear, and feel what this journey is like. In order to give a vivid, nuanced account, I knew I would have to travel with child migrants through Mexico on top of freight trains.

I thought about starting in Central America and tagging

along as one boy tries to reach his mother in the United States. Carmen's son Minor had already explained enough about the trip for me to grasp that this was just shy of nutty. He'd told me about the gangsters who rule the train tops, the bandits along the tracks, the Mexican police who patrol the train stations and rape and rob, about the dangers of losing a leg getting onto and off of moving trains.

In short, I was afraid.

Then there was the issue of marital harmony: I'd just finished another project that involved hanging out in dark garages and shacks with speed, heroin, and crack addicts. My husband had spent months fretting about my safety. He'd had to ask politely that I strip in our garage each evening when I came home after hanging out in addicts' apartments. Apparently I'd been bringing home a healthy population of fleas. Talk of strapping myself to the top of a freight train, I figured, was not likely to be received with open ears. A year later, I hoped the memory of fleas had faded. I decided to move forward.

Cautiously.

First, I learned everything I could about the journey. What's the exact route? The best and worst things that happen at each step of the way? The places where migrants encounter the greatest cruelty? And the greatest kindness? Critical turning points in the journey? What are the favorite areas along the tracks where the gangs rob, where the bandits kill people? Where do Mexican immigration authorities stop the train?

I talked with dozens of children held by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service in four jails and shelters in California and in Texas. Many had ridden the trains. So had students I had spoken with at a special Los Angeles high school for recent immigrants.

At a detention center in Los Fresnos, Texas, a talk with

fifteen-year-old twins José Enrique and José Luis Oliva Rosa forced me to shred my initial plan. I realized that my first choice—to follow one boy from the beginning of his journey in Central America to the end with his mother in the United States—wasn't doable. The twins had left Honduras to find their mother in Los Angeles. During the months they spent running for their lives in Mexico, they were separated from each other four times. Only sheer luck had allowed them to find each other. I can't run as fast as a fifteen-year-old. I also can't rely on that level of luck. I had to find a boy who had made it to northern Mexico and follow him to his mother in the United States. I would have to reconstruct the earlier part of his journey.

Children at the Texas center also brought home the dangers I would face making such a journey. At the Texas center was Eber Ismael Sandoval Andino, eleven, a petite boy with dark eyes and machete marks crisscrossing his legs. The marks were from working in the coffee farms of Honduras since he was six years old. On his train rides through Mexico, he told me, he had witnessed five separate incidents where migrants had been mutilated by the train. He'd seen a man lose half a foot getting on the train. He'd seen six gangsters draw their knives and throw a girl off the train to her death. Once, he'd fallen off the train and landed right next to the churning steel wheels. "I thought I was dead. I turned stone cold," he said.

The director of the Texas center told me I'd be an idiot to attempt this train journey, that I could get myself killed. These kids, he said, motioning to the children around him, don't really understand the dangers they will face. They go into it with their eyes closed. They don't know any better. I understood the exact risks. I would be doing it out of sheer stupidity.

I am not a brave person. I grew up, in part, in Argentina

during the genocidal "dirty war," when the military "disappeared" up to thirty thousand people. Often I walked to school with a friend, in case something should happen to one of us. My mother burned the family's books in a pile in the backyard to avoid trouble if the military ever came to search our Buenos Aires home. We kept the windows closed so neighbors could not hear any discussion that strayed from the mundane into anything vaguely political. Among the disappeared and murdered was a teenage friend, who we heard had been tortured, the bones in his face shattered. A relative was abducted by the military, tortured, and released many months later.

I avoid danger, if possible. If I need to do dangerous things to really understand something, I try to build in as many safety nets as possible.

I redoubled my efforts to reduce my exposure while making the journey. I lay down one rule: No getting onto and off of moving trains (a rule I broke only once).

A newspaper colleague plugged into the Mexican government helped me get a letter from the personal assistant to Mexico's president. The letter asked any Mexican authorities and police I encountered to cooperate with my reporting. The letter helped keep me out of jail three times. It also helped me convince an armed Mexican migrant rights group, Grupo Beta, to accompany me on the trains through the most dangerous leg of the journey, the Mexican state of Chiapas. At the time, the government's Grupo Beta agents, who are drawn from different police groups, carried shotguns and AK-47s. They had not patrolled the train tops for fourteen months. Even with that firepower, they explained, it was too dangerous; in 1999, their patrols had come under attack by gangsters four times. They agreed to make an exception.

The letter helped me obtain permission to ride atop the

trains of four companies that operate freight trains up the length of Mexico. That way, the conductor would know when I was on board. I would tell them to be on the lookout for my signal. I'd wear a red rain jacket strapped around my waist and wave it if I was in dire danger. I tried to have a source in each region I'd be in, including his or her cell phone number, so I could call for help if I was in trouble.

FINDING ENRIQUE

The average child the Border Patrol catches who comes alone over the U.S.-Mexico border is a fifteen-year-old boy. I wanted to find a boy who was coming for his mother and had traveled on the trains.

In May 2000, I scoped out a dozen shelters and churches in Mexico along the 2,000-mile-long U.S. border that help migrants, including minors. I visited a few. I told each priest or shelter director what I was after. I called each place day after day to see if such a child had arrived. Soon, a nun at one of the churches in Nuevo Laredo, the Parroquia de San José, said she had a couple of teenagers who had come in for a free meal: a seventeen-year-old boy and a fifteen-year-old girl. Both were headed north in search of their mothers. She put Enrique on the telephone. He was a little older than the INS average. But his story was typical—and just as harrowing as those I had heard from children in the INS jails.

A few days later, I traveled to Nuevo Laredo and spent two weeks shadowing Enrique along the Rio Grande. I talked to other children but decided to stick with Enrique. In Nuevo Laredo, most of the children I spoke with, including Enrique,

had been robbed of their mothers' telephone numbers along the way. They hadn't thought to memorize the numbers. Unlike the others, Enrique recalled one telephone in Honduras he could call to try to get his mother's phone number in the United States. He still had a shot at continuing his journey and, perhaps, reaching his mother.

From Enrique, I gleaned every possible detail about his life and trip north. I noted every place he had gone, every experience, every person he recalled who had helped or hindered him along the way.

Then I began to retrace his steps, doing the journey exactly as he had done it a few weeks before. I wanted to see and experience things as he had with the hope of describing them more fully. I began in Honduras, interviewing his family, seeing his haunts. I took buses through Central America, just as Enrique had done. In Mexico's southernmost state, Chiapas, I boarded a freight train. I took the same path along the rails, traveling up the length of Mexico on top of seven freight trains. I got off where he did, in San Luis Potosí, then hitchhiked on an eighteen-wheeler from the same spot in the northern Mexican city of Matehuala, where Enrique had hitched a ride to the U.S. border. To follow Enrique's journey, I traversed thirteen of Mexico's thirty-one states. I traveled more than 1,600 miles—half of that on top of trains.

I found people who had helped Enrique and saw towns or crucial spots he had passed through or spent time in along the way. I showed people a photograph of Enrique to make sure we were talking about the same boy. I traveled on trains with other migrant children going to find their mothers, including a twelve-year-old boy in search of his mother, who had left for San Diego when he was one year old. From Tegucigalpa

through Mexico, I interviewed dozens of migrants and other experts—medical workers, priests, nuns, police officers. All this added to the journey and helped corroborate Enrique's story. I returned to Enrique three times to ask if he had seen or heard some of the many things I had witnessed during my journey. In all, I spent more than six months traveling in Honduras, Mexico, and the United States. In 2003, to conduct additional research, I retraced much of the journey again, beginning in Tegucigalpa.

FOLLOWING A DANGEROUS PATH

For months, as I traveled in Enrique's footsteps, I lived with the near-constant danger of being beaten, robbed, or raped. Once, as I rode on top of a fuel car on a rainy night with lightning, a tree branch hit me squarely in the face. It sent me sprawling backward. I was able to grab a guardrail and keep from stumbling off the top of the train. On that same ride, I later learned, a child had been plucked off the fuel tanker car behind mine by a branch. His train companions did not know if he was dead or alive.

Even with the presence of the heavily armed Grupo Beta agents on trains as I rode through Chiapas, gangsters were robbing people at knifepoint at the end of our train. I constantly worried about gangsters on the trains. In Tierra Blanca in the Mexican state of Veracruz, during a brief train stop, I feverishly tried to get the local police to find and arrest a notoriously vicious gangster named Blackie, after learning he was aboard the train I was about to reboard. Nearby, a train derailed right in front of mine. Train engineers have described incidents

where migrants have been crushed as trains derail and cars tip over.

At times, I came close to witnessing the worst the train had to offer. As I passed through the town of Encinar, Veracruz, I was riding between two hoppers with four other migrants. A teenage boy emerged from a railside food store to throw a roll of crackers to migrants on the train. A teenage migrant standing next to me was hungry. When the boy threw the roll toward the migrant beside me, it bounced off the train. As the migrant jumped off the hopper to run back for the crackers, he stumbled and fell backward. Both feet landed on the tracks. He had a split second to react. He yanked his feet back just before the wheels rolled over the track.

Things weren't much safer by the side of the rails. I walked along the river that flows by the town of Ixtepec, Oaxaca. It seemed tranquil, a very safe public spot. Above me was the main bridge that crosses the river, busy with trains and pedestrians. The next day, I interviewed Karen, a fifteen-year-old girl who had been raped by two gangsters she had seen on the trains. Karen told me she had been raped right under the river's bridge. I had been alone one day before the rape at the very spot where Karen had been assaulted.

In Chiapas, I hung out with Grupo Beta agents near the dangerous "El Manguito" immigration checkpoint. It is thick with bandits who target migrants. Suddenly we were on a high-speed chase on a two-lane road, trying to reach three bandits in a red Jeep Cherokee who had robbed a group of migrants and driven off with one of them, a twenty-two-year-old Honduran woman. I was in the bed of Grupo Beta's pickup. The pickup pulled up alongside the Cherokee, trying to force it to stop. A Grupo Beta agent stood in the pickup bed. He locked and

loaded his shotgun and aimed at the bandits' vehicle. I was just feet from the Cherokee. I prayed that the bandits wouldn't open fire.

Farther north, human rights activist Raymundo Ramos Vásquez gave me a tour of the most isolated spots along the Rio Grande, places where migrants cross. We stumbled across a migrant preparing to swim north. He explained that the last time he had been here, municipal police officers had arrived. They had cuffed his hands behind his back, he said, and put his face in the river, threatening to drown him if he didn't disclose where he had his money. As the migrant described the abuse, two police officers walked down the dirt path toward us. Their guns were drawn—and cocked.

When I returned to the United States, I had a recurring nightmare: someone was racing after me on top of the freight trains, trying to rape me. It took months of therapy before I could sleep soundly again.

Often in Mexico I was tense. On the trains, I was filthy, unable to go to the bathroom for long stretches, excruciatingly hot or cold, pelted for hours by rain or hail.

Although I often felt exhausted and miserable, I knew I was experiencing only an iota of what migrant children go through. At the end of a long train ride, I would pull out my credit card, go to a motel, shower, eat, and sleep. These children typically spend several months making their way north. During that time, in between train rides, they sleep in trees or by the tracks, they drink from puddles, they beg for food. The journey gave me a glimmer of how hard this is for them.

TRAIN-TOP LESSONS

I thought I understood, to a great extent, the immigrant experience. My father, Mahafud, was born in Argentina after his Christian family fled religious persecution in Syria. My mother, Clara, born in Poland, emigrated to Argentina as a young child. Her family was fleeing poverty and the persecution of Jews. Many of her Polish relatives were gassed during World War II. My family emigrated to the United States in 1960. My father, a biochemistry professor working on genetic mapping, had greater resources and opportunities to conduct research here. He also wanted to leave behind a country controlled by the military, where academic expression was limited.

I understood the desire for opportunity, for freedom. I also understood, due to the death of my father when I was a teenager and the turbulent times my family experienced afterward, what it is like to struggle economically. Growing up as the child of Argentine immigrants in 1960s and 1970s Kansas, I have sometimes felt like an outsider. I know how difficult it is to straddle two countries, two worlds. On many levels, I relate to the experiences of immigrants and Latinos in this country. I have written about migrants, on and off, for two decades.

Still, my parents arrived in the United States on a jet airplane, not on top of a freight train. My family was never separated during the process of immigrating to the United States. Until my journey with migrant children, I had no true understanding of what people are willing to do to get here.

As I followed Enrique's footsteps, I learned the depths of desperation women face in countries such as Honduras. Most earn $40 to $120 a month working in a factory, cleaning houses, or providing child care. A hut with no bathroom or kitchen rents for nearly $30 a month. In rural areas of Honduras, some people

live under a piece of tarp; they have no chairs or table and eat sitting on a dirt floor.

Children go to school in threadbare uniforms, often unable to afford pencil or paper or buy a decent lunch. A Tegucigalpa elementary school principal told me that many of his students were so malnourished that they didn't have the stamina to stand up for long at school rallies or to sing the national anthem. Many Honduran mothers pull their children out of school when they are as young as eight. They have them watch younger siblings while they work, or sell tortillas on a street corner. Seven-year-olds sell bags of water on public buses or wait at taxi stands to make change for cabdrivers. Some beg on Bulevar Juan Pablo II.

Domy Elizabeth Cortés, from Mexico City, described being despondent after her husband left her for another woman. The loss of his income meant she could feed her children only once a day. For weeks, she considered throwing herself and her two toddlers into a nearby sewage canal to drown together. Instead, she left her children with a brother and headed to Los Angeles. Day after day, mothers like Domy walk away from their children, some of them just a month old, and leave for the United States, not knowing if or when they will see them again.

With each step north, I became awed by the gritty determination these children possess in their struggle to get here. They are willing to endure misery and dangers for months on end. They come armed with their faith, a resolve not to return to Central America defeated, and a deep desire to be at their mothers' sides. One Honduran teenager I met in southern Mexico had been deported to Guatemala twenty-seven times. He said he wouldn't give up until he reached his mother in the United States. I began to believe that no number of border guards will deter children like Enrique, who are willing to endure so much to reach the United States. It is a powerful stream, one that can only be addressed at its source.

The migrants I spent time with also gave me an invaluable gift. They reminded me of the value of what I have. They taught me that people are willing to die in their quest to obtain it.

The single mothers who are coming to this country, and the children who follow them, are changing the face of immigration to the United States. Each year, the number of women and children who immigrate to the United States grows. They become our neighbors, children in our schools, workers in our homes. As they become a greater part of the fabric of the United States, their troubles and triumphs will be a part of this country's future. For Americans overall, this book should shed some light on this part of our society.

For Latina mothers coming to the United States, my hope is that they will understand the full consequences of leaving their children behind and make better-informed decisions. For in the end, these separations almost always end badly.

Every woman I interviewed in the United States who had left children behind had been sure the separation would be brief. Immigrants who come to the United States are by nature optimists. They have to be in order to leave everything they love and are familiar with for the unknown. The reality, however, is that it takes years and years until the children and mothers are together again. By the time that happens, if it happens, the children are usually very angry with their mothers. They feel abandoned. Their mothers are stunned by this judgment. They believe their children should show gratitude, not anger. After all, the mothers sacrificed being with their children, worked like dogs, all to help provide their children with a better life and future.

Latina migrants ultimately pay a steep price for coming to

the United States. They lose their children's love. Reunited, they end up in conflicted homes. Too often, the boys seek out gangs to try to find the love they thought they would find with their mothers. Too often, the girls get pregnant and form their own families. In many ways, these separations are devastating Latino families. People are losing what they value most.

Children who set out on this journey usually don't make it. They end up back in Central America, defeated. Enrique was determined to be with his mother again. Would he make it?

ENRIQUE'S JOURNEY