

number on a scrap of paper. Just in case, he also scrawls it in ink on the inside waistband of his pants. He has \$57 in his pocket.

On March 2, 2000, he goes to his grandmother Águeda's house. He stands on the same porch that his mother disappeared from eleven years before. He hugs María Isabel and Aunt Rosa Amalia. Then he steps off.

T W O



Seeking Mercy

The day's work is done at Las Anonas, a railside hamlet of thirty-six families in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, when a field hand, Sirenio Gómez Fuentes, sees a startling sight: a battered and bleeding boy, naked except for his undershorts.

It is Enrique. He limps forward on bare feet, stumbling first one way, then another. His right shin is gashed. His upper lip is split. The left side of his face is swollen. He is crying.

His eyes are red, filled with blood. He dabs open wounds on his face with a filthy sweater he has found on the tracks. Gómez hears him whisper, "Give me water, please."

The knot of apprehension in Sirenio Gómez melts into pity. He runs into his thatched hut, fills a cup, and gives it to Enrique.

"Do you have a pair of pants?" Enrique asks.

Gómez dashes back inside and fetches some. There are

holes in the crotch and the knees, but they will do. Then, with kindness, Gómez directs Enrique to Carlos Carrasco, the mayor of Las Anonas. Whatever has happened, maybe he can help.

Enrique hobbles down a dirt road into the heart of the little town. He encounters a man wearing a white straw hat on a horse. Could he help him find the mayor? "That's me," the man says. He stops and stares. "Did you fall from the train?"

Again, Enrique begins to cry. Mayor Carrasco dismounts. He takes Enrique's arm and guides him to his home, next to the town church. "Mom!" he shouts. "There's a poor kid out here! He's all beaten up." Lesbia Sibaja, the mayor's mother, hears his urgent tone and rushes outside.

Enrique's cheeks and lips are swelling badly. *He's going to die*, Carrasco thinks. Carrasco drags a wooden pew out of the church, pulls it into the shade of a tamarind tree, and helps Enrique onto it.

The mayor's mother puts a pot of water on to boil and sprinkles in salt and herbs to clean his wounds. She brings Enrique a bowl of hot broth, filled with bits of meat and potatoes. He spoons the brown liquid into his mouth, careful not to touch his broken teeth. He cannot chew.

Townpeople come to see. They stand in a circle. "Is he alive?" asks Gloria Luis, a stout woman with long black hair. "Why don't you go home? Wouldn't that be better?" Other women press him to return to Honduras.

"I'm going to find my mom," Enrique says, quietly.

He is seventeen. It is March 24, 2000. Eleven years before, he tells the townspeople, his mother left home in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, to work in the United States. She did not come back, and now he is riding freight trains up through Mexico to find her.

Gloria Luis looks at Enrique and thinks about her own children.

She earns little; most people in Las Anonas make 30 pesos a day, roughly \$3, working the fields. She digs into a pocket and presses 10 pesos into Enrique's hand.

Several other women open his hand, adding 5 or 10 pesos each.

Mayor Carrasco gives Enrique a shirt and shoes. He has cared for injured migrants before. Some have died. Giving Enrique clothing will be futile, Carrasco thinks, if he can't find someone with a car who can get the boy to medical help.

Adan Díaz Ruiz, mayor of San Pedro Tapanatepec, the county seat, happens by in his pickup.

Carrasco begs a favor: Take this kid to a doctor.

Díaz balks. He is miffed. "This is what they get for doing this journey," he says. Enrique cannot pay for any treatment. The migrants most badly mangled by the train run up bills of \$1,000 to \$1,500 each when they end up at a public hospital one and a half hours away. Why, Díaz wonders, do these Central American governments send us all their problems?

Looking at the small, soft-spoken boy lying on the bench, he reminds himself that a live migrant is better than a dead one. In eighteen months, Díaz has had to bury eight of them, nearly all mutilated by the trains. Already today, he has been told to expect the body of yet another, in his late thirties.

Sending this boy to a local doctor would cost the county \$60. Burying him in a common grave would cost three times as much. First Díaz would have to pay someone to dig the grave, then someone to handle the paperwork, then someone to stand guard while Enrique's unclaimed body is displayed on the steamy patio of the San Pedro Tapanatepec cemetery for seventy-two hours, as required by law.

All the while, people visiting the graves of their loved ones would complain about the smell of another rotting migrant.

"We will help you," he tells Enrique finally.

He turns him over to his driver, Ricardo Díaz Aguilar. Inside the mayor's pickup, Enrique sobs, but this time with relief. He says to the driver, "I thought I was going to die."

An officer of the judicial police approaches in a white pickup. Enrique cranks down his window. Instantly, he recoils. He recognizes both the officer with buzz-cut hair and the truck.

The officer, too, seems startled. Both stare silently at each other.

For a moment, the officer and the mayor's driver discuss the new dead migrant. Quickly, the policeman pulls away.

"That guy robbed me yesterday," Enrique says.

The policeman and a partner had seen Enrique and four other migrants drying off after bathing in a river five miles to the south. "Get over here," the buzz-cut officer barked, waving a pistol. One of the migrants bolted. Enrique obeyed, afraid of what might happen if he tried to run. The officers put the migrants in the back of their truck. They demanded 100 pesos to let them go. Enrique was relieved that one of the fellow migrants had the money and handed it over. "You won't tell anyone," the officer warned.

The mayor's driver is not surprised. The judicial police, he says, routinely stop trains to rob and beat migrants. The *judiciales*—the Agencia Federal de Investigación—deny it.

Enrique has already had other run-ins with corrupt Mexican cops. Once, he was just fifteen miles inside Mexico, in Tapachula, when two municipal police officers grabbed him and put him in the back of their pickup.

"Where are you from?" they demanded. "How much do

you have on you? Give it to us and we will let you go." They stole everything he had, \$4.

Four of five migrants who arrive at the Albergue Belén shelter in Tapachula have already been robbed, beaten, or extorted by police, says the shelter priest, Flor María Rigoni. At the Tapachula train station, fights break out between municipal and state police officers over who gets to rob a group of migrants. Migrants describe being locked up by police officers until a relative in the United States can wire the kidnapper's fee and buy their freedom.

For immigration agents, squeezing cash from migrants is central to day-to-day operations, helping underpaid agents buy big houses and nice cars. At highway checkpoints, agents charge smugglers \$50 to \$200 per migrant to pass through. The checkpoint boss typically gets half the take; his workers split the rest. Officials who try to stop abuses receive repeated death threats. One government worker in the Mexican state of Tabasco, who in 1999 denounced corruption by certain judicial police agents, was dead a few days later in a mysterious car accident. "If you speak out too much against police corruption, you wake up with a machete in your back," says Father Rigoni.

In San Pedro Tapanatepec, the driver seeking a doctor for Enrique finds the last clinic still open that night.

PERSEVERANCE

When Enrique's mother left, he was a child. Six months ago, the first time he set out to find her, he was still a callow kid. Now he is a veteran of a perilous pilgrimage by children, many of whom come looking for their mothers and travel any way they

can. The thousands who ride freight trains must hop between seven and thirty trains to get through Mexico. The luckiest make it in a month. Others, who stop to work along the way, take a year or longer.

Some go up to five days without eating. Their prize possessions are scraps of paper, wrapped in plastic, often tucked into a shoe. On the scraps are telephone numbers: their only way to contact their mothers. Some do not have even that.

None of the youngsters has proper papers. Many are caught by the Mexican police or by *la migra*, the Mexican immigration authorities, who take them south to Guatemala. Most try again.

Like many others, Enrique has made several attempts.

The first: He set out from Honduras with a friend, José del Carmen Bustamante. They remember traveling thirty-one days and about a thousand miles through Guatemala into the state of Veracruz in central Mexico, where *la migra* captured them on top of a train and sent them back to Guatemala on what migrants call *El Bus de Lágrimas*, the Bus of Tears. These buses make as many as eight runs a day, deporting more than 100,000 unhappy passengers every year.

The second: Enrique journeyed by himself. Five days and 150 miles into Mexico, he committed the mistake of falling asleep on top of a train with his shoes off. Police stopped the train near the town of Tonalá to hunt for migrants, and Enrique had to jump off. Barefoot, he could not run far. He hid overnight in some grass, then was captured and put on the bus back to Guatemala.

The third: After two days, police surprised him while he was asleep in an empty house near Chahuities, 190 miles into Mexico. They robbed him, he says, and then turned him over to *la migra*, who put him, once more, on the bus to Guatemala.

The fourth: After a day and twelve miles, police caught him sleeping on top of a mausoleum in a graveyard near the depot in Tapachula, Mexico, known as the place where a migrant woman had been raped and, two years before that, another had been raped and stoned to death. *La migra* took Enrique back to Guatemala.

The fifth: *La migra* captured him as he walked along the tracks in Querétaro, north of Mexico City. Enrique was 838 miles and almost a week into his journey. He had been stung in the face by a swarm of bees. For the fifth time, immigration agents shipped him back to Guatemala.

The sixth: He nearly succeeded. It took him more than five days. He crossed 1,564 miles. He reached the Rio Grande and actually saw the United States. He was eating alone near some railroad tracks when *migra* agents grabbed him. They sent him to a detention center called El Corralón, the Corral, in Mexico City. The next day they bused him for fourteen hours, all the way back to Guatemala.

The bus unloaded him back across the Río Suchiate in the rugged frontier town of El Carmen. The river marks the Guatemalan border, just as the Rio Grande defines the Mexican border to the north. A sign in block letters on top of a hill says BIENVENIDOS A GUATEMALA.

It was as if he had never left.

He has slept on the ground; in a sewage culvert, curled up with other migrants; on top of gravestones. Once, on top of a moving train, he grew so hungry that he jumped forward to the first car, leaped off, and raced to pick a pineapple. He was able to reboard one of the train's last cars. Another time, he had gone two days without water. His throat felt as if it was swelling shut. There were no houses in sight. He found a small cattle trough. It was frothy with cow spit. Under the froth was green

algae. Beneath the algae was stagnant, yellow water. He brought handfuls to his parched lips. He was so thirsty it tasted wonderful.

Each time he is deported, Enrique knows he must quickly get back over the river, into Mexico, away from Guatemala's lawless border towns. Once he was deported at 2 A.M. and spent the night cowering, sleepless, near the border guard station, afraid for his life.

Migrants usually head to the border town of Tecún Umán to cross the river. Its lifeblood is trafficking in arms, drugs, and people. It teems with violence, prostitutes, and destitute migrants. They die at a rate of two or three a week. Tecún Umán is controlled by two rival gangs, both born in Los Angeles: the Mara Salvatrucha and 18th Street.

In Tecún Umán, the river is wider, slower, easier to ford. A platoon of large passenger tricycles wheels migrants from the bus stop to the riverbank, swerving along the main, rutted, dirt road to avoid pigs and trash burning in the middle of the street.

The bank's muddy shores reek of sewage. Salsa music blares from restaurants that double as houses of prostitution. Some Central American children, penniless, get stuck here, turning tricks, doing drugs, and stealing, says Marvin Godínez, legal assistant at Tecún Umán's Casa del Migrante shelter. Workers unload scores of tricycles piled high with toilet paper and Pepsi-Cola and load them onto rafts bound for Mexico. The rafts are a few planks of wood lashed on top of two tractor tire inner tubes. Dozens of the rafts crisscross the river. A man uses a long cane to push against the river bottom or ties himself to the front of the raft with a long rope and swims. Migrants prefer to pay to cross in a raft than risk the river alone.

Enrique prefers to cross the river in El Carmen, where the

bus leaves him, even though there are no rafts and the Río Suchiate is more narrow, fast, and rocky. The water is the color of coffee with too much cream. The nasty river reaches his chest. Each time he crosses, as the rainy season approaches, the river is higher and higher. He always crosses with one or two other migrants, in case he slips and starts to drown. Chin high, he staggers across, stumbling on the uneven riverbed, lurching into the hollows, straining against the current. Exhausted, he reaches the far bank.

This is his seventh try, and it is on this attempt that he suffers the injuries that leave him in the hands of the kind people of Las Anonas.

Here is what Enrique recalls:

It is night. He is riding on a freight train. A stranger climbs up the side of his tanker car and asks for a cigarette. The man moves quickly, but Enrique is not alarmed. Sometimes migrants riding on the trains climb from car to car, trying to move forward or backward.

Trees hide the moon, and Enrique does not see two men who are behind the stranger, or three more creeping up the other side of the car. Scores of migrants cling to the train, but no one is within shouting distance.

One of the men reaches a grate where Enrique is sitting. He grabs Enrique with both hands. Someone seizes him from behind. They slam him facedown. All six surround him. Take off everything, one says. Another swings a wooden club. It cracks into the back of Enrique's head. Hurry, somebody demands. The club smacks his face.

Enrique feels someone yank off his shoes. Hands paw through his pants pockets. One of the men pulls out a small scrap of paper. It has his mother's telephone number. Without

it, he has no way to locate her. The man tosses the paper into the air. Enrique sees it flutter away.

The men pull off his pants. His mother's number is inked inside the waistband. But there is little money. Enrique has less than 50 pesos on him, only a few coins that he has gathered begging. The men curse and fling the pants overboard.

The blows land harder.

"Don't kill me," Enrique pleads.

"Shut up!" someone says.

His cap flies away. Someone rips off his shirt. Another blow finds the left side of his face. It shatters three teeth. They rattle like broken glass in his mouth. The men pummel him for what seems like ten minutes. The robbery has turned into blood sport.

One of the men stands over Enrique, straddling him. He wraps the sleeve of a jacket around Enrique's neck and starts to twist.

Enrique wheezes, coughs, and gasps for air. His hands move feverishly from his neck to his face as he tries to breathe and buffer the blows.

"Throw him off the train," one man yells.

Enrique thinks of his mother. He will be buried in an unmarked grave, and she will never know what happened. "Please," he asks God, "don't let me die without seeing her again."

The man with the jacket slips. The noose loosens.

Enrique struggles to his knees. He has been stripped of everything but his underwear. He manages to stand, and he runs along the top of the fuel car, desperately trying to balance on the smooth, curved surface. Loose tracks flail the train from side to side. There are no lights. He can barely see his feet. He stumbles, then regains his footing.

In half a dozen strides, he reaches the rear of the car.

The train is rolling at nearly 40 miles per hour. The next car is another fuel tanker. Leaping from one to the other at such speed would be suicidal. Enrique knows he could slip, fall between them, and be sucked under.

He hears the men coming. Carefully, he jumps down onto the coupler that holds the cars together, just inches from the hot, churning wheels. He hears the muffled pop of gunshots and knows what he must do. He leaps from the train, flinging himself outward into the black void.

He hits dirt by the tracks and crumples to the ground. He crawls thirty feet. His knees throb. Finally, he collapses under a small mango tree.

Enrique cannot see blood, but he senses it everywhere. It runs in a gooey dribble down his face and out of his ears and nose. It tastes bitter in his mouth. Still, he feels overwhelming relief: the blows have stopped.

He recalls sleeping for maybe twelve hours, then stirring and trying to sit. His mind wanders to his mother, then to his family and María Isabel, who might be pregnant. "How will they know where I have died?"

Enrique's girlfriend, María Isabel, is sure Enrique hasn't really left Honduras. This is all a joke. He has probably gone to visit a friend. He'll be back any day.

A couple of weeks after Enrique disappears, his paternal grandmother, María, traverses Tegucigalpa to talk to Enrique's relatives and María Isabel. Has anyone heard anything from Enrique, who came to bid her good-bye before leaving for the United States?

It is no joke.

María Isabel knows Enrique longed to be with his mother.

He spoke often of going north to be with Lourdes. Still, how could he leave her? What if he is harmed or killed crossing Mexico? What if she never sees him again?

She cries and blames herself for Enrique's departure. Then she prays. "God," she whispers, "grant me one wish. Get Mexican immigration authorities to catch Enrique and deport him back to Honduras. Send him back to me." It is a well-worn prayer in Honduras, especially by children whose mothers have just left them to head north.

María Isabel doesn't feel well, forcing her to quit night school. She loses weight. What if she is pregnant and Enrique dies trying to make it to his mother?

A friend offers a solution. The two of them will journey to the United States together. Maybe, the friend says, they will find Enrique as they make their way through Mexico. María Isabel has no money. Her friend, who works at a clothing store, says she has cash. She has saved 10,000 lempiras, roughly \$570. It's not enough to hire a smuggler. But if María Isabel will accompany her north, the friend says, she will share it. "We'll be happier there. There, we'll have everything," the friend says.

María Isabel has decided. They set a date to leave. She will go and find Enrique.

A MISTAKE

Enrique falls back asleep, then wakes again. The sun is high and hot. Enrique's left eyelid won't open. He can't see very well. His battered knees don't want to bend.

He grabs a stick and pulls himself up. Slowly, barefoot, and with swollen knees, he hobbles north along the rails. He sees a

rancher and asks for water. Get lost, the rancher says. Enrique grows dizzy and confused. He walks the other way, south along the tracks. After what seems to be several hours, he is back again where he began, at the mango tree.

Just beyond it, in the opposite direction, is a thatched hut surrounded by a white fence. It belongs to field hand Sirenio Gómez Fuentes, who watches as the bloodied boy walks toward him.

At the one-room medical clinic, Dr. Guillermo Toledo Montes leads Enrique from the outside porch, where patients wait to be seen, to an examination table inside.

Enrique's left eye socket has a severe concussion. The eyelid is injured and might droop forever. His back is covered with bruises. He has several lesions on his right leg and an open wound hidden under his hair. Two of his top teeth are broken. So is one on the bottom.

Dr. Toledo jabs a needle under the skin near Enrique's eye, then into his forehead. He injects a local anesthetic. He scrubs dirt out of the wounds and thinks of the migrants he has treated who have died. This one is lucky. "You should give thanks you are alive," he says.

Sometimes the doctor hands the most difficult cases to a hospital in Arriaga, a town one and a half hours away. Arriaga's Red Cross workers retrieve, on average, ten migrants per month who have fallen or been beaten up by bandits or gangsters. "They threw me off the train," they explain. Some have been shot. Others have had their hands cut open trying to protect themselves from machete blows. Injured migrants who land in isolated stretches of the tracks and cannot move wait one or two days until someone finally walks by.

In Las Anonas, the Red Cross retrieves a seventeen-year-

old Honduran boy who lost his left leg. They come for a woman who is convulsing. She has not eaten for six days and has fallen off the train.

They pick up three migrants mutilated by the train in as many days. One loses a leg, another his hand; the third has been cut in half. Sometimes the ambulance workers must pry a flattened hand or leg off the rails to move the migrant. Other times, the migrant is dead by the time they arrive. They aren't supposed to transport dead people. Still, sometimes, they take the body away, so coyotes and vultures won't eat it.

The Arriaga hospital chronicles a parade of misery. Two weeks before Enrique's March beating, a Salvadoran was found crumpled and unconscious and by the tracks, his left arm broken. In April, a Honduran broke his foot falling from the train. Another, assaulted by someone wielding a machete atop the trains, arrived with the ligaments in his right hand severed. In May, a Honduran had a fractured right clavicle. In June, a Nicaraguan had a broken right rib. In July, a seventeen-year-old Honduran lost both legs. In August, a Salvadoran arrived with his leg hanging by a bit of skin and muscle. In October, two Salvadoran youths on top of a train were electrocuted by a high-tension wire. One had second-degree burns over 47 percent of his body. In December, a Honduran arrived with both legs and ankles broken. Most often, says social worker Isabel Barragán Torres, migrants lose their left legs to the train.

Some amputees stay in the area, too ashamed to go back and let their families see what has become of them. To the many injured who do return to Central America, the hospital social worker pleads, "Tell other people there not to travel this way."

"Why don't you go home?" the doctor treating Enrique asks.

"No." Enrique shakes his head. "I don't want to go back." Politely he asks if there is a way that he can pay for his care, as well as the antibiotics and the anti-inflammatory drugs.

The doctor shakes his head. "What do you plan to do now?"

Catch another freight train, Enrique says. "I want to get to my family. I am alone in my country. I have to go north."

The police in San Pedro Tapanatepec do not hand him over to *la migra*. Instead, he sleeps that night on the concrete floor of their one-room command post. At dawn, he leaves, hoping to catch a bus back to the railroad tracks. As he walks, people stare at his injured face. Without a word, one man hands him 50 pesos. Another gives him 20. He limps on, heading for the outskirts of town.

The pain is too great, so he flags down a car. "Will you give me a ride?"

"Get in," the driver says.

Enrique does. It is a costly mistake. The driver is an off-duty immigration officer. He pulls into a *migra* checkpoint and turns Enrique over. You can't keep going north, the agents say.

Next time, he prays, he will make it.

He is ushered onto another bus, with its smell of sweat and diesel fumes. He is relieved that there are no Central American gangsters on board. Sometimes they let themselves be caught by *la migra* so they can beat and rob the migrants on the buses. They move from seat to seat, threatening the passengers with ice picks and demanding everything they have.

Enrique's bus picks up other deportees at *migra* stations along the way. As Mexican officials call out their names, the migrants step out of large cells, some with open-trench toilets brimming with feces and urine. They are handed their belong-

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.

T H R E E



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.