3

SEEKING MERCY

It is almost sundown in Las Anonas, a tiny railside village in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. A local field hand, Sirenio Gómez Fuentes, is relieved to be done for the day. As he walks home along the tracks, he sees a startling sight. Before him is a battered and bleeding boy, naked except for his underwear.

The boy is limping 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. His eyes are red, filled with blood. He is crying. He dabs at open wounds on his face with a filthy sweater he has found on the tracks.

It is Enrique. He is seventeen. It is March 24, 2000.

Gómez hears him whisper, "Give me water. Please."

The knot of uneasiness in Gómez melts into pity. He runs

into his thatched hut to fetch a cup of water and a pair of pants for the boy. Then, with kindness, Gómez directs Enrique to Carlos Carrasco, the mayor of Las Anonas.

Enrique hobbles down a dirt road into the heart of the village. He encounters a man wearing a white straw hat and mounted on a horse.

"Can you help me find the mayor?" Enrique asks feebly.

"That's me," the man says. He brings his horse to a stop and stares. "Did you fall from the train?"

Again Enrique begins to cry. When Mayor Carrasco sees Enrique's agony, he quickly dismounts. No matter what has happened, he will try to help, the mayor says. He takes Enrique's arm and guides him to his house, next to the church.

"Mom!" Mayor Carrasco shouts. "There's a poor kid out here! He's all beaten up." The mayor's mother hears his urgent tone and rushes outside. He drags a wooden bench out of the church, pulls it into the shade of a tamarind tree, and helps Enrique onto it.

Enrique's cheeks and lips are swelling badly. He's going to die, Mayor Carrasco thinks.

The mayor's mother cleans Enrique's wounds with steaming water, salt, and herbs. She brings Enrique a bowl of hot broth, filled with bits of meat and potatoes. He spoons it into his mouth, careful not to touch his broken teeth. He cannot chew.

Villagers come to see. They stand in a circle around him. "Is he alive?" asks a stout woman with long black hair. "Why

don't you go home?" someone else asks. "Wouldn't that be better?"

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

Eleven years before, he tells the villagers, his mother left home in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, to find work in the United States. Now he is riding freight trains up through Mexico to find her.

Some of the women in the crowd look at Enrique and think about their own children.

They earn little money working in the fields, usually around thirty pesos, or three dollars, a day. Many of them dig into their pockets and press five or ten pesos into Enrique's hand.

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

Over time, the people of Las Anonas have seen many injured migrants like Enrique. They debate whether they should repeatedly pay medical costs to help save them.

Mayor Adan Díaz Ruiz, the mayor of San Pedro Tapanatepec, a neighboring town, is passing through. He tells Mayor Carrasco that he does not think it is worth the time and money for doctors to save travelers like Enrique. "This is what they get for doing this journey," he says of migrants.

Mayor Carrasco disagrees. It is worth the effort and money

to let this boy live. He begs a favor of Mayor Díaz: Lend your pickup truck so we can take this kid to the doctor.

Mayor Díaz finally agrees, calculating that it will cost the government three times more to bury the soft-spoken boy who is on the bench.

Enrique collapses into the seat of the pickup. He sobs with relief and tells Mayor Díaz's driver, "I thought I was going to die."

His head against the window, Enrique sobs, but this time with relief.

PERSEVERANCE

In the past few weeks, Enrique has slept on the ground; in a sewage ditch, curled up with other migrants; on top of gravestones. Once, riding on top of a moving train, he grew so hungry that he jumped forward to the first car, leaped off onto the ground, 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 water trough for cattle. 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 that it tasted wonderful.

The thousands of migrants who ride atop freight trains must hop as many as thirty trains to get through Mexico. Many are caught by the Mexican police or by *la migra,* the Mexican

immigration authorities, who take them south to Guatemala. Most try again. The luckiest make it to the United States in a month. Others, who stop to work along the way, take a year or longer.

Like many others, Enrique has made several attempts. Six months ago, the first time he set out to find Lourdes, he was still a naïve kid. Now he is a veteran of the treacherous journey through Mexico.

Setting out with his friend José was the first attempt. It was more like a trial run for what was to come. It was then that *la migra* captured them on top of a train and sent them back to Central America on the Bus of Tears.

The second attempt: Enrique journeyed by himself. Five days and 150 miles into Mexico, he made 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 Chahuites, 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. *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. A sign in block letters on top of a hill says BIENVENIDOS A GUATEMALA.

It was as if he had never left.

Some migrants realize, sitting on the bus, that they can take no more. They slump in their seats, tearful, weak, and sometimes penniless. 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, but they vow to keep trying, no matter what. They plot how they will try again, using the knowledge they have gained from previous attempts. On his sixth ride back to Guatemala, Enrique's exhaustion tempts him to give up, but he thinks of his mother.

It is on his seventh attempt that he suffers the injuries that leave him destitute in 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 train climb from car to car trying to move forward or backward.

Trees hide the light of 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. Dozens of migrants cling to the train, but no one is within shouting distance.

One of the men reaches Enrique and grabs him with both hands. Someone else 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, then smacks his face.

Enrique feels someone yank off his shoes. Hands paw through his 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. Enrique has less than fifty pesos in the pockets, 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.

Enrique's cap flies away. Someone rips off his shirt. Another blow hits 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 protect his face from the blows.

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

Enrique's mind races to 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 around Enrique's neck loosens.

Enrique struggles to his knees, ready to run. He has been stripped of everything but his underwear. He manages to stand. 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. It is so dark he can barely see his feet. The train is rolling at what must be forty miles per hour. Leaping from one car to another at such speed would be suicidal. Enrique knows he could slip, fall between the cars, and be sucked under.

He stumbles, then regains his footing. In half a dozen strides, he reaches the rear of the car.

He hears the men coming. Carefully, he jumps down onto the coupler that holds the cars together. It is 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 gooey dribbles 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.

Enrique sleeps for maybe twelve hours, then stirs and tries to sit. 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 alongside 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 where he began, at the mango tree.

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

GOOD MEDICINE

Mayor Díaz's driver rushes Enrique to San Pedro Tapanatepec, to the last medical clinic still open in the area that night.

At the one-room clinic, Dr. Guillermo Toledo Montes huddles over Enrique, who is lying on a stainless steel table. He examines the boy's injuries. Enrique's left eye socket has a severe concussion. The eyelid is injured and may droop forever. His back is covered with bruises and he has several deep gouges on his right leg. Hidden under his hair is an open wound. Two of his top teeth are broken. So is one on the bottom.

Dr. Toledo jabs a needle with local anesthetic under the skin near Enrique's eye, then into his forehead. He scrubs dirt out of the wounds and thinks of the migrants he has treated who have died.

Many have fallen off a train or, like Enrique, been beaten up by bandits or gangsters. Some have been shot. Injured migrants who cannot move sometimes have to wait one or two days until someone finally walks by, discovers them, and stops to help.

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. Ambulance workers aren't supposed to transport dead people. Still, sometimes, they take the body away, so vultures won't eat it.

Some migrants who have lost an arm, a leg, or a foot are too ashamed to go back home and show their families what has become of them. Social workers say to the migrants who return: tell other people there not to travel this way.

"You should give thanks you are alive," the doctor says to Enrique. "Why don't you go home?"

"No." Enrique shakes his head. "I have to go north."

Politely, Enrique asks if there is a way that he can pay for his care, as well as for the antibiotics and the anti-inflammatory drugs. The doctor shakes his head. He knows Enrique cannot pay for the treatment.

At dawn, Enrique leaves, hoping to catch a bus back to the railroad tracks. People stare at his injured face. Without a word, one man hands him fifty pesos. Another gives him twenty. 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 yet another bus, with its smell of sweat and diesel fumes, back to the Guatemalan border. He is relieved that there are no Central American gangsters on board this time. 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.

The twenty other migrants on Enrique's bus are depressed. They talk of giving up. 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 glares out the window of the Bus of Tears. Seven times! All his effort, money, and time. When will he make it over the border to his mother? He tells himself over and over that he'll just have to try again.

4

FACING THE BEAST

Enrique wades chest-deep across the Río Suchiate. The river forms a border. Behind him is Guatemala. Before him is Mexico's southernmost state, Chiapas. "*Ahora nos enfrentamos a la bestia.* Now we face the beast," migrants say when they enter Chiapas. Enrique will risk "the beast" again because he needs to find his mother.

This is his eighth attempt to reach *el Norte.*

The water is the color of coffee with too much cream. Each time he crosses, as the rainy season approaches, the river is higher and higher. He is stoop-shouldered and cannot swim. The logo on his cap boasts hollowly, NO FEAR. 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, straining against the current. Exhausted, he reaches the far bank.

Enrique has discovered several important things about the state of Chiapas:

In Chiapas, do not take buses. Buses pass through nine permanent immigration checkpoints. Trains pass through checkpoints as well, but Enrique can jump off a train as it brakes. Inside a bus, he would be stuck.

In Chiapas, never ride trains alone. The best time to move forward is at night or when there is fog. Then he can see immigration agents' flashlights but the agents cannot see him.

In Chiapas, do not trust anyone. Residents tend to dislike migrants. Even the authorities, including police and immigration agents, are corrupt and may rob or rape you.

With Central America safely behind him, Enrique sneaks into a cemetery to rest. In the cemetery he is close enough to the tracks to hear a train coming, its diesel engine growling and its horns blaring, but far enough away to avoid police who might be hovering around the station looking for migrants. Enrique hopes there will be a train tomorrow. Missing one means waiting two or three days for the next train.

He washes his mouth with urine, a home remedy for his aching, broken teeth. He stuffs a few rags under his head for a pillow and slips into sleep.

Sleeping among the dead is eerily calming. The cemetery is beautiful in the light of the yellow moon. The sky is midnight blue. Enrique can see stars around the ceiba trees that shroud the headstones. Crosses and crypts are painted periwinkle, neon green, and purple. A wind touches the tree branches

and the leaves flutter and murmur in the gathering light. A bigger gust moves the vast branches, commanding them to dance.

The same darkness and isolation that give the graveyard beauty also make it a place of great peril. There have been many harrowing atrocities in these dark spaces, between the tombstones, worst of all rape and murder. A young woman was found dead; she had been raped, then beaten with stones.

"Wake up." The warning is only a whisper, but Enrique hears it. The words are from the boy who was sleeping next to him.

It is just before dawn. Five pickup trucks filled with police coast up to the cemetery, their lights out. Cops are striding through the maze of pathways, fanning out among the graves, armed with rifles, shotguns, and pistols. Enrique hears migrants trying to run, stampeding among the graves, but he knows there is no point. Weeks ago he tried to flee from police in this very cemetery. He was caught and deported.

Trying not to breathe, he flattens himself on the mausoleum roof where he was sleeping. A policeman peers up over the edge of the crypt and straight at him.

There is no escape.

Enrique and the other migrants are marched off to the Tapachula jail.

"Name?" "Age?" "Where are you from?" the policemen bark, taking notes.

The migrants are led into an enclosed patio. They wait

anxiously. Soon they will be shoved into a packed jail cell, then deported. As they mill about, a rumor starts going around: a train headed north is leaving at ten a.m.

I *can't* miss it, Enrique says to himself. Urgently, he looks around. How can he escape? Walls surround the patio, and *migra* agents are standing nearby.

Enrique sees an old bicycle leaning against the wall. Now he watches *la migra* carefully. For a moment they look 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, and the soles of his feet smack onto the ground. His head pounds; it is still swollen from being battered.

But he is free.

Before *la migra* can notice, Enrique runs back toward the cemetery to hide until ten a.m. At the first rumble of the departing train, the cemetery comes to life as dozens of migrants, children among them, appear from behind the bushes, trees, and tombs where they have been hiding.

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

Two days ago he was battered in Las Anonas; yesterday he was shuttled back to Guatemala on the deportation bus. Now he and the other migrants run on trails between the graves and dash headlong down a hill. A sewage canal, twenty feet wide, separates them from the train rails. They cross the canal on seven stones, jumping from one to another over a nauseating stream of black water. They gather on the other side, shaking the dampness from their feet. Now they are only yards from the rails.

Enrique sprints alongside rolling freight cars, focusing on his footing. The roadbed is slanted at a forty-five-degree angle and scattered with rocks as big as his fist. It is hard to keep his balance in his tattered sneakers.

Here the locomotives accelerate, sometimes reaching twenty-five miles per hour. He knows he needs to be speedy and climb up the ladder before the train reaches a bridge just beyond the cemetery. If he runs too slowly, when he tries to climb up, the ladder will yank him forward and send him sprawling. Then the churning wheels could take an arm, a leg, perhaps his life.

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

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 the train hits a curve, the wheels kick up hot white sparks, burning Enrique's skin. By this time around, he has learned that if he overthinks all of this too long, he will fall behind—and the train will pass him by. Enrique grabs one of its ladders, summons his strength, and pulls himself up.

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.

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 calls.

"Don't let go!" another man shouts. He and others crawl along the top of the train to a nearby car. 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.

Enrique gasps as the boy dangles from the ladder. The boy is struggling to keep his grip. Carefully, men crawl down and reach for him. They lift him up slowly. The rungs batter his legs, but he is alive. He still has his feet.

DANGER

There are few women on board the train today; it is too dangerous.

A University of Houston study found that nearly one in six migrant girls detained by authorities in Texas say they have been sexually assaulted during their journey. Many female migrants are gang-raped. One of them was a Salvadoran woman, four months pregnant, who was assaulted at gunpoint by thirteen bandits along the railroad tracks to the south. The rape victims arrive at hospitals with severe internal bleeding and long scratch marks on their bodies. 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.

Some girls journeying north cut off their hair, bind their breasts, and try to pass for boys. Others scrawl on their chests *Tengo SIDA,* "I have AIDS," to scare men off. Men are also targets of rape and sexual assault. Rape is one way Mexicans demean and humiliate Central Americans, who are sometimes 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 IRON HORSE

Migrants hang on to the sides of cars, trying to find a spot to perch. Enrique guesses there are more than two hundred on board, a small army of them who charged out of the cemetery with nothing but their cunning. 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 human rights report said that migrants trying to make it through Chiapas face "an authentic race against time and death."

Enrique considers carefully. Which car will he ride on? This time he will be more cautious about being seen.

He could lie flat on the roof of a boxcar and hide. But boxcars have little on top to hold on to. Inside the boxcar might

be better, but what if someone locked the door, trapping him? It could turn into an oven.

Enrique looks elsewhere. A good place to hide could be under the cars, balancing on a small shock absorber, but he might be too big to fit. Besides, 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 stand on a tiny ledge, barely big enough for his feet, on the end of a hopper car. Or he could sit on the round compressor at the end of some hoppers, his feet dangling just above the train wheels: shiny metal, three feet in diameter, five inches thick, churning. His hands would turn numb after hours of hanging on, though.

Enrique settles for the top of a hopper. From his perch fourteen feet up, he can see anyone approaching on either side of the tracks up ahead or from another car. As usual, the train lurches hard from side to side. Enrique holds on with both hands.

He doesn't carry anything that might keep him from running fast. At most, a plastic bottle for water, tied to his arm. Some migrants climb on board with a toothbrush tucked into a pocket. A few allow themselves a small reminder of family. Maybe a rosary, or a Bible, or a tiny drawing of San Cristóbal, the patron saint of travelers, or of San Judas Tadeo, the patron saint of desperate situations. One father wraps his eight-year-old daughter's favorite hair band around his wrist.

There are several children on board, and Grupo Beta, the government migrant rights group in Chiapas, estimates that

20 to 30 percent of migrants who board here are fifteen or younger. Enrique has encountered kids as young as nine. Some speak only with big brown eyes or a shy 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 nods understandingly as they speak. He confides in them, too. They share the burden of their loneliness. Although Enrique's efforts to survive often force thoughts of his mother out of his mind, at times he thinks of her with a longing 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."

Wheels rumble, screech, and clang. The train speeds up and slows down unpredictably, tossing the travelers backward and forward. Sometimes each car rocks the other way from the ones ahead and behind. Migrants call the train *El Gusano de Hierro,* The Iron Worm, for how it squirms up the tracks. 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 on the rails, making them slippery. When the cars round a bend, they feel as if they might overturn. Derailments are common. The train Enrique is on runs only a few times a week, but it derails three times a month, on average—with seventeen accidents in a particularly bad month—by the count of Jorge Reinoso, the railroad's chief of operations in Chiapas. One year before, a hopper car

like Enrique's overturned with a load of sand, burying three migrants alive. In another spot, six hoppers tumbled over. The cars' rusty remains lie 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 to being afraid, but he is scared that his car might tip. He holds on with both hands.

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

Other migrants believe the train has a noble purpose. Sometimes the train tops are packed with migrants, all facing north, toward a new land. *El Tren Peregrino,* they call it. The Pilgrim's Train.

The train picks up speed. It passes a brown river that smells of sewage. A dark form emerges ahead. Migrants at the front of the train 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!" The train is hurtling toward a thick canopy of tree branches.

Enrique and the other 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 moment—and the branches will hurl them into the air.

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? A bad curve, a migrant disconnecting the brake line, or a conductor pulling off onto a siding to let another train pass can all cause a train to slow. If the train speeds up again, everyone climbs back up. The movement down and up the ladders looks almost choreographed.

Slowing down at Huixtla, with its red-and-yellow depot, can mean only one thing: La Arrocera is coming up. La Arrocera is the immigration checkpoint Enrique fears most. It is in an isolated agricultural area, with few houses or busy streets where migrants can hide. Usually half of those aboard a train here are caught by *migra* agents. Enrique decides he will jump off the train, run around the checkpoint, and catch up with the train so he can reboard it on the other side.

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

The train stops. Enrique lies flat, facedown, arms spread-eagle, hoping *la migra* won't see him. But several agents do. Sometimes Mexican immigration authorities put people on the train who pretend to be migrants. The imposters radio

ahead to tell agents where migrants are hidden and how many are on each train.

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 run alongside him on the ground, pelting him with rocks and sticks. Stones clang against the metal.

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

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

"*¡Bájate!* Get down!" they shout. They curse him.

"No! I'm not coming down!" he shouts back.

The agents summon reinforcements. One starts to climb, shimmying up the side of the boxcar.

Enrique flees from car to car, more than twenty cars 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 to stand on. He will have to jump off and go around the La Arrocera checkpoint on foot, alone. It may be suicidal, but he has no choice. More stones fly through the air. They miss him and bounce off the train with a *ping*. Enrique scurries down a ladder and sprints into the bushes.

As Enrique runs, he hears what he thinks are gunshots behind him. Mexican immigration agents are prohibited from carrying firearms. According to a retired agent, however, most ignore the rule and carry pistols anyway. Workers at a local

migrant shelter tell of migrants who have been hit by bullets. Others tell of torture. Enrique once met a man whose chest was scarred with cigarette burns. The man told him that a *migra* agent at La Arrocera branded him.

In the brush, though, Enrique worries less about agents than about what awaits him in the woods. Swarms of bandits, some carrying Uzis, some on drugs, patrol this three-mile dirt path he will have to use to go around La Arrocera. Whereas gangsters rule on the train tops, bandits stay in isolated areas like this. Human rights activists and some police agencies say these bandits commit some of the worst atrocities—rapes and torture. They split what they steal from their victims with the police, who allow them to operate freely.

Migrants hide their money in case they are caught by robbers. Some stitch it into the seams of their pants. Others put a bit in their shoes, a bit in their shirts, or a few coins in their mouths. Still others tuck money into their underwear. 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 hiding it. He knows bandits catch on to these hiding places, anyway: they split open waistbands, collars, and cuffs looking for money. Local residents see groups of migrants walking down dirt roads naked, stripped of everything, just as Enrique had been, back in Las Anonas.

Migrants who fight back are beaten—or worse. The bandits warn: If you say anything to the authorities, we will find you and kill you.

The police force itself is involved in crime and cannot be relied on for help. Many of the bandits are current or former police officers, says Grupo Beta Sur supervisor Mario Campos Gutiérrez. If these bandits are arrested, they pay bribes to police headquarters and are quickly released without any consequences. Witness statements against them mysteriously "disappear."

For migrants, going to police authorities would be dangerous anyway because they could be deported. Because migrants are on the run, they cannot wait around for months until a trial to testify against the bandits. This makes them ideal victims for robbers to attack.

Migrants have asked members of Grupo Beta Sur why the authorities don't clamp down on the gangsters. Grupo Beta Sur agents told them they needed witnesses. They urged the migrants to step forward and report abuses. One teenager who did was brutally beaten by Mara Salvatrucha gangsters later that day.

And 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 a local elderly man, who is afraid to give his full 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 likely to

be armed. They prefer to attack someone who can't shoot back. 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, Enrique 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 waiting for days in the bushes and tall grass until another one comes.

Enrique races so fast he feels the blood pounding at his temples. Long, wet grass coils around his feet. He stumbles but never stops running.

Enrique crawls under a barbed-wire fence, then under a double strand of smooth wire. It is electrified. At night, locals who live along the train tracks hear the piercing screams of migrants who have been electrocuted by this wire. "Help me! Help me!" they wail. These locals have also found train riders who have lost arms, legs, or heads along the tracks, migrants who were injured as they tried to outrun the agents and get onto and off of moving trains.

He reaches the Cuil bridge, which spans a stream of murky brown water. The bridge, migrants and Grupo Beta Sur officers say, is the most dangerous spot. Bandits hide in trees, waiting to pounce on migrants. They use children as lookouts; in exchange for a coin or a piece of candy, the children race ahead on their bicycles to tell the bandits when migrants are drawing near. As migrants near the bridge, the bandits drop down and surround them. Other robbers hide along the tracks on the bridge and below it—an area thick with bushes

and vines. One bandit fishes in the river or cuts grass with a machete, like a fieldworker, and whistles to the others to set a trap.

Enrique dashes across the bridge and keeps his pace. If there are bandits in the distance, he does not notice them. Mountains stand to his right. The ground is so wet that farmers grow rice between their rows of corn. He can feel 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 that he never stopped running; maybe it was his decision to hide atop the boxcar instead of jumping off immediately, which meant that bandits targeted migrants ahead of him.

He is desperate for water. He spots a house.

The people inside are not likely to give him any. The people of Chiapas are fed up with Central American migrants. Central Americans are poorer than Mexicans, and here they are seen as backward and ignorant. People think they bring disease, prostitution, and crime and take away jobs. They tell of a man from Chiapas who sold chickens in a market and was kind to outsiders. He gave three Salvadorans a place to sleep, and work slaughtering and plucking birds. The Salvadorans robbed and killed him.

Migrants like Enrique are called "stinking undocumented." They are cursed, taunted. Dogs are set upon them. Barefoot children throw rocks at them. Some use slingshots and shout, "Go to work!" and "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." They press the door closed in his face.

Many La Arrocera residents lock themselves inside their homes when they hear the train coming. 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. 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.

Enrique 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. 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.

WAITING IN HONDURAS

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

A couple of weeks after he disappears, María Isabel realizes 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?

Tearfully, she prays he will be caught and deported back to Honduras, back by her side.

She doesn't feel well and loses weight. She quits night school. What if she *is* pregnant and Enrique dies trying to make it to his mother? Then she will be alone, raising their child.

She makes a plan to follow Enrique north, to find him in Mexico or in the United States. But she has no money. She fears being assaulted or raped. Her family scolds her. "Are you crazy? You want to die along the way?" If you are pregnant, they tell her, you could lose the child on the road.

María Isabel listens in silence. She knows they are right. All she can do now is wait.

HEAT WAVES

The Iron Worm squeaks, groans, and clanks its way north. Enrique eyes the scenery over the edge of the hopper car he is riding. 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. The sun reflects off the metal of the train, stinging Enrique's eyes, draining the little energy he has left. His head still throbs. His skin tingles as he breaks into a full-bodied sweat. He moves around on the car, chasing patches of shade. 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 of the migrants aboard 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 palms burn when he holds on to the hopper. He risks riding no-hands. He cannot let himself fall asleep; one

good shake of the train and he would tumble off. Other migrants have taught him tricks on how to stay awake.

Slap your own face, they say, do squats, pour drops of alcohol into your eyes, sing—do anything to keep yourself from getting tired. At four a.m. the train sounds like a chorus.

Mara Salvatrucha street gangsters always prowl the train tops in Chiapas, in groups of ten or twenty, looking for sleepers. Many gangsters settle in Chiapas after committing crimes in the United States and being deported to their home countries in Central America. Gangsters say the police target and kill them in Central America, so they've settled in Mexico and made a good business robbing migrants on top of the trains. Before a train leaves, they try to figure out which migrants are the best targets, which ones have money or food, and which ones are weakest. They try to get friendly with the migrants, telling them they have already done the train ride. Maybe they can offer tips? Enrique knows to watch for anyone with tattoos, especially gangsters who have skulls inked around their ankles—one skull, some say, for every person they have killed. Some wear black knit hats they can pull down over their faces.

Their brutality is legendary. Often they are high on marijuana or crack cocaine. Drugs embolden them. They are armed with machetes, knives, bats, and pistols. When the train gains speed, they surround a group of migrants. They tell them: Hand over your money or die. 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 moving trains or left dead on top of the cars, to be discovered by train workers at the next stop.

Enrique has heard of the two most dangerous gangsters: El Indio, who claims the Guatemalan side of the Mexican border, and Blackie, a chubby Salvadoran with dark skin and MS tattooed on his forehead, whose territory stretches from the border to Arriaga in northern Chiapas.

During one of his first attempts to go 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, he and El Brujo became friends. On their first train ride through Chiapas, El Brujo introduced Enrique to other teenage MS members. There was Big Daddy, a skinny and short teenager, and El Payaso, the Clown, who had a big mouth and eyes. Sticking with these gang members protected him from attacks along the way.

On his seventh trip, the convenient relationship ended. One of the MS gangsters is upset because a member of the rival gang, an 18th Streeter, has stolen his shirt. He decides to throw the 18th Streeter off the train. Enrique refuses to participate, creating a rift.

"If you are MS, you have to kill Eighteenth Streeters. And if you are Eighteenth Street, you must kill MS. I wasn't like that," Enrique says.

After the fight, the gang members stop riding with Enrique.

That night, without their protection, he is beaten by the six men on top of the train.

Now that he is riding alone, he must stay extra alert. He is terrified of another beating. Every time someone new jumps onto his car, he tenses. Fear, he realizes, is a tool he can use to keep himself awake. He climbs on 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 another. Some cars 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. This is where police stage their biggest shakedowns. But it is past midnight now, and the judicial police are probably asleep.

Mario Campos Gutiérrez, the Grupo Beta Sur supervisor, estimates that half of those who try to migrate north eventually get here—after repeated attempts. Migrants know getting

this far means conquering the toughest part of the journey. As one migrant put it, "When I get to this point, I begin to sing hallelujah."

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.

He puts Chiapas behind him. He still has far to go, but he has faced this beast of a state 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. As Enrique slowly recovers from his beating, he hears horror stories from other migrants of riders who are mutilated by the train itself.

The Red Cross estimates that every other day in Chiapas alone, a migrant riding the freight trains loses an arm, leg, hand, or foot. This estimate does not include people who die instantly. One police chief keeps snapshots of the dead in a black book. He keeps the book handy, hoping someone will identify the bodies. No one ever comes to look.

A young Honduran seventeen-year-old, Carlos Roberto Díaz Osorto, lies in bed number 1 of the trauma unit at Hospital Civil 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.

Carlos had almost crossed Chiapas. Racing alongside a train, he asked himself: Should I get on or not? His cousins, who were running with him, 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. 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. A doctor cut his bones, then sealed each artery and vein. He stretched skin over the openings and stitched 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 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 down to her hips, and a simple white rosary strung around her neck. She is always in motion, impatient to find solutions to problems. She nurses the migrants until they can be taken back home.

The injured migrants seethe with anger. They curse God. Why didn't he protect them? Their eyes speak fear. Who will ever marry them like this? How will they ever work again? "Let me die," they say.

She perches on the edge of their hospital beds. She strokes their hair.

"God has a plan for you," she says. "You will learn to live—in a different way."

She tells them her story, how an intestinal disease contracted when she was seven, which went untreated because her family had no money for medicine, led to a life of being gravely ill. At times she was blind, mute. Once, she was in a coma for thirty-eight days. Once, she was down to sixty-six pounds, just skin and bones. Once, when she was working at a tortilla factory, a machine tore off two fingertips. She tells them she tried to slit her wrists. One day her doctor told her she had cancer, and only months to live. What would become of her two small children? She wasn't very religious, but she went to church that day, kneeled, and made a pact with God: Heal me and I will heal others.

She studied the Bible. It told her to help the weak, the hungry.

She began visiting patients at a local hospital. One year later, she saw a thirteen-year-old Salvadoran boy who had lost both legs boarding a train. She walked home in tears. How, she asked God, could you be so cruel? She taught herself, watching doctors, how to dress the migrants' wounds. She began taking migrants who had been kicked out of the hospital into her humble home. In 1999, she opened the four-bedroom migrant shelter in a little former tortilla factory someone lent her.

She confesses it has not been easy. She works for free, from dawn until late at night, seven days a week, to obtain money for food, units of blood, medicine, and prostheses. She raises money selling food in the streets and going from car to car, begging, with a picture of a mutilated migrant she's trying to help. People often tell her that she's crazy to help foreigners who could be robbers or murderers, and that she should help Mexicans instead.

Sometimes she loses her patience with God. She can't always quickly come up with the money to buy the blood or medicine migrants need to fight for their lives. What do you want me to do? she asks God angrily. Some migrants are too battered by the beast to save. A thirteen-year-old girl was raped by the side of the tracks and left with a broken neck and shattered hips. She could not move or talk. Olga 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. Otherwise, their bodies would be lowered, nameless, into common graves in Tapachula.

But most slowly recuperate under Olga's care. A young man who has lost both feet fears 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. "You are going to walk again," Olga says, vowing to get him prostheses.

A teenage girl, who lost her right foot, fears her husband will leave her. "Don't cry," Olga soothes her. "God wants people who are useful. You must keep going forward. You have your hands. You must go forward and trust in God."

Each night, when she hears the train whistle, she asks God to protect the migrants from the trains and the assaults.

OAXACA

Enrique reaches Oaxaca, the next state north from Chiapas. He is now 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 water 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 especially 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 hide in bushes on the grassy

slope by the tracks in case there is a *migra* raid. Two boys standing near Enrique are too frightened to go into town. They offer Enrique twenty pesos and ask him to buy food. If he will bring it back, they will share it with him.

Blending in is critical. If he doesn't look like a local, the police might search him and deport him. Enrique takes off his yellow shirt. It is stained and smelling of diesel smoke. Underneath he wears a white one, which he takes off and then puts back on over the dirty one.

Throughout his journey, he has tried 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 has been wearing and lays them on the riverbank to dry. Maybe he can pass for someone who lives here. He resolves not to panic if he sees a policeman, and to walk confidently, as if he knows where he is going.

He takes the pesos the two migrant boys have given him and walks down the main street, past a bar, a store, a bank, and a pharmacy. He buys enough food for the three of them and stashes it. Then he stops at a barbershop. His curly hair has grown 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 in a singsongy way, like a Oaxacan. He asks the barber 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. Up here, *pisto* doesn't mean money, it means alcohol. He is careful not to slip up.

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. He is underweight and his eyes are sunken in, with dark circles of exhaustion.

What Enrique sees angers him. It steels his determination to push northward.