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THE BOY LEFT BEHIND

The boy does not understand.

Lourdes understands, as only a mother can, the terror she is about to inflict. She knows the ache Enrique will feel, and finally, the emptiness.

She says nothing. She can't even look at him. Enrique has no hint of what she is going to do.

What will become of him? He loves her deeply, as only a son can. Already he will not let anyone else feed or bathe him. With Lourdes, he is openly affectionate. "*Dame pico, Mami.* Give me a kiss, Mom," he pleads, pursing his lips. With Lourdes, he is a chatterbox. "*Mira, Mami.* Look, Mommy," he says softly, asking her questions about everything he sees. Without her, he is so shy it is crushing.

Slowly she walks out onto the porch. Enrique clings to her

leg. Beside her, he is tiny. Lourdes loves him so much she cannot bring herself to say a word. She cannot carry his picture. It would melt her will. She cannot bear to hug him. He is five years old.

They live on the outskirts of Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. Lourdes, twenty-four, makes money going door to door, selling tortillas, used clothes, and plantains. Or she finds a spot where she can squat on a dusty sidewalk next to the downtown Pizza Hut and sells gum, crackers, and cigarettes out of a box. The street is Enrique's playground.

A good job is out of the question. Lourdes can barely afford food for Enrique and his sister, Belky, who is seven. She has never been able to buy them a toy or a birthday cake. Her husband is gone. She cannot afford uniforms or pencils. Enrique and Belky are not likely to finish grade school. Their future is bleak.

Lourdes can think of only one place that offers hope. As a seven-year-old child, she glimpsed this place on other people's television screens when she would deliver her mother's homemade tortillas to wealthy homes. On television, she saw New York City's spectacular skyline, Las Vegas's shimmering lights, Disneyland's magic castle. The flickering images were a far cry from Lourdes's childhood home: a two-room shack made of wooden slats, with a flimsy tin roof. The bathroom was a clump of bushes outside.

Lourdes has decided: She will leave. She will go to the United States, and make money and send it home. She will be gone for one year—less, with any luck—and come back to

Honduras, or she will bring her children north to be with her. It is for them she is leaving, she tells herself, but still she feels overpowered by guilt.

Lourdes will have to split up her children. None of her family members can afford to take them both on. Belky will be left with Lourdes's mother and sisters. Enrique will be left with his father, Luis, who has been separated from Lourdes for three years.

Lourdes kneels and kisses Belky, hugging her tightly. But she cannot face Enrique. He will remember only one thing that she says to him: "Don't forget to go to church this afternoon."

It is January 29, 1989. His mother steps off the porch.

She walks away.

"¿Dónde está mi mami?" Enrique cries over and over that night. "Where is my mom?"

His mother never returns to Central America. This decides Enrique's fate.

BEVERLY HILLS

Lourdes has paid a smuggler, or "coyote," as they are called, to help her cross Mexico on buses. She closes her eyes and imagines herself home at dusk, playing with Enrique and Belky under a eucalyptus tree in their front yard. Tears fall. She reminds herself that if she is weak, if she does not make it, her children will keep suffering.

Lourdes's smuggler sneaks her into the United States during one of the largest immigrant waves in the country's history.

She enters at night through a rat-infested sewage tunnel in Tijuana, Mexico, and makes her way to Los Angeles. There, in the downtown Greyhound bus terminal, the smuggler tells Lourdes to wait while he runs a quick errand. He'll be right back. She has paid him to take her all the way to Miami.

Three days pass. The smuggler does not return. Lourdes musses her filthy hair, trying to blend in with the homeless so she won't get singled out by police. She prays to God to put someone before her to show her the way. To whom can she reach out for help? Starved, she starts walking. East of downtown, she spots a small factory. On the loading dock, under a gray tin roof, women sort red and green tomatoes. Lourdes begs for work. As she puts tomatoes into boxes, she hallucinates that she is slicing open a juicy one and sprinkling it with salt.

Soon she finds a job as a nanny. She moves in with a Beverly Hills couple to take care of their three-year-old daughter. Their spacious home has carpet on the floors and mahogany panels on the walls. Her employers are kind. Maybe, Lourdes tells herself—if she stays long enough—they will help her become a legal resident.

Every morning when the couple leaves for work, the little girl cries for her mother. Lourdes feeds her breakfast and thinks of Enrique and Belky. She asks herself: Do my children cry like this? I'm giving this girl food instead of feeding my own children. The girl, so close to Enrique's age, is a constant reminder of him. Lourdes is filled with sadness. Many afternoons, she cannot contain her grief. She gives the girl a toy and dashes into the kitchen. There, out of sight, she lets

the tears flow. She cannot take being around other people's children when hers are so far away. She decides she must find another kind of job.

CONFUSION

It is two years since Lourdes has left. Enrique is seven.

Boxes arrive back home in Tegucigalpa. They are filled with clothes, shoes, toy cars, a RoboCop doll, a television. Lourdes doesn't write long letters; she is barely literate and this embarrasses her. She tells Enrique to behave and to study hard. She has hopes for him: graduation from high school, a career, maybe as an engineer. She pictures her son working in a crisp shirt and shiny shoes. She tells him she loves him.

Enrique clings to his daddy, Luis, who dotes on him. A bricklayer, Luis takes Enrique to work and lets him help mix mortar. He shares a bed with Enrique, and brings him apples and clothes. They live with Enrique's grandmother, María Marcos. Every month, Enrique misses his mother less, but he does not forget her. "When is she coming for me?" he asks. "She'll be home soon," his grandmother assures him. "Don't worry. She'll be back."

But his mother does not come. Enrique's shock turns to confusion and finally anger. Her disappearance is incomprehensible.

On Mother's Day, he makes a heart-shaped card at school and presses it into María's hand. "I love you very much, Grandma," he writes.

But she is not his mother.

Enrique looks across the rolling hills to his old neighborhood. Belky still lives there with Lourdes's family. Enrique lives six miles away. He misses his sister. He and Belky hardly ever see each other, but they recognize one another's pain.

For Belky, their mother's disappearance is just as painful. She lives with Aunt Rosa Amalia, Lourdes's sister.

"There are days," Belky tells Aunt Rosa Amalia, "when I wake up and feel so alone." Belky is moody. Sometimes she stops talking to everyone. When Belky's disposition turns dark, her grandmother warns the other children in the house, "*¡Pórtense bien porque la marea anda brava!* You better behave, because the seas are choppy!"

On Mother's Day, Belky cries quietly, alone in her room. She struggles through the celebrations at school. Then she scolds herself. She should thank her mother for leaving; without the money Lourdes sends for books and uniforms, Belky could not even attend school. She reminds herself of all the other things her mother ships south: Reebok tennis shoes, black sandals, the yellow bear and pink puppy stuffed toys on her bed. She finds comfort in a friend whose mother has also left for the States. She and her friend know a girl whose mother died of a heart attack. At least, they say, our moms are alive.

Aunt Rosa Amalia thinks the separation has caused Belky and Enrique deep emotional problems. To her, it seems that they each struggle with an unavoidable question: How can I be worth anything if my own mother left me?

GRANDMOTHER MARÍA

Enrique's father starts dating a new woman. To her, Enrique is just another mouth to feed, a waste of money. One morning, she spills hot cocoa on Enrique and scalds him. Luis throws her out.

But their separation is brief.

"Mom," Luis tells Grandmother María, "I can't think of anyone but that woman."

Enrique's father bathes, dresses, splashes on cologne, and follows his girlfriend. He plans to move in with her and leave Enrique with Grandmother María. Enrique tags along as Luis leaves. He begs his father to let him come along. But Luis refuses. He tells Enrique to go back home.

His father begins a new family. Enrique sees him rarely, usually by chance. In time, Enrique's love turns to hate. "He doesn't love us. He loves the children he has with his wife," he tells Belky. "I don't have a dad."

His father notices. "He looks at me as if he wasn't my son, as if he wants to strangle me," he tells Enrique's grandmother. Most of the blame, he decides, belongs to Enrique's mother. "She is the one who promised to come back."

Enrique and Grandmother María share a tiny shack, thirty feet square, in Carrizal, one of Tegucigalpa's poorest neighborhoods. Grandmother María built it herself with wooden slats. Enrique can see daylight through the cracks. The shack has four rooms, three without electricity. There is no running water. Gutters carry rain off the patched tin roof into two

barrels. A trickle of cloudy white sewage runs past the front gate. The bathroom is a concrete-lined hole outside. Beside it are buckets for bathing. Two or three times a week, Enrique lugs buckets filled with drinking water, one on each shoulder, from the bottom of the hill up to the house.

Grandmother María cooks plantains, spaghetti, and fresh eggs for dinner. Now and then, she kills a chicken and prepares it for Enrique. In return, when she is sick, Enrique rubs medicine on her back and brings water to her in bed.

Lourdes usually sends Enrique fifty dollars a month. In a good month, she sends up to a hundred, in a bad month, nothing. There is enough for food but not for school supplies and clothes, which are expensive in Honduras. There is never enough for a birthday present. But Grandmother María hugs him and wishes him a cheery *¡Feliz cumpleaños!*



Enrique loves to climb his grandmother's *guayaba* tree, but there is no more time for play. At age ten, Enrique is old enough to make money. "Your mom can't send enough," Grandmother María says, "so we both have to work."

On a well-worn rock nearby, Grandmother María washes used clothing she sells door to door.

After school, Enrique sells tamales and plastic bags of fruit juice from a bucket hung in the crook of his elbow. "*¡Tamarindo! ¡Piña!*" he shouts.

At a local service station, he jostles among mango and

avocado vendors to sell cups of diced fruit. He rides buses alone to an outdoor food market. There, he stuffs tiny bags with nutmeg, curry powder, and paprika to sell, then seals them with hot wax. "*¿Va a querer especias?*" he calls out. "Who wants spices?" He has no vendor's license, so he keeps moving, darting between carts piled with papayas in case the police are on the lookout.

Younger children, five and six years old, dot the curbs, thrusting fistfuls of tomatoes and chiles at shoppers. Others offer to carry purchases of fruits and vegetables from stall to stall in rustic wooden wheelbarrows in exchange for tips. "*¿Te ayudo? May I help you?*" they ask shoppers.

In between sales, some of the young market workers sniff glue.

Enrique longs to hear Lourdes's voice. His mother's cousin is the only family member who has a telephone he can use. Because Enrique lives across town, he is not often lucky enough to be at her house when his mother phones. She does not call often. One year, she does not call at all.

Better to send money, Lourdes replies, than burn it up on the phone bills. But there is another reason she hasn't called: Her surroundings in the United States are nothing like the images she saw on television in Honduras. She is ashamed to report how shabby her life is.

Lourdes sleeps on the floor in a bedroom she shares with three other women. Her boyfriend from Honduras, Santos, joins her. Santos works as a bricklayer. Living together is less expensive than paying rent on her own. With him here,

Lourdes figures she can save enough to bring her children within two years. If not, she will take whatever savings she has and return to Honduras to build a little house and corner grocery store.

Then Lourdes unintentionally gets pregnant. She struggles through the difficult pregnancy, working in a refrigerated fish-packing plant, weighing and packing salmon and catfish all day. Her water breaks at five one summer morning. Lourdes's temperature shoots up to 105 degrees. She is delirious.

"Bring my mother! Bring my mother!" she cries from her hospital bed.

She has trouble breathing. A nurse slips an oxygen mask over her face.

Lourdes gives birth to a girl, Diana.

Santos has never shown up at the hospital. He is not answering their house phone. He has gone to a bar to get drunk.

Alone, Lourdes leaves the hospital wearing nothing more than a blue paper robe. She doesn't even have underwear. She sits in her apartment kitchen and sobs, longing for her two children back home, her mother, her sister, anyone familiar. Her homesickness is unbearable.

Lourdes is let go from the fish-packing plant after she is injured on the job. Money is tight.

Santos drinks more and more. He doesn't help with the baby. Lately, when he drinks, he gets jealous and violent.

I will not put up with this, Lourdes tells herself. Their arguing gets worse.

Santos goes back to visit Honduras. He promises that in their home country he will invest the little they have saved.

Instead he spends it all on a long drinking binge with a fifteen-year-old girl on his arm. He never calls Lourdes again. Through friends, she hears that soon after returning to California he and other Latin American workers were caught during a raid by U.S. immigration enforcement agents. He has been deported back to Honduras but is determined to return to the United States. He never arrives. Not even his mother in Honduras knows what has happened to him. Eventually, Lourdes concludes that he has died in Mexico or drowned in the Rio Grande.

On her own, Lourdes cannot make car and apartment payments. Lourdes and Diana, who is now two years old, move into a one-car garage that has been converted into an "apartment." There is no kitchen. Mother and daughter share a mattress on the concrete floor. The roof leaks, the garage floods, and slugs inch up the side of the mattress and into bed. Lourdes can't always buy milk and diapers, or take Diana to the doctor when she gets sick. Sometimes they live on emergency welfare, by which the government pays for medical care and food for people who are destitute.

There are random shootings in their neighborhood. A small park near the garage is a gang hangout. When Lourdes returns home in the middle of the night, gangsters come up to her and ask for money. She hands over three dollars, or sometimes five, so they will leave her alone. What would happen to her children if she died?

Unemployed, unable to send money to her children in Honduras, Lourdes takes the one job available: work as a *fichera* at a Long Beach bar called El Mar Azul Bar #1. As a *fichera*, Lourdes must sit at the bar, chat with male customers, and encourage them to keep buying grossly overpriced drinks for her. Her first day is filled with shame. She imagines that her brothers are sitting at the bar, judging her. What if someone she knows walks into the bar and recognizes her, and word somehow gets back to her mother in Honduras? Lourdes sits in the darkest corner of the bar and begins to cry. What am I doing here? she asks herself. Is this going to be my life?

For nine months, she spends night after night patiently listening to drunken men talk about their problems, how they miss their wives and children left behind in Mexico.

Then a friend helps Lourdes get new work: cleaning offices and houses by day and ringing up gasoline and cigarette sales at a gas station at night. Lourdes drops her daughter Diana off at school at seven a.m., cleans all day, picks her up at five p.m., drops her at a babysitter's, then goes back to work until two a.m. After that she fetches Diana and collapses into bed. She has four hours to sleep.

Some of the people whose houses she cleans are kind. One woman in Redondo Beach always cooks Lourdes lunch and leaves it on the stove for her. Another woman offers, "Anything you want to eat, there is the fridge."

"God bless you," Lourdes says to each of them.

Other bosses seem to take pleasure in her humiliation. One wealthy woman demands that Lourdes scrub her living room

and kitchen floors on her knees instead of cleaning them with a mop. The cleaning liquids cause the skin to slough off Lourdes's knees, which sometimes bleed. The work also makes Lourdes's arthritis worse. She walks like an old lady some days.

The woman never even offers Lourdes a glass of water.

There are good months, though, when Lourdes can earn \$1,200 cleaning offices and homes. She takes extra jobs, one at a candy factory for \$2.25 an hour. Besides the cash for Enrique, every month she sends \$50 each to her mother and Belky.

Those are her happiest moments, when she can wire money. Her greatest dread is when there is no work and she can't. Then being in the United States, so far away from home, feels pointless.

To her children, the money Lourdes sends is no substitute for her presence. Belky is furious about the new baby, Diana. Their mother might lose interest in her and Enrique now that she has another child. And caring for Diana will cost money that Lourdes should be saving to reunite with them in Honduras.

For Enrique, each telephone call grows more strained. Their talk is clipped and anxious.

"When are you coming home?" Enrique asks. Lourdes avoids answering his question directly. Instead she promises they will be together again very soon.

Then, for the first time, something occurs to him: If she will not come home, maybe he can go to her. Neither he nor his mother realizes it yet, but this kernel of an idea will take

root. From now on, whenever Enrique speaks to her, he ends by saying, "I want to be with you."

"Come home," Lourdes's own mother begs her on the telephone. "It may only be beans, but you always have food here." Lourdes's pride forbids it. How can she justify leaving her children if she returns empty-handed?

She makes plans to become a resident of the United States and bring her children legally. She spends a total of \$3,850 on three immigration counselors who promise help. But the counselors never deliver. Some are just con artists who steal her money.

Lourdes scolds herself for not dating an American who asked her out long ago. She could have married him, gotten citizenship, maybe even had her children here by now. . . .

Lourdes seriously considers hiring a smuggler to bring the children but fears the danger. The "coyotes" are often alcoholics or drug addicts. She can't imagine leaving Enrique and Belky in the hands of a stranger. Her own smuggler abandoned her.

Lourdes is continually reminded of the risks. One of her best friends in Los Angeles paid for a smuggler to bring her sister from El Salvador. During her journey, the sister called to give regular updates on her progress through Mexico. Then the calls stopped.

Two months later, Lourdes's friend hears from a man who was among the group headed north. The boat to Mexico was overloaded. It tipped over. All but four drowned. Some bodies were swept out to sea. Others, including that of the missing

sister, were buried along the beach. When they unearth her body on a beach in Mexico, she is still wearing her high school graduation ring.

Another friend is panic-stricken when her three-year-old son is caught by Border Patrol agents as a smuggler tries to cross him into the United States. For a week, Lourdes's friend doesn't know what's become of her toddler.

For Lourdes, the disappearance of her ex-boyfriend, Santos, hits closest to home.

"Do I want to have them with me so badly," she asks herself of her children, "that I'm willing to risk their losing their lives?" Besides, she does not want Belky or Enrique to come to California. There are too many gangs, drugs, and crimes.

The danger aside, Lourdes does not have enough money for a smuggler. The cheapest "coyote" charges three thousand dollars per child. A top smuggler will bring a child by plane for ten thousand. She would have to save enough to bring both children at once. If not, the one left in Honduras will think she loves him or her less.

Enrique despairs. He will simply have to do it himself. He will go find her. He will sneak on top of trains, as he has heard so many people migrating to the United States do. "I want to come," he tells her.

"Don't even joke about it," she says. "It is too dangerous. Be patient."

2

REBELLION

Lourdes sells her belongings. In California there is such an abundance of immigrants that employers can pay poorly and treat them badly. Even with two jobs, she can't save.

She wants to start over again in America. She and Diana move to North Carolina. In North Carolina, Lourdes quickly lands a job as a waitress at a Mexican restaurant. She finds a room to rent in a trailer home for just \$150 a month—half her rent in California.

Here people are less hostile. She can leave her car, even her house, unlocked. And she meets a man. He is a house painter from Honduras, and they are moving in together. He, too, has two children in Honduras. He is kind and gentle, a quiet man with good manners. He is different from the fathers of her children. He eases her loneliness. He takes Lourdes and Diana

to the park on Sundays. For a while, when Lourdes works two restaurant jobs, he picks her up when her second shift ends, so they can share a few moments together. They call each other "honey." They fall in love.

Money from Lourdes helps Enrique, and he realizes it. Her gifts arrive steadily. She sends Enrique an orange polo shirt, a pair of blue pants, a radio cassette player. If she were here in Honduras with him, he knows where he would probably be: scavenging in the trash dump, on a hilltop across town. Lourdes knows it, too; as a girl, she herself had rooted around the dump, where scavengers, some as young as six or seven, stand in a stinking stew of oozing trash, a black cloud of buzzards circling above. She and the other scavengers would desperately sort through piles of filth just to find a piece of stale, moldy bread or some bits of plastic and tin that they could sell.

Enrique sees other children who must work hard jobs. A block from where Lourdes grew up, children gather barefoot atop a mound of sawdust left by a lumber mill. Their faces smeared with dirt, the children quickly scoop sawdust into rusty tin cans and dump it into big white plastic bags. They lug the bags half a mile up a hill. There they sell the sawdust to families, who use it to kindle fires, or to dry the wet mud around their houses. An eleven-year-old boy has been hauling sawdust for three years, three trips up the hill each day. The earnings buy clothes, shoes, and paper for school.

Lourdes is proud that her money pays Belky's tuition at a private high school and eventually a college, to study account-

ing. In a country where nearly half live on a dollar or less a day, kids from poor neighborhoods almost never go to college.

In one neighborhood near where Enrique's mother grew up, fifty-two children arrive at kindergarten each morning. Forty-four arrive barefoot. An aide reaches into a basket and places a pair of shoes into each one's hands. At four p.m., before they leave, the children must return the shoes to the basket. If they take the shoes home, their mothers will sell them for food.

At dinnertime the mothers count out three tortillas for each child. If there are no tortillas, they try to fill their children's bellies with a glass of water with a teaspoon of sugar mixed in.

Enrique knows that without money from the United States, he could be one of these children. Still, he feels he would rather be with his mother than get the money and the gifts she sends.

Lourdes wants to give her son and daughter some hope. "I'll be back next Christmas," she tells Enrique.

In his dreams of his mother coming home in December, she stands at the door with a box of Nike shoes for him. "Stay," he pleads. "Live with me." He promises when he grows a little older to help her work and make money.

Christmas arrives, and Enrique waits by the door. She does not come. Every year, she promises. Every year, he is disappointed, and his anger grows. "I need her. I miss her," he tells his sister. "I want to be with my mother. I see so many children with mothers. I want that."

When Lourdes tells him yet again that she will come home, he replies sarcastically. "*Va, pues.* Sure. Sure." Enrique senses

a truth: Very few mothers return. He tells her that he doesn't think she is ever coming back. To himself, he says: It's all one big lie.

His anger boils over. He refuses to make his Mother's Day card at school. He hits other kids and lifts girls' skirts. When a teacher tries to make him behave by smacking him with a large ruler, Enrique grabs the end of the ruler and refuses to let go, making the teacher cry.

He stands on top of the teacher's desk and bellows, "Who is Enrique?"

"You!" the class replies.

Three times, he is suspended. Twice, he repeats a grade. But he keeps his promise to study. Unlike half the children from his neighborhood, Enrique completes elementary school. There is a small graduation ceremony. A teacher hugs him and mutters, "Thank God, Enrique's out of here." He stands proud in a blue gown and mortarboard. But nobody from his mother's family comes to the graduation.

Enrique is small, just shy of five feet, even when he straightens up from a slight stoop. He has a big smile and perfect teeth.

He makes up for the vulnerability he feels inside, fueled in part by not having a parent to protect him, by putting on a tough image. He starts spending more time on the streets of Carrizal, which is quickly becoming one of Tegucigalpa's roughest neighborhoods. His grandmother tells him to come home early, but he plays soccer until midnight.

Now he is fourteen, a teenager. He refuses to sell spices

Marco three times in the chest and once in the leg. They shoot Victor in the face.

In nine years, Lourdes has saved seven hundred dollars toward bringing her children to the United States. Instead, she uses it to help pay for her brothers' funeral. Marco had visited her once, shortly after she arrived in California. She had not seen Victor since leaving Honduras.

Lourdes goes into a tailspin. She angrily swears off Honduras. How could she ever live in such a lawless place? People there are killed like dogs. The only way she'll go back now, she tells herself, is by force, if she is deported.

Soon after her brothers' deaths, the restaurant where Lourdes works is raided by immigration agents. Every worker there is caught up in the sweep. Lourdes is the only one spared. It is her day off.

ADRIFT AGAIN

Back in Honduras, within days of the two brothers' deaths, Uncle Marco's girlfriend sells Enrique's television, stereo, and Nintendo game—all gifts from Marco. Without telling him why, she says, "I don't want you here anymore." She puts his bed out on the street.

Enrique, now fifteen, gathers his clothing and goes to his maternal grandmother, Águeda Amalia Valladares. "Can I stay here?" he asks.

This had been his first home, the small stucco house where he, Belky, and Lourdes lived until Lourdes stepped off the

front porch. His second home was the wooden shack where he and his father lived with his father's mother, until his father found a new wife and left. His third home was the comfortable house where he lived with Uncle Marco.

Now he is back where he began. Seven people live here already: besides Grandmother Águeda, there are two aunts and four young cousins. They are poor. Nonetheless, Grandmother Águeda takes Enrique in.

The whole family is devastated by the murders of Uncle Marco and Uncle Victor. Enrique grows quiet, introverted. He does not return to school. He shares a bedroom with his aunt Mirian. One day she awakens at two a.m. Enrique is sobbing quietly in his bed, cradling a picture of Uncle Marco in his arms. His uncle loved him. Without that love, he is lost.

THE GIRL NEXT DOOR

At Uncle Marco and Uncle Victor's funeral, Enrique notices a shy girl with cascading curls of brown hair. She lives next door with her aunt. She has an inviting smile, a warm manner. At first, the girl, María Isabel, can't stand Enrique. She is seventeen, two years older than he is. He seems arrogant to her. Enrique persists. Hoping to start a conversation, he whistles softly as she walks by. She ignores him. The more she rejects him, the more he wants her. He loves her girlish giggle, how she cries easily. He hates it when she flirts with other boys. He saves up money and buys her roses, lotions, a teddy bear,

chocolates. He walks her home after school from night classes two blocks away. Slowly, María Isabel warms to him.

The third time Enrique asks if she will be his girlfriend, she finally says yes.

They understand each other, they connect. She, too, has shuffled from home to home throughout her childhood, and has been separated from her parents.

María Isabel grew up with her mother, Eva, in a borrowed hut on a Tegucigalpa mountainside. Like Enrique's mother, Eva had left an unfaithful husband. She struggled to keep the family fed.

Nine people slept in the hut. To fit, they slept head to foot.

Neighbors loved María Isabel, the sweet, loving girl who always smiled. She offered to help them with chores and cleaning. By the time she was ten, they could already see she was a hard worker and a fighter.

María Isabel says, "*Mira, yo por pereza no me muero del hambre. Look, I will never die from hunger or out of laziness.*"

María Isabel graduated from the sixth grade. Her mother proudly hung the girl's elementary school graduation diploma on the wall of the hut. She knew her daughter was a good student, but she could not afford to send her to junior high. Eva herself never went to school; she began selling bread from a basket perched on her head when she was twelve.

At sixteen, María Isabel moved across town with her aunt Gloria, who lived next door to Enrique's grandmother Águeda. Gloria's house is modest. But to María Isabel, Aunt

Gloria's two-bedroom home is wonderful. Besides, Gloria is more easygoing about letting María Isabel go out at night to an occasional dance or party, or to the annual county fair. Eva wouldn't hear of such a thing, fearful the neighbors would gossip about her daughter's morals.

A cousin promises to take María Isabel to a talk about birth control. Now that she is dating Enrique, María Isabel wants to prevent a pregnancy. Enrique desperately wants to get María Isabel pregnant. If they have a child together, he thinks, surely María Isabel won't abandon him.

EL INFIERNITO

Grandmother Águeda quickly sours on Enrique. She is furious when he comes home late, waking up the household.

Enrique has started hanging out in a neighborhood known as El Infiernito, Little Hell. Some homes there are teepees, stitched together from rags. It is controlled by the street gang Mara Salvatrucha, or MS. The Mara Salvatrucha gang members hold sway over the streets throughout much of Central America and Mexico. Here in El Infiernito, they carry *chimbass*, guns made from plumbing pipes, and they drink *charamila*, diluted rubbing alcohol. They rob bus passengers and assault churchgoers after Mass.

Enrique and his friend José del Carmen Bustamante, sixteen, venture into El Infiernito. They quickly buy marijuana, making sure to leave El Infiernito, which is dangerous. They sit outside a billiard hall listening to music drift through the

open doors. Lately the boys have been inhaling glue late into the night, getting high off of the fumes.

They talk about what it would be like to ride on top of trains to *el Norte*. In Enrique's marijuana haze, train riding sounds like an adventure. He doesn't even care if there are *migra* agents shooting overhead, and bandits waiting to rob him. He and José resolve to try it soon.

Enrique tries to hide his drug habit from his family and María Isabel.

One day, María Isabel turns a street corner and bumps into him. She is overwhelmed. He smells like an open can of paint.

"What's that?" she asks, reeling away from the fumes. "Are you on drugs?"

"No!" Enrique says.

One night, Aunt Mirian wakes up to the sound of rustling plastic and a strong chemical smell. Through the dimness, she sees Enrique in his bed, puffing on a bag. He is sniffing glue.

This is the last straw. The family kicks him out of the house to live in the little stone cooking shack just behind the house. His grandmother Águeda used to prepare food here, over an open fire. The walls and ceiling are still charred black. The single window has steel bars like a prison cell and there is no electricity.

Now, living alone, Enrique can do whatever he wants. If he is out all night, no one cares. But to him, getting kicked out of the house feels like another rejection.

María Isabel sees him change. Drugs make his mouth

sticky. He is always jumpy and nervous. His eyes grow red. Sometimes they are glassy, half closed. Other times he looks drunk. When he is high, he is quiet, sleepy, and distant. When he comes crashing down from his high, he becomes hysterical and short-tempered. Sometimes Enrique hallucinates that someone is chasing him. For two especially bad weeks, he doesn't recognize family members. His hands tremble. He coughs black phlegm.

His grandmother points to a neighbor with pale, scaly skin who has sniffed glue for a decade. The man can no longer stand up. "Look! That's how you're going to end up," Grandmother Águeda tells Enrique.

Drogo, one of his aunts calls him. Drug addict.

A TEST RUN

When Enrique turns sixteen, he and José try train hopping for the first time.

To get to the United States, Enrique will have to travel north through Honduras, then Guatemala, and finally Mexico. Enrique and José slip past guards into Tapachula, Mexico's southernmost train depot. Just before they reach the train tracks, police stop them. Enrique prays he and José will not be deported back to Guatemala. Then they would have to sneak back over the Mexican border. The officers rob them but fortunately do not arrest them.

Enrique and José find another train. They clamber aboard as it crawls out of the Tapachula station. José is terrified. Enrique

is feeling brave; he jumps from car to car on the slow-moving train. He slips and falls—away from the tracks, luckily—and lands on his backpack, which is padded with a shirt and an extra pair of pants.

He scrambles aboard again. But their journey comes to a humiliating halt. Near Tierra Blanca, a town in the South Central Mexican state of Veracruz, authorities snatch them from the top of a freight car. This time the officers don't care about bribes. They take the boys to a cell filled with Mara Salvatrucha gangsters, then deport them. Enrique is bruised and limping from his fall, and he misses María Isabel.

He and José ride back to Central America in what migrants call *El Bus de Lágrimas*, the Bus of Tears. The bus unloads migrants back across the Río Suchiate in the rugged town of El Carmen. The river marks the border between Guatemala and Mexico, just as the Rio Grande defines the border between Mexico and the United States up north. These buses make as many as eight runs a day, deporting more than a hundred thousand unhappy passengers every year.

A DECISION

It is January 2000. Enrique has sunk deeper into drugs. Enrique promises María Isabel he will quit. He is sick of feeling out of control. He owes money to drug dealers and lives in constant fear of their death threats. He is caught stealing Aunt Rosa Amalia's jewelry. He was going to sell it to pay his dealer back.

Aunt Rosa Amalia is furious. Her husband, Enrique's uncle Carlos, recognizes that the boy is troubled. He doesn't want Enrique in jail, he just wants him to shape up. Uncle Carlos finds Enrique a job at a tire store. He tells the family they must show Enrique love. They must be patient with him.

Quitting drugs is harder than Enrique expected, though. He slips back into old habits. He tries to cut back on drugs, but then he gives in to them. Every night, he comes home later. María Isabel begs him not to go up the hill where he sniffs glue, but he does anyway. He looks at himself in disgust. He is dressing like a slob—his life is unraveling.

Even Enrique's sister and grandmother have urged María Isabel to leave Enrique, to find someone better. "What do you see in him?" they ask her. "Don't you see he uses drugs?"

María Isabel tries to give him support. When they walk by his drug haunts, she holds his hand tighter, hoping it will help. "Why don't you leave your vices?" she asks. "It's hard," he answers quietly.

She loses herself in Enrique. She can't leave him, despite his deep flaws. He is macho and stubborn. When they fight, he gives her the silent treatment. He leaves it up to her to break the ice. More often than not, she gives in. He is her third boyfriend but her first love. Enrique also provides a refuge from her own problems. Her aunt Gloria's son is an alcoholic. He throws things. He steals things. Enrique is her escape from fights at home.

Enrique's shame eats at him. He feels guilt for what he has done to his family and what he is doing to María Isabel. He is

clear-headed enough to tell Belky that he knows what he has to do. He has to go find his mother. She is his salvation.

María Isabel pleads with him to stay. She might be pregnant. She tells Enrique she will move into the stone hut with him. She won't abandon him. But Enrique fears if he stays in Honduras right now, he will end up on the streets or dead. His own family is sick of him. They think he is sullyng the only thing the family owns: its good name.

His aunt Ana Lucía, Lourdes's sister, speaks bitter words.

"Where are you coming from, you old bum?" Aunt Ana Lucía asks as Enrique walks in the door. "Coming home for food, huh?"

"Be quiet!" he says. "I'm not asking anything of you."

"You're a lazy bum! A drug addict! No one wants you here," Aunt Ana Lucía yells. All the neighbors can hear. "This isn't your house. Go to your mother!"

Enrique pleads in a low voice with his aunt to be quiet. Finally he snaps. He kicks Aunt Ana Lucía twice, squarely in the buttocks. She shrieks.

His grandmother Águeda runs out of the house. She grabs a stick and threatens to club him if he touches Ana Lucía again.

"No one cares about me!" he screams, running away.

Now even his grandmother wishes he would go to the United States. He is hurting the family—and himself. She says, "He'll be better off there."

SAYING GOOD-BYE

Enrique decides he will make the journey to the United States by himself. There is no way he can scrape together five thousand dollars for a smuggler. He sells the few things he owns, his bed and the leather jacket Uncle Marco gave him, so he will have money for food along the way.

He crosses town to say good-bye to Grandmother María. Trudging up the hill to her house, he runs into his father.

"I'm leaving," Enrique says. "I'm going to make it to the United States." He asks Luis for some money.

Luis gives him enough change for a soda and wishes him luck. Enrique wasn't really expecting much more from his father.

"Grandma, I'm leaving," Enrique says when he arrives at his grandmother María's shack. "I'm going to find my mom."

Grandmother María pleads with him not to go, but he has made up his mind. She gives him a hundred lempiras, about seven dollars—all the money she has—and kisses his forehead.

"I'm leaving already, Sis," Enrique tells Belky the next morning.

Belky feels her stomach tighten. They have lived apart most of their lives, but he is the only one who understands her loneliness. Quietly, she fixes him a special meal: tortillas, a pork cutlet, rice, fried beans with a sprinkling of cheese. "Don't leave," she says, tears welling up in her eyes.

"I have to."

Every time Enrique has talked to his mother, she has warned

him not to come—it's too dangerous. But if somehow he gets to the U.S. border, he will call her. "If I call her from there," he says to his friend José, "how can she not accept me?"

He makes himself one promise: Only after a year of trying to get to his mother in the United States will he give up and go back.

Enrique, a kid with a boyish grin, fond of kites, spaghetti, soccer, and break dancing, who likes to play in the mud and watch Mickey Mouse cartoons with his four-year-old cousin, quietly packs up his belongings: corduroy pants, a T-shirt, a cap, gloves, a toothbrush, and toothpaste.

For a long moment he looks at a picture of his mother, but he does not take it. He might lose it. He writes her telephone number on a scrap of paper. Just in case, he also scrawls it in ink on the inside waistband of his pants. He has fifty-seven dollars in his pocket.

On March 2, 2000, he goes to 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.

PART II

THE JOURNEY