

## The Boy Left Behind

### I

The boy does not understand. His mother is not talking to him. She will not even look at him. Enrique has no hint of what she is going to do.

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

What will become of him? Already he will not let anyone else feed or bathe him. He loves her deeply, as only a son can. With Lourdes he is openly affectionate. Z With Lourdes, he is a chatterbox. "Mira, Mami." Look, Mom, 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 pant 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 resolve. She cannot hug him. He is 5 years old.

They live on the outskirts of Tegucigalpa, in Honduras. She can barely afford food for him and his sister, Belky, who is 7. She's never been able to buy them a toy or a cake. Lourdes, 24, scrubs other people's laundry in a muddy river. Z She fills a wooden box with gum and crackers and cigarettes, and she finds a spot where she can squat on a dusty sidewalk next to the downtown Pizza Hut and sell the items to passersby. The sidewalk is Enrique's playground.

They have a bleak future. He and Belky are not likely to finish grade school. Lourdes cannot afford uniforms or pencils. Her husband is gone. A good job is out of the question. 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 luck, or she will bring her children to be with her. It is for them she is leaving, she tells herself, but still, she feels guilty.

She kneels and kisses Belky and hugs her tightly. Then she turns to her own sister. If she watches over Belky, she will get a set of gold fingernails from El Norte.

But Lourdes 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 Jan. 29, 1989. His mother steps off the porch.

She walks away.

"¿Dónde está mi mamá?" Enrique cries, over and over. "Where is my mom?"

His mother never returns, and that decides Enrique's fate. As a teenager--indeed, still a child--he will set out for the U.S. on his own to search for her. Virtually unnoticed, he will become one of an estimated 48,000 children who enter the United States from Central America and Mexico each year, illegally and without either of their parents. Roughly two-thirds of them will make it past the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Many go north seeking work. Others flee abusive families. Most of the Central Americans go to reunite with a parent, say counselors at a detention center in Texas where the INS houses the largest number of the unaccompanied children it catches. Of those, the counselors say, 75% are looking for their mothers. Some children say they need to find out whether their mothers still love them. A priest at a Texas shelter says they often bring pictures of themselves in their mothers' arms.

The journey is hard for the Mexicans, but harder still for Enrique and the others from Central America. They must make an illegal and dangerous trek up the length of Mexico. Counselors and immigration lawyers say only half of them get help from smugglers. The rest travel alone. They are cold, hungry and helpless. They are hunted like animals by corrupt police, bandits, and gang members deported from the United States. A University of Houston study found that most are robbed, beaten or raped, usually several times. Some are killed.

They set out with little or no money. Thousands, shelter workers say, make their way through Mexico clinging to the sides and tops of freight trains. Since the 1990s, Mexico and the United States have tried to thwart them. To evade Mexican police and immigration authorities, the children jump on to and off the moving train cars. Sometimes they fall, and the wheels tear them apart. They navigate by word of mouth or by the arc of the sun. Often, they don't know where or when they'll get their next meal. Some go days without eating. If a train stops even briefly, they crouch by the tracks, cup their hands and steal sips of water from shiny puddles tainted with diesel fuel. At night, they huddle together on the train cars or next to the tracks. They sleep in trees, in tall grass or in beds made of leaves.

Some are *very* young. Mexican rail workers have encountered 7-year-olds on their way to find their mothers. A policeman discovered a 9-year-old boy near the downtown Los Angeles tracks. "I'm looking for my mother," he said. The youngster had left Puerto Cortes in Honduras three months before; he had been guided only by his cunning and the single thing he knew about her: where she lived. He had asked everyone: "How do I get to San Francisco?"

Typically, the children are teenagers. Some were babies when their mothers left; they know them only by pictures sent home. Others, a bit older, struggle to hold on to memories: One has slept in her mother's bed; another has smelled her perfume, put on her deodorant, her clothes. One is old enough to remember his mother's face; another her laugh, her favorite shade of lipstick, how her dress felt as she stood at the stove patting tortillas.

Many, including Enrique, begin to idealize their mothers. They remember how their mothers fed and bathed them; how they walked them to kindergarten. In their absence, these mothers become larger than life. Although in the US the women struggle to pay rent and eat, in the imaginations of their children back home they become deliverance itself, the answer to every problem. Finding them becomes the quest for the Holy Grail.

## Confusion

Enrique is bewildered. Who will take care of him now that his mother is gone? Enrique is entrusted to his father, Luis, from whom his mother has been separated for three years.

Enrique clings to his daddy, who dotes on him. A bricklayer, his father takes Enrique to work and lets him help mix mortar. They live with Enrique's grandmother. His father shares a bed with him and brings him apples and clothes. Every month, Enrique misses his mother less, but he does not forget her.

"When is she coming for me?" he asks.

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Lourdes and her smuggler cross Mexico on buses. Each afternoon, she closes her eyes. She imagines herself home at dusk, playing with Enrique under a eucalyptus tree in her mother's front yard. Enrique straddles a broom, pretending it's a donkey, trotting around the muddy yard. Each afternoon, she presses her eyes shut and tears fall. Each afternoon, she reminds herself that if she is weak, if she does not keep moving forward, her children will pay.

Lourdes crosses into the United States in one of the largest immigrant waves in the country's history. She enters at night through a rat-infested Tijuana sewage tunnel 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. The smuggler has been paid to take her all the way to Miami.

Three days pass. Lourdes musses her filthy hair, trying to blend in with the homeless and not get singled out by police. She prays to God to put someone before her to show her the way. Whom can she reach out to for help? Starved, she starts walking. East of downtown, Lourdes spots a small factory. On the loading dock, under a gray tin roof, women sort red and green tomatoes.

She begs for work. As she puts tomatoes into boxes, she hallucinates that she is slicing open a juicy one and sprinkling it with salt. The boss pays her \$ 14 for two hours' work.

Lourdes's brother has a friend in Los Angeles who helps Lourdes get a fake Social Security card and a job. 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. They pay her \$125 a week. She gets nights and weekends off. Maybe, Lourdes tells herself— if she stays long enough— they will help her become legal.

Every morning as the couple leave 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." To get the girl to eat, Lourdes pretends the spoon is an airplane. But each time the spoon lands in the girl's mouth, Lourdes is filled with sadness. In the afternoon, after the girl comes home from prekindergarten class, they thumb through picture-books and play. The girl, so close to Enrique's age, is a constant reminder of her son. Many afternoons, Lourdes cannot contain her grief. She gives the girl a toy and dashes into the kitchen. There, out of sight, tears flow. After seven months, she cannot take it. She quits and moves to a friend's place in Long Beach.

Boxes arrive in Tegucigalpa bearing clothes, shoes, toy cars, a Robocop doll, a television. Lourdes writes: Do they like the things she is sending? She tells Enrique to behave, to study hard. She has hopes for him: graduation from high school, a white-collar job, maybe as an engineer. "

She loves him.

Enrique asks about his mother. "She'll be home soon," his grandmother assures him. "Don't worry. She'll be back." But his mother does not come. Her disappearance is incomprehensible. Enrique's bewilderment turns to confusion and then to adolescent anger.

When Enrique is seven, his father brings a woman home. To her, Enrique is an economic burden. One morning, she spills hot cocoa and burns him. His father throws her out. But their separation is brief. "Mom," Enrique's father tells the grandmother, "I can't think of anyone but that woman." Enrique's father bathes, dresses, splashes on cologne, and follows her. Enrique tags along and begs to stay with him. But his father tells him to go back to his grandmother.

His father begins a new family. Enrique sees him rarely, usually by chance. In time, Enrique's love turns to contempt. "He doesn't love me. 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, his father decides, belongs to Enrique's mother. "She is the one who promised to come back."

Confused by his mother's absence, Enrique turns to his grandmother. Alone now, he and his father's elderly mother share a shack 30 feet square. Maria Marcos built it herself of wooden slats.

Enrique can see daylight in the cracks. It 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. On a well-worn rock nearby, Enrique's grandmother washes musty used clothing she sells door to door. Next to the rock is the latrine--a concrete hole. Beside it are buckets for bathing.

The shack is in Carrizal, one of Tegucigalpa's poorest neighborhoods. Sometimes Enrique looks across the rolling hills to the neighborhood where he and his mother had lived and where Belky still lives with their mother's family. They are six miles apart. They hardly ever visit.

Lourdes sends Enrique \$50 a month, occasionally \$100, sometimes nothing. It is enough for food, but not for school clothes, fees, notebooks or pencils, which are expensive in Honduras. There is never enough for a birthday present. But Grandmother Maria hugs him and wishes him a cheery "¡Feliz cumpleaños!"

"Your mom can't send enough," she says, "so we both have to work."

After he turns 10, he rides buses alone to an outdoor food market. He stuffs tiny bags with nutmeg, curry powder and paprika, then seals them with hot wax. He pauses at big black gates in front of the market and calls out, "¿Va a querer especias? Who wants spices?" He has no vendor's license, so he keeps moving, darting between wooden carts piled with papayas.

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

Every year on Mother's Day, he makes a heart-shaped card at school and presses it into her hand.

"I love you very much, Grandma," he writes.

But she is not his mother. Enrique longs to hear Lourdes' voice. Once he tries to call her collect from a public telephone in his neighborhood. He can't get the call to go through. His only way of talking to her is at the home of his mother's cousin María Edelmira Sánchez Mejía, one of the few family members who has a telephone. His mother seldom calls. One year she does not call at all.

"I thought you had died, girl!" Maria Edelmira says when she finally does call..

"Better to send money," Lourdes replies, "than burn it up on the phone."

But there is another reason she hasn't called: her life in the United States is nothing like the television images she saw in Honduras. Lourdes shares an apartment bedroom with three other women. She sleeps on the floor.

For Enrique, each telephone call grows more strained. Because he lives across town, he is not often lucky enough to be at Maria Edelmira's house when his mother phones. When he is, their talk is clipped and anxious.

Quietly, however, one of these conversations plants the seed of an idea. Unwittingly, Lourdes sows it herself.

"When are you coming home?" Enrique asks.

She avoids an answer. Instead, she promises to send for him very soon.

It had never occurred to him: If she will not come home, then maybe he can go to her. Neither he nor his mother realizes it, 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."

"I'll be back next Christmas," she tells Enrique.

Enrique fantasizes about Lourdes's expected homecoming in December. In his mind, she arrives at the door with a box of Nike shoes for him. "Stay," he pleads. "Live with me. Work here. When I'm older, I can help you work and make money."

Christmas arrives, and he waits by the door. She does not come. Every year, she promises. Each year, he is disappointed. Confusion finally grows into anger. "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."

One day, he asks his grandmother, "How did my mom get to the United States?"

Years later, Enrique will remember his grandmother's reply--and how another seed was planted.

"Maybe," Maria said, "she went on the trains."

"What are the trains like?"

"They are very, very dangerous," his grandmother said. "Many people die on the trains."

When Enrique is 12, Lourdes tells him yet again that she will come home.

"Sí," he replies. "Va, pues. Sure. Sure."

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

Enrique decides: he will go to the United States by himself and find his mother.