

Part II: A Decision and a Journey

Enrique has made up his mind.

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

She feels her stomach tighten. Quietly she fixes a special meal: tortillas, a pork cutlet, rice, fried beans with a sprinkling of cheese.

"Don't leave," she says, tears welling in her eyes.

"I have to."

It is hard for him too. Every time he 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. Being so close, she'll have to welcome him. "If I call her from there," he says to Jose, "how can she not accept me?"

He makes himself one promise: "I'm going to reach the United States, even if it takes one year."

Quietly, Enrique, the slight 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 4-year-old cousin, 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 \$57 in his pocket.

On March 2, 2000, he goes to his Grandmother Agueda's house. He stands on the same porch that his mother disappeared from 11 years before.

He hugs Maria Isabel and Aunt Rosa Amalia. Then he steps off.

He is 17. It is March 24, 2000. Eleven years before, his mother had left home in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, to work in the United States. She did not come back, and now he is riding freight trains up through Mexico to find her.

Every year, experts say, an estimated 48,000 youngsters like Enrique from Central America and Mexico enter the United States illegally and without either of their parents. Many come looking

for their mothers. They travel any way they can, and thousands ride the tops and sides of freight trains.

They leap on and off rolling train cars. They forage for food and water. Bandits prey on them. So do street gangsters deported from Los Angeles, who have made the train tops their new turf. None of the youngsters have proper papers. Many are caught by the Mexican police or by la migra, the Mexican immigration authorities, who take them south to Guatemala.

Most try again. Like many others, Enrique has made several attempts. 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. Trees hide the moon, and Enrique does not see two men who are behind the stranger, or three more creeping up the other side of the car. Scores of migrants cling to the train, but no one is within shouting distance.

One of the men reaches a grate where Enrique is sitting. He grabs Enrique with both hands. Someone seizes him from behind. They slam him face down. All six surround him.

"Take off everything," one says.

Another swings a wooden club. It cracks into the back of Enrique's head. Hurry, somebody demands. The club smacks his face. Enrique feels someone yank off his shoes. Hands paw through his pants pockets. One of the men pulls out a small scrap of paper. It has his mother's telephone number. Without it, he has no way to locate her. The man tosses the paper into the air. Enrique sees it flutter away.

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

"Don't kill me," Enrique pleads.

His cap flies away. Someone rips off his shirt. Another blow finds the left side of his face. It shatters three teeth. They rattle like broken glass in his mouth.

One of the men stands over Enrique, straddling him. He wraps the sleeve of a jacket around Enrique's neck and starts to twist. Enrique wheezes, coughs and gasps for air. His hands move feverishly from his neck to his face as he tries to breathe and buffer the blows.

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

Enrique thinks of his mother. He will be buried in an unmarked grave, and she will never know what happened.

"Please," he asks God, "don't let me die without seeing her again."

The man with the jacket slips. The noose loosens.

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

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

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

He hits dirt by the tracks and crumples to the ground. He crawls 30 feet. His knees throb. Finally, he collapses under a small mango tree.

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

He sleeps maybe 12 hours, then he finds himself stirring and trying to sit. His mind wanders to his mother, then his family. "How will they know where I have died?" He falls back to sleep, then wakes again. Slowly, barefoot and with swollen knees, he hobbles north along the rails. He grows dizzy and confused. After what seems to be several hours, he is back again where he began, at the mango tree.

He sleeps again. At dawn, he goes, hoping to catch a train. As he walks, people stare at his injured face. Without a word, one man hands him 50 pesos. Another gives him 20. He limps on. He tells himself over and over that he'll just have to try again. He catches another train, and heads north.

The border between Honduras and Mexico looms ahead.

As Enrique enters Mexico's southernmost state of Chiapas, he knows why immigrants call it "the beast." Bandits, street gangs and police will be out to get him. Even tree branches scraping the boxcars may hurl him from the train. But he will take those risks. He needs to find his mother.

Enrique wades chest-deep across a river. He is 5 feet tall, stoop-shouldered and cannot swim. The logo on his cap boasts hollowly, "No Fear."

The river, the Rio Suchiate, forms the border. Behind him is Guatemala. Ahead is Mexico, with its southernmost state of Chiapas. "Ahora nos enfrentamos a la bestia," immigrants say when they enter Chiapas. "Now we face the beast."

Painfully, Enrique, 17, has learned a lot about "the beast." In Chiapas, bandits will be out to rob him, police will try to shake him down, and street gangs might kill him. But he will take those risks, because he needs to find his mother.

Enrique tells himself, "In Chiapas, do not take buses." They must pass through nine permanent immigration checkpoints. A freight train faces checkpoints as well, but Enrique can jump off as it brakes, and if he runs fast enough, he might sneak around and meet the train on the other side.

He makes it.

That night he sleeps in a cemetery.

This particular cemetery is a way station for immigrants. At sun rise on any given day, it seems as uninhabited as a country graveyard, with crosses and crypts painted periwinkle, neon green and purple. But then, at the first rumble of a departing train, it erupts with life. Dozens of migrants, children among them, emerge from the bushes, from behind the trees and from among the tombs.

They run on trails between the graves and dash headlong down the slope. A sewage canal, 20 feet wide, separates them from the rails. They jump across seven stones in the canal, from one to another, over a nauseating stream of black. They gather on the other side, shaking the water from their feet. Now they are only yards from the rail bed.

On this day, March 26, 2000, Enrique is among them. He sprints alongside rolling freight cars and focuses on his footing. The roadbed slants down at 45 degrees on both sides. It is scattered with rocks as big as his fist. He cannot maintain his balance and keep up, so he aims his tattered tennis shoes at the railroad ties. Spaced every few feet, the ties have been soaked with creosote, and they are slippery.

Here the locomotives accelerate. Sometimes they reach 25 mph. Enrique knows he must heave himself up onto a car before the train comes to a bridge just beyond the end of the cemetery. He has learned to make his move early, before the train gathers speed.

Most freight cars have two ladders on a side, each next to a set of wheels. Enrique always chooses a ladder at the front. If he misses and his feet land on the rails, he still has an instant to jerk them away before the back wheels arrive.

But if he runs too slowly, the ladder will yank him forward and send him sprawling. Then the front wheels, or the back ones, could take an arm, a leg, perhaps his life.

"Se lo comio el tren," other immigrants will say. "The train ate him up."

The lowest rung of the ladder is waist-high. When the train leans away, it is higher. If it banks a curve, the wheels kick up hot white sparks, burning Enrique's skin.

He has learned that if he considers all of this too long, then he falls behind--and the train passes him by.

This time, he trots alongside a gray hopper car. He grabs one of its ladders, summons all of his strength and pulls himself up. One foot finds the bottom rung. Then the other. 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. Some of the youngsters could not land their feet on the ladders and have pulled themselves up rung by rung on their knees, which are bruised and bloodied.

Suddenly, Enrique hears screams.

Three cars away, a boy, 12 or 13 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.

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

The boy dangles from the ladder. He struggles to keep his grip.

Carefully, the men crawl down and reach for him. Slowly, they lift him up. The rungs batter his legs, but he is alive. He still has his feet.

Getting Aboard, Enrique guesses there are more than 200 migrants on board, a tiny army of them who charged out of the cemetery with nothing but their cunning.

Arrayed against them are Mexican immigration authorities, or la migra, along with crooked police, street gangsters and bandits. They wage what a priest at an immigrant 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."

All of this is nothing, however, against Enrique's longing for his mother, who left him behind 11 years ago. Although his effort to survive often forces her out of his mind, at times he thinks of her with a loneliness 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."

The train rumbles on relentlessly, mile after mile, bound for El Norte.