

## **The Final Leg of the Journey**

### **To the Rio Grande – And the United States Border.**

Enrique and his friends have been hauled off the northbound train by the police. To their astonishment, the boys are treated kindly. After eating, they are freed by the police. The boys re-board the boxcar and prepare to ride to the next city, San Luis Poyosi. Sixty-four railroad security officers guard the station. They must be careful. At midmorning, Enrique sees two flashing red antennas. The boys jump off the train half a mile south of town.

Until now, Enrique has opted to keep moving. But here the countryside is too desolate to live off the land, and begging is too chancy. He needs to work if he is going to survive. Besides, he does not want to reach the border penniless. He has heard that U.S. ranchers shoot immigrants who come to beg.

He trudges up a hill to the small home of a brick maker. Politely, Enrique asks for food. The brick maker offers yet another kindness: If Enrique will work, he will get both food and a place to sleep. Happily, Enrique accepts.

Some migrants say Mexicans exploit illegals for a fraction of the going wage, which is 50 pesos, or about \$5, a day. But the brick maker does better than that: 80 pesos. And he gives Enrique shoes and clothing.

For a day and a half, Enrique works at the brickyard, one of 300 that straddle the tracks on the northern edge of San Luis Potosi. Workers pour clay, water and dried cow manure into large pits. They roll up their pants and stomp on the sloppy concoction, as if pressing grapes to make wine. When the slop becomes a firm brown paste, they slap it into wooden molds. Then they empty the molds on flat ground and let the bricks dry.

The bricks are stacked into pyramids inside ovens as big as rooms. Under the ovens, the fires are stoked with sawdust. Each batch of bricks bakes for 15 hours, sending clouds of black smoke into the sky. Enrique's job is to shovel the clay. At night, he sleeps in a shed on a dirt floor he shares with one of his friends from the train.

"I have to get to the border," Enrique tells him.

Should he take another train? Freight cars have brought him 990 miles from Tapachula near Guatemala. Is he pushing his luck?

His employer says he should ride a Volkswagen van called a combi through a checkpoint about 40 minutes north of town. The authorities won't stop a combi, the brick maker says. Then he should take a bus to Matehuala, and he might be able to get a ride on a truck all the way to Nuevo Laredo on the Rio Grande.

Enrique collects his pay, 120 pesos. He spends a few on a toothbrush.

He hails a combi. It breezes through the checkpoint. He pays 83 pesos to board a bus to Matehuala. Outside the bus station, he sees a kindly looking man.

"Can you help me?" Enrique asks.

The man gives him a place to sleep. The next morning, Enrique walks to a truck stop.

"I don't have any money," he tells every driver he sees. "Can you give me a ride however far north you are going?"

One after another, they turn him down. If they said yes, police might accuse them of smuggling. Drivers say it is enough to worry about officers planting drugs on their trucks and demanding bribes. Moreover, some of the truckers fear that immigrants might assault them.

Finally, at 10 a.m., one driver takes the risk.

Enrique pulls himself up into the cab of an 18-wheeler hauling beer.

"Where are you from?" the driver asks.

Honduras.

"Where are you going?" The driver has seen boys like Enrique before. "Do you have a mom or dad in the United States?"

Enrique tells him about his mother.

A sign at Los Pocitos says, "Checkpoint in 100 Meters." The truck idles in line. Then it inches forward. Judicial police officers ask the driver what he is carrying. They want his papers. They peer at Enrique.

The driver is ready: My assistant.

But the officers do not ask.

A few feet farther on, soldiers stop each vehicle to search for drugs and guns. Two fresh-faced recruits wave them through.

Men rest under cardboard

A group of Central American men rest on and under cardboard next to the Rio Grande on the Nuevo Laredo side. The encampment is similar to the one Enrique found after he arrived in the Mexican city. He decided to stay in the camp while he planned his crossing.

Oblivious to chatter on the trucker's two-way radio, Enrique falls asleep. The driver clears two more checkpoints. As he nears the Rio Grande, he stops to eat. He buys Enrique a plate of eggs and refried beans and a soda, another gift.

Riding a truck, Enrique figures, is a dream.

Sixteen miles before the border, he sees a sign: "Reduce Your Speed. Nuevo Laredo Customs."

Don't worry, the driver says, la migra check only the buses.

A sign says, "Bienvenidos a Nuevo Laredo." Welcome to Nuevo Laredo.

The driver drops him off. With 30 pesos he has left, he takes a bus that winds into the city.

He has one more piece of good fortune. At the Plaza Hidalgo, in the heart of Nuevo Laredo, Enrique sees a man from Honduras whom he has met on a train. The man takes him to an encampment along the Rio Grande. Enrique likes it. He decides to stay until he can cross.

That night, as the sun sets, Enrique stares across the Rio Grande and gazes at the United States. It looms as a mystery.

Somewhere over there lives his mother. She has become a mystery too. He was so young when she left that he can barely remember what she looks like: curly hair; eyes like chocolate. Her voice is a distant sound on the phone.

Enrique has spent 47 days bent on nothing but surviving. Now, as he thinks about her, he is overwhelmed.

The Rio Grande looms ahead. This milky green river stands between him and his dream. Enrique is stuck on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande, watching, listening and planning. Somewhere on the other side, in the United States, is his mother.

You are in American territory," a Border Patrol agent shouts into a bullhorn. "Turn back."

Sometimes Enrique strips and wades into the Rio Grande to cool off. But the bullhorn always stops him. He goes back.

"Thank you for returning to your country."

He is stymied. For days, Enrique, 17, has been stuck in Nuevo Laredo, on the southern bank of the Rio Bravo, as it is called here. He has been watching, listening and trying to plan. Somewhere across this milky green ribbon of water is his mother.