

At the Rio Grande River

Enrique has no money as he stands at the border camp. But he sees a man from Honduras whom he met on the 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 forty-seven days bent on nothing but surviving. Now, as he thinks about her, he is overwhelmed.

At 1 A.M. on May 21, 2000, Enrique waits on the edge of the water. “If you get caught, I don’t know you,” says El Tiríndaro, the smuggler. He is stern.

Enrique nods. So do two other migrants, a Mexican brother and sister, waiting with him. They strip to their underwear. Enrique has seen smugglers ask migrants to grab hold of a long rope to cross the river. Others lock arms and form a human chain. El Tiríndaro’s strategy is more risky. He uses a black inner tube, which is bulky and easy for Border Patrol agents to spot.

Across the Rio Grande stands a fifty-foot pole equipped with U.S. Border Patrol cameras. In daylight, Enrique has counted four sport-utility vehicles near the pole, each with agents. Now, in the darkness, he cannot see any. He leaves it up to El Tiríndaro, who has spent hours at this spot studying everything that moves on the other side.

Enrique tears up a small piece of paper and scatters it on the riverbank. It is his mother’s phone number. He has memorized it. Now the agents cannot use it to locate and deport her. In all, Enrique has spent four months trying to find her.

El Tiríndaro holds an inner tube. The Mexicans climb on. He paddles them to an island in midstream. He returns for Enrique with the tube. He steadies it in the water. Carefully, Enrique climbs aboard. Up to three migrants have drowned in a single day along this stretch of river. The Río Bravo, as it is called here, is swollen with rain, a torrent of water coursing toward the Gulf of Mexico. Two nights ago, it killed a youngster he knew, a tall, skinny migrant with a cleft upper lip. A whirlpool pulled him under. The year is not yet half over. Already, fifty-four people have been pulled, lifeless, from the river at or near Nuevo Laredo. Enrique cannot swim, and he is afraid.

El Tiríndaro places a plastic garbage bag on Enrique’s lap. It contains dry clothing for the four of them. Then El Tiríndaro paddles and starts to push. A swift current grabs the tube and sweeps it

into the river. Wind whips off Enrique's cap. Drizzle coats his face. He dips in a hand. The water is cold. He scans the murky water for the greensnakes that sometimes skim across the waves. All at once, he sees a flash of white — one of the SUVs, probably with a dog in back, inching along a trail above the river. Silence. No bullhorn barks, "Turn back."

The inner tube lurches, sloshes, and bounces along. Enrique grips the valve stem. The sky is overcast, and the river is dark. In the distance, bits of light dance on the surface. At last, he sees the island, overgrown with willows and reeds. He seizes the limb of a willow. It tears off. With both hands, he lays hold of a larger branch, and the inner tube swings onto the silt and grass. They have crossed the southern channel.

On the other side of the island flows the northern channel, even more frightening because it is closer to the United States. El Tiríndaro circles the island on foot and looks across the water. The white SUV reappears, less than a hundred yards away. It is moving slowly along the dirt trail, high on the riverbank. Its roof lights flash red and blue on the water, creating a psychedelic sheen. Agents turn to aim a spotlight straight at the island. Enrique and the Mexicans dive to the ground face-first. If the agents spot them and lie in wait, it could spell doom for Enrique. He is closer to his mother than ever. Authorities can deport the Mexicans back across the river, but they can send *him* all the way to Honduras. Worse, he could sit in a Texas jail cell for months before the United States processed the paperwork to deport him, most likely the juvenile prison in Liberty, Texas, forty-six miles northeast of Houston, where many minors who are captured in Texas trying to enter the United States alone and illegally are sent to await deportation.

Immigrant children arrive at the jail shackled. They are strip-searched and asked to "squat and cough"— an exercise to determine if they are harboring any contraband items in certain cavities of their bodies. They file through eight locked metal doors to arrive at the E pod, where immigrant children as young as twelve are held. They are housed, at times, in the same pod with accused rapists and other felons. Children in the E pod spend most of their time inside windowless cells that measure seven and a half by ten feet. Migrant children say the jail, operated by Corrections Corporation of America, doesn't feed them enough . Without cash to buy from the jail's commissary, they go hungry and lose weight. They see sunlight one hour a day , when they are allowed into an outdoor area surrounded by a fence topped with concertina wire. They have little information about when they might be brought before an immigration judge or deported. The guards know little, and most do not speak Spanish.

Locked up day after day, month after month, the children grow desperate. They run circles around their tiny cells. They read the instructions on the shampoo label over and over. Some become fearful they will go crazy in the jail. They begin to talk to themselves. One boy gets so depressed he stops eating for days and bangs his knuckles against the concrete wall until they are raw. A few of the children become suicidal and try to hang themselves.

If he was lucky, Enrique would spend no more than two or three months locked up before being sent back to Honduras. It would mean starting out for the ninth time.

For half an hour on the river's island, everyone lies stone still. Crickets sing, and water rushes around the rocks. Finally, the agents seem to give up. El Tiríndaro waits and watches. He makes certain, then returns. Enrique whispers: Take the others first. El Tiríndaro loads the Mexicans onto the tube. Their weight sinks it almost out of sight. Slowly, they lumber across the water.

Minutes later, El Tiríndaro returns. "Get over here," he says to Enrique. "Climb up." He has other instructions: Don't rustle the garbage bag holding the clothes. Don't step on twigs. Don't paddle; it makes noise."

El Tiríndaro slips into the water behind the tube and kicks his legs beneath the surface. It takes only a minute or two. He and Enrique reach a spot where the river slows, and Enrique grabs another branch. They pull ashore and touch soft, slippery mud. In his underwear, Enrique stands for the first time on U.S. soil.

NEARLY FROZEN

As El Tiríndaro hides the inner tube, he spots the Border Patrol. He and the three migrants hurry along the edge of the Rio Grande to a tributary called Zacate Creek. "Get in," El Tiríndaro says.

Enrique walks into the creek. It is cold. He bends his knees and lowers himself to his chin. His broken teeth chatter so hard they hurt; he cups a hand over his mouth, trying to stop them. For an hour and a half, they stand in Zacate Creek in silence. Effluent spills into the water from a three-foot-wide pipe close by. It is connected to a sewage treatment plant on the edge of Laredo, Texas. Enrique can smell it. El Tiríndaro walks ahead, scouting as he goes. At his command, Enrique and the others climb out of the water. Enrique is numb. He falls to the ground, nearly frozen.

"Dress quickly," El Tiríndaro says.

Enrique steps out of his wet undershorts and tosses them away. They are his last possession from home. He puts on dry jeans, a dry shirt, and his two left shoes. El Tiríndaro offers everyone a piece of bread and a soda. The others, hidden in a thicket of bushes, eat and drink. Enrique is too nervous. Being on the outskirts of Laredo means they are near homes. If dogs bark, the Border Patrol will suspect intruders.

"This is the hard part," El Tiríndaro says. He runs.

Enrique races behind him. The Mexicans follow, up a steep embankment, along a well-worn dirt path, past mesquite bushes and behind some tamarind trees, until they are next to a large, round, flat tank. It is part of the sewage plant. Beyond is an open space. El Tiríndaro glances nervously to the right and left. Nothing.

“Follow me,” he says.

Now he runs faster. Numbness washes out of Enrique’s legs. It disappears in a wave of fear. They sprint next to a fence, then along a narrow path on a cliff above the creek. They dash down another embankment, into the dry upstream channel of Zacate Creek, under a pipe, then a pedestrian bridge, across the channel, up the opposite embankment, and out onto a two-lane residential street. Two cars pass. Winded, the four scuttle into bushes. Half a block ahead, a car flashes its headlights.

PUFFS OF CLOUDS

It is a red Chevrolet Blazer with tinted windows. “Let’s go,” El Tiríndaro says.

As they reach it, locks click open. Enrique and the others scramble inside. In front sit a Latino driver and a woman, part of El Tiríndaro’s smuggling network. Enrique has met them before, on the other side of the river. It is 4 A.M. Enrique is exhausted. He climbs onto pillows in back. They are like puffs of clouds, and he feels immense relief. He smiles and says to himself, “Now that I’m in this car, no one can get me out.”

The engine starts, and the driver passes back a pack of beer. He asks Enrique to put it into a cooler. The driver pops a top. For a moment, Enrique worries: What if the driver has too many?

The Blazer heads toward Dallas. Border Patrol agents pay attention to Blazers, other SUVs, and vans. Some smugglers favor windowless vans. They strip out the backseats and stack the migrants like cordwood, one on top of the other. Headlights tilted up mean there are people in the back, weighing down the vehicle, says Alexander D. Hernandez, a supervisor in Cotulla, Texas. Weaving means the load is heavy and causing sway. When the agents notice, they pull alongside and shine a flashlight into the eyes of the passengers. If the riders do not look over but seem frozen in their seats, they are likely to be illegal immigrants.

Enrique sleeps until El Tiríndaro shakes him. They are out of Laredo and half a mile south of a Border Patrol checkpoint.

“Get up!” El Tiríndaro says.

Enrique can tell he has been drinking. Five beers are gone. The Blazer stops. Enrique and the two Mexicans, with El Tiríndaro leading, climb a wire fence and walk east, away from the freeway. Then they turn north, parallel to it. Enrique can see the checkpoint at a distance. Every car must stop. “U.S. citizens?” agents ask. Often, they check for documents.

Enrique and his group walk ten minutes more, then turn west, back toward the freeway. They crouch next to a billboard. Overhead, the stars are receding, and he can see the first light of dawn. The Blazer pulls up. Enrique sinks back into the pillows. He thinks: I have crossed the last big

hurdle. Suddenly he is overwhelmed. Never has he felt so happy. He stares at the ceiling and drifts into a deep, blissful sleep.

Four hundred miles later, the Blazer pulls into a gas station on the outskirts of Dallas. Enrique awakens. El Tiríndaro is gone. He has left without saying good-bye. From conversations in Mexico, Enrique knows that El Tiríndaro gets \$ 100 a client. Enrique's mother, Lourdes, has promised \$ 1,200. The driver is the boss; he gets most of the money. The patero is on his way back to Mexico.

Along with fuel, the driver buys more beer, and the Blazer rolls into Dallas about noon. America looks beautiful. The buildings are huge. The freeways have traffic exchanges with double and triple decks. They are nothing like the dirt streets at home. Everything is clean.

The driver drops off the Mexicans and takes Enrique to a large house. Inside are bags of clothing, in various sizes and American styles, to outfit clients so they no longer stand out. They telephone his mother.

LOURDES

Lourdes, now thirty-five years old, has come to love North Carolina. People are polite. There are plenty of jobs for immigrants, and it seems to be safe. She can leave her car unlocked, as well as her house. Her daughter Diana quickly masters English, something she hadn't done surrounded by Spanish speakers in California.

Lourdes is always thinking about the two children she left in Honduras. When she walks by stores that sell things they might like, she thinks of Enrique and Belky. When she meets a child Enrique's age, she tells herself, " Así debe estar mi muchachito. My little boy must look this big now."

A small gray album holds treasures and painful memories: pictures of Belky, her daughter back home. At seven, Belky wears a white First Communion dress and long white gloves; at nine, a yellow cheerleader's skirt; at fifteen, for her quinceañera, a pink taffeta dress with lace sleeves and white satin shoes. Belky leans over a two-layer cake topped with white frosting and a pink angel. Lourdes spent \$ 700 to make the party special. She promised Belky she would try to make it back to Honduras for the big event somehow. "I wanted to go. I wanted to go..." Lourdes says. At eighteen, Belky wears a blue gown and mortarboard for her high school graduation.

There are pictures of Enrique, too: at eight in a tank top , with four piglets at his feet; at thirteen in the photograph at Belky's quinceañera, the serious-looking little brother. She most treasures a photo of her son in a pink shirt. It is the only one she has where he is smiling.

She has often worried from afar about her boy. In 1999, a sister in Honduras disclosed the truth about Enrique: “He’s getting in trouble. He’s changed.” He was smoking marijuana. The news made Lourdes sick. Her stomach tightened into a knot for a week. Now she is more worried than ever. Lourdes has not slept. All night, since Enrique’s last call from a pay phone across the Rio Grande, she has been having visions of him dead, floating on the river, his body wet and swollen.

She told her boyfriend, “My greatest fear is never to see him again.”

She has spent part of the night in her kitchen, praying before a tall candle adorned with the image of San Judas Tadeo. This saint tackles difficult situations, matters of life and death. Lourdes lit the candle days ago, when Enrique made his first phone call from Nuevo Laredo.

Each time Lourdes walks past the candle, she prays: “God has granted to you the privilege of aiding humankind in the most desperate cases. O, come to my aid that I may praise the mercies of God! All my life I will be your grateful client until I can thank you in Heaven.”

Now a female smuggler is on the phone. The woman says: “We have your son in Texas, but \$ 1,200 is not enough. \$ 1,700.”

Lourdes grows suspicious. Maybe Enrique is dead, and the smugglers are trying to cash in. “Put him on the line,” she says.

“He’s out shopping for food,” the smuggler replies.

Lourdes will not be put off. He’s asleep, the smuggler says. How can he be both? Lourdes demands to talk to him. Finally, the smuggler gives the phone to Enrique.

“¿ Sos tú?” his mother asks anxiously. “Is it you?”

“Sí, mami, it’s me.”

Still, his mother is not sure. She does not recognize his voice. She has heard it only half a dozen times in eleven years.

“¿ Sos tú?” she asks again.

Then twice more. She grasps for something, anything, that she can ask this boy— a question that no one but Enrique can answer. She remembers what he told her about his shoes when he called on the pay phone.

“What kind of shoes do you have on?” she asks.

“Two left shoes,” Enrique says.

Fear drains from his mother like a wave back into the sea. It is Enrique. She feels pure happiness.

WAITING

She takes \$ 500 she has saved, borrows \$ 1,200 from her boyfriend, and wires it to Dallas. In the house with the clothing, the smugglers wait. From the bags, Enrique puts on clean pants, a shirt, and a new pair of shoes. The smugglers take him to a restaurant. He eats chicken smothered in cream sauce. Clean, sated, in his mother's adopted country, he is happy. They go to Western Union. But there is no money under his mother's name, not even a message. How could she do this? At worst, Enrique figures, he can break away. Run. But the smugglers call again.

She says she has sent the money through a female immigrant who lives with her, because the woman gets a Western Union discount. The money should be there under the woman's name. It is.

Enrique has no time to celebrate. The smugglers take him to a gas station, where they meet another man in the network. He puts Enrique with four immigrant men being routed to Orlando, Florida. They stay overnight in Houston, and at midday, Enrique leaves Texas in a green van.

Five days later, Lourdes's boyfriend gets time off from work to drive to Orlando, where Enrique has been staying with other immigrants and waiting for him to arrive. Her boyfriend is handsome, with broad shoulders, graying temples, and a mustache. Enrique recognizes him from a video his uncle Carlos brought back from a visit.

"Are you Lourdes's son?" the boyfriend asks.

Enrique nods.

"Let's go."

They say little in the car, and Enrique falls asleep. By 8 A.M. on May 28, Enrique is in North Carolina. He awakens to tires crossing highway seams: Click-click. Click-click.

"Are we lost?" he asks. "Are you sure we aren't lost? Do you know where we are going?"

"We're almost there."

They are moving fast through pines and elms, past billboards and fields, yellow lilies and purple lilacs. The road is freshly paved. It goes over a bridge and passes cattle pastures with large rolls of hay. On both sides are wealthy subdivisions. Then railroad tracks.

Finally, at the end of a short gravel street, some house trailers. One is beige. Built in the 1950s, it has white metal awnings and is framed in tall green trees. At 10 A.M., after more than 12,000 miles, 122 days, and seven futile attempts to get to his mother, Enrique, eleven years older than when she left him behind, bounds from the backseat of the car and up five faded redwood steps, and swings open the white door of the mobile home. To the left, beyond a tiny living room with dark wooden beams, sits a girl with shoulder-length black hair and curly bangs. She is at the

kitchen table eating breakfast. He remembers a picture of her. Her name is Diana. She is nine now. Enrique leans over and kisses the girl on the cheek.

“Are you my brother?”

He nods. “Where’s my mother? Where’s my mother?”

She motions past the kitchen to the far end of the trailer. Enrique runs. His feet zigzag down two narrow, brown-paneled hallways. He opens a door. Inside, the room is cluttered, dark. On a queen-size bed, under a window draped with lace curtains, his mother is asleep. He jumps squarely onto the bed next to her. He gives her a hug. Then a kiss.

“You’re here, mi hijo.”

“I’m here,” he says.

The End