Kington: I don't think so, but then at the same time I think that maybe it is too late. I did some bad things in the past, and like they say, "You live by the sword, you die by the sword." I mean, I've been shot in my head, my foot, my neck. I've been attacked with machetes. But everything is okay, man. Life is life. I always say that there has to be good *and* bad things happening to you. If you don't have both, that shit is not real life.

Jason: But what's it like to think that every day there might be someone that wants to kill you?

Kingston: I worry about it a lot because I got my babies and my family.[*]

Jason: But you seem lucky. You made it into your thirties.

Kingston: I'm older than Jesus now! [*We both laugh.*] I'm glad for that. I always thank God in the morning.

Jason: Do you think that means that you'll be okay?

Kingston: You never know. We could be drinking right now and I go outside and somebody comes up to me and "boom." [*He mimics shooting a handgun.*] You'd be like, "Oh shit, that motherfucker was just here drinking with us!" Life is like that. But I'm *tranquilo* now. I'm just biding my time. But it's not easy though, to be thinking that one day you could be dead. I'm just trying to be okay because sometimes I can't sleep, and I ask myself, "What the fuck is wrong?" Sometimes I only sleep every two or three days. I don't eat. I'm just thinking and thinking about the bad shit I've done. There are days where I be eating and I see things or remember things and that shit kills my appetite. But *así es la vida*.

Jason: What's next for you?

Kingston: Right now, I just want to kick back and maybe start a little business. I want to try and live a calm life, a good life. I'm just trying to live through all this shit. I'm not saying that I'm going to be a Christian or a pastor or none of that. [*Both of us laugh.*] But maybe God can find something else for me to do with my life.

Jason: But it's hard to find good work here in Mexico.

Kingston: You know how much they pay here daily? Like 90 or 100 pesos [$4.50 or $5.00] a day, and you got to be working under the fucking sun, carrying sacks of cement and doing that kind of bullshit.

Jason: What if you can't get your business going?

Kingston: If that doesn't work, I'll head back to the United States and get away from all this stuff here. I'll never come back to Mexico.

Kingston clearly wants out of smuggling and gang life, but his options are limited. He can't go back to Honduras because people want to kill him there. If he is caught crossing into the United States, he will face serious prison time because of his previous record. He doesn't have a Mexican work visa, so the only employment available to him is as a low-wage undocumented worker. While he has dreams of starting his own business, he lacks both the start-up capital and the social skills needed to run a legitimate enterprise. Kingston is not the kind of person who is going to apply for permits or pay taxes. He also does not have the patience to deal with the many setbacks he is likely to face while trying to get his business affairs in order. Like the highly motivated crack dealers described by anthropologist Philippe Bourgois or the business-savvy stickup kids sociologist Randol Contreras writes about, Kingston is smart, charismatic, and driven but has grown up in a world where these skills have been utilized largely in illicit economies. In an alternate universe, Kingston could be a successful and respected businessman. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that

his aspirations for a straight job will ever be realized. His employment problems are further compounded by the fact that his daily existence is perilous and characterized by various calamities, both external and self-inflicted.

As night falls outside, we get antsy from being locked in the house all afternoon.

"You want to go to the club?" Kingston asks.

"That sounds like a really bad idea," I say, laughing. "Sure, let's do it. What could possibly go wrong this time?"

"Cool, I just have to stop by my house to feed my dog."

I'M STARING UP at the night sky as I relieve myself on a tree in the front yard. The whining horn of a nearby passing train cuts through the jungle air, reminding one that an escape is never far away. Kingston jiggles the key in the lock and pushes the metal door open. A few seconds later, I hear yelling and cabinets and doors slamming. He comes barreling out of the house screaming, "They took everything!"

Jason: What are you talking about?

Kingston: They stole everything. They came in and stole everything. I don't have nothing.

Jason: What the fuck are you talking about? Where's the dog?

Kingston: They stole my shit. They stole my dog, my fucking refrigerator, everything. They took everything!

I poke my head into the house and stare at emptiness. The place has been picked clean.

Kingston aggressively paces around the room. His aggravated voice echoes off the bare linoleum floor and concrete walls.

“They took everything!” he screams. “They even took my gun!”

The place suddenly feels unsafe. We wonder who would have the audacity to do something like this. It has to be someone who knows him, which makes the theft even more brazen and scary. We decide it’s not a good idea to stick around, so we hop into a cab and head to the center of town. Kingston is understandably enraged. Everything he owns is gone. It’s another Friday night where something disastrous has happened.

The taxi stops at a light. A shoeless kid in filthy rags starts scrubbing the windshield.

Kingston rolls down his window and starts yelling at him. “There’s nothing here, *carnal*! Nothing. Get the fuck outta here! *¡Chinga su madre!*”

He turns to me and for the first time since I’ve known him, I think he’s going to cry. “Fuck! Look at me!” he says. “I have no clothes. I’m in a fucking tank top and *chanclas*.”

The taxi drops us off in front of a run-down club. The thumping bass from inside gives the impression that the sidewalk has a pulse. “Let’s get a beer and figure this shit out,” I tell him. We get to the door and the bouncer gives Kingston the once-over.

“Sorry, you can’t come in here in sandals,” he says. “You have to have shoes on to get in.”

I brace for the worst, but Kingston just nods and says, “No problem.” As we turn and walk into the night, I’m thankful that our evening is coming to an early end.

Straight Up

There is no shade to protect us from the sun bouncing off the marble tiles of Bellas Artes, Mexico City’s most prominent cultural center. A million cars playfully honk at each other as they fight their way down a nearby boulevard. An organ-grinder mercilessly turns his crank and releases a lilting melody into the afternoon air. *Chilangos* who still appreciate this

dying musical art form toss pesos into his upturned cap. Tourists pose for selfies. Couples hold hands on benches while passing vendors hawk cotton candy and balloons. Nearby, teenagers in baggy pants and death metal T-shirts engage in a rap battle. Kingston takes in the ambience in a cool and resigned way. He looks exhausted. He wanted to leave the chaos of the safe house in Lechería for someplace calmer and away from the ears of his soldiers. He wants to get some things off his chest. I don't realize it then, but this will be the last time I ever see him.

For weeks, he's been talking to me about getting out of the game. His nephew dying and his house being robbed have added urgency to this idea he has been mulling over for months.

Jason: When did you decide that you were done?

Kingston: It was after the last time I went to prison and no one wanted to bail me out. I was in prison for seven months in Mexico. They wanted to give me five years for smuggling. I called my people in New York and told them to get me out. I told them I needed 30,000 pesos [$1,500] for bail, and they said they would take care of me. They said they would send someone to help me. I waited and waited, but it never happened.

Jason: That doesn't seem like that much money considering how much you make for them.

Kingston: I know! Come on, man, it's not a lot of fucking money, especially after twenty years of doing this shit. That guy was supposed to be my friend, but he let me down.

That "guy" Kingston refers to is the high-ranking gang member who initiated him into the Bloods when he was a kid back in Honduras. This person calls all the shots from New York and has large crews of people working for him across Latin America. Kingston is so afraid of him that he

never says his name. He only refers to him as “this person” or “that guy.” A monster *sin nombre* who is omnipresent. Everything that Kingston does has to be vetted by “that guy,” including his decision to get out of the game.

Like Chino, Kingston understands that leaving the gang comes with major consequences and is not something to be done lightly. He explains his escape plan.

> **Kingston:** I want to go to New York to talk to this guy to tell him that I quit. I need to ask permission.
>
> **Jason:** What do you think he’ll say?
>
> **Kingston:** I don’t know. He might say it’s okay or he might say no. But even if he says it’s okay, he might not mean it. He might say it’s okay and then send people later to kill me. He’s got people everywhere: Mexico, Belize, the United States. I have friends who have gone to talk to him about getting out and then they disappeared. They could be hiding or they could be dead. A lot of people go see him and then you never hear from them again. But even if they let you out, others will remember you. Other people are still looking for you and now you have no protection.

For the past several months, Kingston has been lying low and avoiding parts of Mexico where he was previously active. This is because he thinks he is now being hunted.

> **Kingston:** There’s a nigga up in San Luis [Potosí] who’s been saying he’s going to kill me. He thinks I’m running things up there, but I ain’t doing that shit no more. I’m retired from that.
>
> **Jason:** Are you afraid?

Kingston: No, because I'm in my house all day, locked up. But I want to run away from this world. I go back and forth from feeling safe and then not feeling safe. Every day it's something new to worry about. Someone could come for me today or tomorrow.

It's not just the fear of being killed that haunts Kingston. His lifetime of trauma and violent acts is destroying him from the inside. He believes that escape is not just about physically leaving but also finding some peace and mental stability.

Jason: What would make you happy?

Kingston: I just want to leave all this behind, but I don't know how. I don't know how to cleanse myself of all the stuff that has happened. You know how it is—we all do what we have to do to survive and there is nothing you can do about it. But for me, the biggest fucking things are the memories. It's so many fucking memories, Jason. There are moments where I can't stop thinking about them. That's why I smoke my weed and try to relax, because I end up remembering things and that shit gets me down. It puts me in a bad place. It's like you are stuck with this stuff; it's like a tattoo. All that you do in your life is recorded on you like a tattoo. *Carnal*, there have been so many fucked-up things in my life, but I tell myself that the past is the past and I'm just trying to live in the present. I want a life that moves forward because I'm tired after so many years of doing crazy shit for other people. After all I've done, those people aren't even grateful. And now the only person who has problems is me. I just want to retire and find someone who I can talk to, someone who can help me deal with my mind and all my worries. I know you can get help for this kind of stuff. I know it.

Perhaps one of the biggest ironies of Kingston's life is that he has earned so much money helping people escape violence and poverty, yet he himself

is perpetually stuck between the two. Right before we met, he unsuccessfully tried to get his family into the United States. Despite that failure, he is committed to trying again, both for their safety and his own.

Jason: What do you want for your family?

Kingston: I want to bring my kids to the United States. I tried before, but shit got fucked up because I didn't have no money. Immigration caught my whole family. My baby mom, my daughter, my son. They sent them all back. I tried to bring them twice, but it didn't work. I can try again, but I need money to get them across. I can't put my family on the train because those motherfuckers there know me, and if they see my family they're gonna do some bad shit to them. So we would have to travel by bus or car. Or maybe if I go to New York, I can earn money and get somebody to bring my family. I could pay someone I know and trust to bring them. I have to do this because it's getting dangerous. My baby's mom keeps calling me and saying, "Somebody came by the house asking for you." People are now looking for me in Mexico and Honduras. That's why I'm trying to retire from this shit so that I can do better things with my life. I want to start over so that my family can be okay. I just want to get out. Straight up.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Liberty without Tricks or False Promises

For years Flaco has told me he is leaving the world of smuggling. It's a story on repeat. *It's too dangerous, bro. They almost killed me in Coatza. It's too dangerous, bro. They almost killed me in Tierra Blanca.* He says these things with deep conviction but soon afterward sends me videos of him rolling a fat joint in a Guadalajara safe house or roasting an iguana somewhere deep in the jungles of Chiapas.

Mexico is increasingly cracking down on Central American migration while organized crime tightens its choke hold on the smuggling industry. This means more risk and lower profits for Flaco. But still, he can't seem to pull himself away from the train tracks. He can't cut the umbilical cord to a lifestyle he has always known and loved. I can't blame him. It's easy to see the attraction: fast money, the euphoria that accompanies successfully evading danger, the nonstop partying, the thrill of calling the shots and being a boss. These are the things that attract young people to the occupation in the first place. These are the things that keep people coming back. Keep in mind that in practically every other social context, Flaco is a nobody, a poor and uneducated person who lives hand to mouth on the margins. But on the migrant trail he is an authority figure, an expert, a king. Smuggling people gives him a sense of power and control, even if it's only temporary. But his brushes with death are becoming more frequent: his hands and feet bound with duct tape; a dirty knife to his throat; a pistol to his head; another plea to God to get him out of one more bad situation. The

violence at the hands of cartels and gangs is escalating. Like Kingston, he is starting to read the writing on the wall, and the prognosis is not good. He keeps telling himself to get out before it's too late, but it is unclear if he truly wants that to happen or if it is even possible. Then a series of unfortunate events forces his hand.

"Hey, Jason, how you doing, bro?" he says over the phone. "I got no money. I'm broken, foo. Can you send me like twenty bucks? I need to put some credit on my phone, *hermano*." Flaco has just been deported back to Honduras after spending almost a month in a Mexican detention center. It's a relief to hear his weary voice. He was incommunicado for so long that his family and I began to worry that something really bad had happened. His sister called me out of the blue to see if I could help locate him. I began contacting hospitals in Chiapas and Veracruz to see if they had a patient matching his description. I started looking for stories of his death on the internet. This went on for several tense weeks until he surfaced in Honduras penniless and exhausted. "I'm really done," he says. "It's too dangerous now. Immigration took all my money. They took a lot this time. The *mareros* and the mafia are too much. There's too much kidnapping and murder. I have to think about my family here in Honduras. I have to think about my little boy. I'm done."

Losing thousands of dollars to corrupt Mexican immigration agents who robbed him and then locked him up seems to have scared Flaco straight. He doesn't want to talk about what they did to him, but he gives the impression that it was worse than the normal shakedown and beating. Personally, I am relieved that he is walking away from smuggling. Getting out reduces the chances that I will be texted a photo of him with a bullet in his skull. Smuggling is an unsustainable lifestyle, even for someone as hardened and smart as Flaco. I make plans to visit him and see the new life he is building. He sends pictures of himself working with a truck driver hauling goods across Honduras. We video chat and he has me talk to his children and his wife as he cackles and puffs on a joint. "Say hello to the gringo," he tells his young son. "He's going to come visit for your birthday." Things seem to be going well for him—as well as they can be for someone making only a few

dollars a day. The good news is that he isn't in jail or kidnapped or dead in a ditch. "When you come to visit, we will butcher a cow for my son's birthday. There's gonna be a lot a beer and weed too, foo. *¡Mucha lechuga!*" he laughingly tells me in February of 2020.

By May of 2020, the tone and topic of our conversations has drastically changed. "Another one of my neighbors died today from COVID," he says on a video call while standing on the empty road in front of his house. The government-enforced curfew has rendered his *colonia* a ghost town. "It's really bad here, bro. We can't leave, and most of the stores don't have any food. People are charging more for everything. The government isn't doing anything to help us."

Many Americans struggled financially and emotionally during the pandemic, but imagine what it must have been like for those who were already living on the edge of hell in the Third World. Honduras is a country where 60 percent of the population lives in poverty and is dependent on a daily income. Government-imposed lockdowns prevent people from bringing any cash into the household at the end of the day. No cash means no food, no rent, no medicine. COVID is a health risk for Hondurans, but it is no match for the decades of generational starvation that the pandemic only exacerbates. Government health records showed 430,672 infections and 10,912 deaths as of October 2022, but for many analysts the scariest number was the historic 9 percent shrinkage of the country's economy by the end of 2020, caused by work stoppages. Some predict that the Honduran poverty rate will reach 75 percent in the wake of the pandemic.

Flaco tries to find employment during the government shutdown, but pickings are slim for an uneducated thirtysomething street hustler whom everyone suspects of being associated with shady dealings. Still, he cuts cane, clears brush, and digs ditches when there is someone willing to pay him $2 a day, which is not often. Unsurprisingly, he contracts COVID and spends two weeks in bed. "I couldn't taste or smell anything, bro. It was awful. I couldn't even smoke weed, so you know it was bad," he jokes. But the complications created by COVID in Honduras are no joke. Shit was bad before, but the cocktail created by mixing the pandemic with long-standing

violence, economic instability, and government corruption astoundingly makes Honduras more unlivable than ever before.

For the first few months of the pandemic, Flaco struggles to put food on the table and make rent. I send him what I can to help out and cancel my plans to visit. We spend the first part of our respective lockdowns exchanging messages on WhatsApp and video chatting about the party he will eventually have when this global nightmare is over. He does his best to maintain a positive attitude while the world is on fire. The periodic odd jobs keep him afloat. His children keep him laughing. But then death comes banging on his door.

There's No Exception to the Rule

Flaco is so overcome with grief that he can barely get the words out. "They killed my brother, *carnal*. They killed him. They strangled him and stabbed him forty times. They left him like he was garbage. They even stole his shoes. I'm so sad, bro. I just want to go to Mexico, Jason. I want to be anywhere but here. I have so many problems, *hermano*. You know how my life is."

Murders in Mexico and Central America are often captured by cell phone cameras and then circulated on WhatsApp to all interested parties. *Look at what they did to my neighbor, my cousin*, mi carnal. Bodies in cheap coffins. Bodies on a medical examiner's steel table. Bodies in odd contortions on the ground, looking at the world with abandoned eyes. *Look at what they did.* I have reached the point now that when I see someone has texted me a photo, I open it expecting the worst.

In the picture Flaco sends me, his brother (who looks like a younger version of him) is laid out on his back in a field of deep green Honduran grass. His eyes are closed. An unbuttoned shirt exposes a chest dirty with dried blood and riddled with puncture wounds. I can't begin to fathom the rage it takes to stab someone forty times. A line of raw, inflamed skin cuts

across his throat, demarcating where someone's hands pulled and twisted the garrote until he could no longer draw breath. The crotch of his blue jeans is damp. He soiled himself in his final struggle for life. The outline of a bystander just outside of the camera's frame casts a shadow over the corpse and gives the eerie impression that a ghost is floating away from the body. But that's not how death works, and I've known that fact for a long time. I look at this picture of a dead body and a deeply repressed memory surfaces about a woman I watched die when I was ten years old.

Chubby cheeks, husky pants, crooked front teeth. A Chicago Bears *1985 Super Bowl Champions* T-shirt. My head is buried in a tattered copy of *Beckett Baseball Card Monthly* as I ignore the sounds of clinking weights and the grunts of bodies mid-exertion. I'm too busy gauging the current prices of Nolan Ryan and Fernando Valenzuela cards. I'm probably calculating what it would cost me in trade to get a Pedro Guerrero rookie. Nearby, my mom jogs on a treadmill, lost in the music coming out of her Walkman. In my mind she is listening to the Main Ingredient's "Everybody Plays the Fool." It's a song that was crucial to my childhood soundtrack as my working-class mother and I leaned on each other to get through a bitter divorce and a traumatizing custody battle. It's a song that makes me smile and cry. *There's no exception to the rule . . . everybody plays the fool.*

My concentration is broken when I hear a crash and look up to see someone lying on the gym floor. The middle-aged woman had been running on the treadmill next to my mom when she collapsed. A small crowd gathers. The woman is unresponsive to a wet towel put to her forehead. I sit paralyzed and watch my mom perform CPR on this stranger. Chest compressions and mouth-to-mouth. How does my mom know what to do? How does anyone know what to do? An ambulance is called. More people arrive. The woman doesn't react when they cut open her shirt and reposition her to keep performing CPR. She doesn't flinch when a paramedic takes a silver scalpel and performs a tracheotomy. My ten-year-old brain can't fathom how she can just lie there as they carve a hole into her throat. I can't make sense of the lifeless body the paramedics try to put breath back into. I've seen a dead person before, but it was my grandmother and she had

been a sick old lady for a long time. I remember her in a frilly coffin looking like she was peacefully sleeping. But this woman is not old. She is not peacefully sleeping. She was just here in this room, running on a treadmill, and now she is gone. I stare at her lying on the floor and know that there is nothing left to do. There is no bright shining light from the heavens. I don't see any angels take her away. After the paramedics remove the body, I watch my mom use a towel to soak up a small pool of blood that was left behind in the dead woman's wake.

When I look at the photo of Flaco's brother lying shoeless in a grassy field, I see that woman from so many years ago. I see something familiar but incomprehensible. I feel an emptiness and a sadness, but not because I knew him. I feel empty because I know there is no escaping this. There is no coming back. I know that the reality for many I have come to know on the migrant trail is what I see in that grassy field. Stab wounds. Bullet wounds. A rope around a neck. Desperation and fury and an ending with no trumpets or fanfare. A paramedic comes and unceremoniously takes away what death leaves behind. I look at this image of a dead young man and know that this is what getting out of the game means for many. I wonder what Flaco sees when he looks at the photo.

"I'm going back to Mexico, bro," he says. "It's better there than it is here. There's too much sadness here." He packs his bag and starts heading north once again. How many times does someone have to flee their home before it stops being home?

In 1998, Flaco watched from a rooftop as Hurricane Mitch washed away houses and bodies. He counts himself lucky because he left Honduras just in time to escape Hurricanes Eta and Iota. Those back-to-back category 4 storms ravaged Central America in November 2020, causing billions of dollars of damage and displacing hundreds of thousands of impoverished people already suffering through a pandemic. When the floodwaters recede, Flaco's neighbors begin their own mass exodus from Honduras.

AS SOON AS I exit the plane and walk onto the tarmac, the smell of dense jungle and burning garbage hits me, invoking a thousand memories, dreams, and nightmares of Chiapas. Because of the pandemic, it's been more than two years since I've visited the southern Mexico border. I send Flaco a voice message to let him know I have arrived. "I'll see you soon, *hermano*," he replies. As I wait for my luggage at the Tapachula airport, I read the various anti-smuggling and anti-trafficking signs that the Mexican government has posted in the baggage claim area. One poster carries the inspirational slogan *Liberty without tricks or false promises*, a critique of the chicanery smugglers and traffickers are known for. I can't help being a little cynical and thinking that the notion of liberty for much of the world is itself a false promise.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Suerte

December 24 on the train tracks is not as grim as one might imagine. Santos and a small group of men are in a festive mood this morning because Good Samaritans from nearby Caborca have been visiting the tracks and bringing gifts for migrants. Tamales. Warm tortillas and beans. Someone has even procured a little booze and marijuana. The men fill their stomachs as drinks flow and clouds of rich smoke ascend into the Sonoran sky. They make toasts to better futures and the pending new year. There is optimism in the air. America is only 150 kilometers north. Everyone hopes they will soon see midwestern sunrises through the cracked windshields of work trucks as they drive to American jobs grooming golf courses or hanging drywall for $14 an hour. There are visions of drinking cases of Bud Light after work and listening to *rancheras* from the bed of an F-150. They joke about better futures where there are no train tracks to sleep on or bullets and knives to dodge. The simple dream of the promised land is enough to make one feel hopeful. Whatever happens is God's will. They just hope that God's will includes a roof over their heads and maybe a gringa to come home to. Someone fires up a portable speaker and soon a lazy reggaeton beat has several people dancing. It almost feels like a real Navidad.

Just as their little party is getting under way, a disheveled Mexican approaches. He sizes up the group. Everyone on the tracks is undocumented, and thus he has the legal upper hand. Besides, this is his

tierra and these men are intruders. He brazenly walks through the party and grabs the speaker.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" someone asks.

The man smirks and produces a blade. Santos takes a few steps back. *Fuck this*. He wants nothing to do with this encounter. He's got enough problems and doesn't need to add a knife fight to that list. The owner of the speaker starts to make a move toward the thief. The man with the knife makes it clear he is ready to use it. Someone picks up a rock and hurls it. It hits the thief in the mouth, sending him to the ground. He stands up and lunges. Two men begin to roll around in the gravel while the knife slashes at clothing and flesh. Santos watches it all happen as if it is a movie. It's not his speaker and he barely knows these people. None of this is worth getting involved in, so he looks on as these men kick the shit out of each other. When it's all done, the Mexican hobbles away bleeding and without a speaker. It's a small migrant victory. Santos and his crew think the matter is settled and return to their Christmas party. No one expects the thief to come back with the police half an hour later.

At the station the officers are seemingly sympathetic. They tell Santos they know he is innocent and that they will release him soon. They promise to get him a lawyer. But they don't release him and a lawyer never shows up. He sits handcuffed in the precinct for hours. "I kept telling the cops I had nothing to do with it," he remembers. "I told them I wasn't involved. Even the Mexican guy who came back said I had nothing to do with it. But the cops just looked at the Hondurans who were there and decided we were all guilty. The Mexican said that he got jumped by migrants and the police believed him."

They begin processing the paperwork so that the Honduran involved in the altercation can go to court. Santos gets worried as he watches them fill out the same paperwork for him. By the time he stands in front of the judge, he has told everyone who comes within earshot that he is innocent, but no one listens. When you're poor, Honduran, and undocumented in Mexico, your voice doesn't carry much weight, but it does often come with stereotypes: *Everyone knows that catrachos are violent. They are thugs.*

Just look at what is happening in their country. The court seems to harbor these same prejudices.

> **Santos:** The judge looked at me and said that I was responsible for the fight. He said, "You were watching it happen. Why didn't you call the police?" I told him it wasn't just me. There were like ten *cabrones* on the tracks when this happened. I asked, "Why don't you arrest those other people too and bring them in here?" In the end, the judge said it wasn't my fault but I was going to pay for it anyways. He sentenced me to four years and one month.

SANTOS NARROWS HIS EYES against the desert sun. He takes in a necropolis of scorched earth, concrete, and steel. A sea of hardened men uniformed in khaki pants and bright orange shirts plots and schemes and waits while high above armed guards look for excuses to unload a few rounds. Some of the prisoners quietly count the days until they can see the sky unbounded by walls and metal bars. Others know they will never again breathe free air, so they seek out violent diversions to kill time.

The noise from a heated soccer match taking place a few hundred yards away fills the air. *¡Chinga tu madre, cabrón! That was offside!* It's hard for Santos to watch the game and not think about the kid from his cellblock down on his knees in the dirt, screaming and trying to keep his guts from spilling out of a giant gash in his stomach. That's what happens when you talk shit to the wrong person on the opposing team. Nothing around here is a game.

Santos has never been to prison, but he quickly finds his rhythm. A lifetime on the tracks has taught him to mind his own business, a lesson that serves him well in this new environment. Homies invite him to play cards and smoke weed, but he knows that those friendly engagements can turn sour fast: "One of my friends got into a fight over a game of cards and

ended up stabbing someone. He went from having a four-year sentence to a seventeen-year sentence. I just tried to stay busy with work." To make ends meet, Santos crafts jewelry and figurines out of recycled plastic bottles and cans. He sells these items to inmates who give them to relatives on visiting day. Because he has no way to contact his family in Honduras, no one comes to visit him. No one even knows where he is (including me). He quietly paces the prison yard, resigned to serving out his forty-nine-month sentence.

Almost two years into his prison stay, Santos finally makes contact with his mother. He explains his situation and she relays the story to his older brother Marvin, a former soldier who has always been the mature and responsible one in the family. From Honduras, Marvin begins the long and slow process of getting his brother's case reexamined. He is struggling to feed his own family but manages to wire Santos a little money to secure a Mexican lawyer. The lawyer thinks they have a good chance of getting charges dismissed if they can get in front of a judge. Marvin scrambles to get more money together. After months of false starts and small money wires to the attorney, Santos finally gets his day in court. He pleads his innocence to the judge, who calls him "a danger to Mexican society." The judge wants him to sign a document attesting to a crime he didn't commit. Santos reluctantly puts his signature on the paperwork. He will do anything not to sleep another night in hell. "You're getting out of here, but you are leaving with a record," the judge tells him. "You aren't leaving here clean." After twenty-seven months in prison, Santos pays a fine of $600 and finally sees the sky outside prison walls.

Batallando

He looks at me with exhausted eyes and then takes a long drag from a cheap Mexican cigarette. I use the tip of my shoe to kick gravel while I search for words to express how I am feeling. The last time I saw Santos we were

dancing and partying on the tracks in Pakal-Ná. He was fresh-faced and optimistic. He told jokes and we laughed our asses off. We made plans to reunite in Michigan, where I was living at the time. But that feels like a lifetime ago. A few months after Santos left Pakal-Ná with Sombra, we lost contact. His phone got disconnected. His Facebook account became inactive. I knew he was either in prison or dead. I was relieved to eventually learn it was the former. I am happy to see him, but sitting on the train tracks on the outskirts of Nogales, Mexico, it is clear he is a changed person. He looks road-worn and sad. He's gained weight and his once youthful face now shows worry lines and new scars. Prison has aged him and life on the streets is grinding him down. We sit on the tracks and talk about his plans for the future while the whistles of passing trains scream in the background.

Jason: When I stopped getting messages from you and saw that your Facebook account went silent, I thought something really bad had happened. I thought you were dead.

Santos: [*Laughing*] You're not the only one who thought that. No one knew where I was, so everyone assumed I was dead. People in my village were lighting candles for me. Even after I was able to talk to my mom from prison, people still thought I was dead. They were asking her, "When are they going to ship his body home?" My mom kept telling people, "My son is not dead! Who told you that he was dead?" You know how it is with rumors. People hear something and then they are convinced it's true.

Jason: I know it was awful, but I was glad that you were in prison and not in the cemetery.

Santos: Prison was traumatic, Jason. I lost a lot of time there, but I told myself I just had to hang on until things got better. It's like right now, I'm just trying to be strong until I can get to the other side [of the border].

Jason: What did you do when you got out?

Santos: I spent two months in Honduras. I really had no interest coming back here to Mexico but you know how bad it is in my country. There is no work in Honduras and it's too dangerous for me to stay in my neighborhood, so I had to leave. I didn't want to come back to Sonora after all the time I had spent here in prison. But my brother Marvin had never been here and he wanted me to bring him. So we left.

Santos now has a criminal record in Mexico, which means that if he is caught by Immigration he can face serious prison time for illegal entry and violation of his agreement to never return to the country. It speaks volumes about how dangerous and uninhabitable Honduras is that he would risk long-term incarceration again in a foreign country rather than stay home. He still hangs out on the tracks, but mostly because he is moving across northern Mexico in search of temporary employment in the many migrant-heavy communities that exploit itinerant and undocumented labor. He is working hard to stay out of trouble and keep a healthy distance from anything related to smuggling.

Jason: Have you moved any people since you got out?

Santos: No. I lost all my contacts while I was in prison. It's like I have to start over in every place. People I knew before either left or got killed. It's dangerous now because no one remembers me. But it was getting difficult even before I went to prison. That's why I had to get out of Pakal-Ná. I was starting to have problems with Bin Laden and the Breadman. You couldn't trust those guys. They were very problematic. That's why you always have to study people. If I meet someone on the tracks, I have to watch them and get to know them well because in this *camino* your own friends can betray you.

Jason: How did you and Chino become friends?

Santos: After I tattooed him, we started hanging out and traveling together for months. He was a funny kid who became like my little brother. We had a lot of adventures on the train bringing people from Pakal-Ná to Coatza. We did that a lot. We were always doing stuff together. Partying on the tracks. Getting tattooed. I did a lot of his tattoos, including the *catracho* one on his arm. The last time I saw him was when I left to go north with Sombra and he stayed behind with Jesmyn. I didn't want him to stay behind, but I knew he wanted to be with her, so all I could do was wish him luck. I went to Celaya and then to Caborca, where I ended up in prison.

Jason: And what happened with Sombra?

Santos: I never saw him again after that trip, although one of the women we traveled with ended up in Mazatlán. She still calls me and wants me to bring her up here to the border, but I keep telling her to stay where she is. It's probably better there. I don't want to bring her here because I don't want to be responsible for bad things that could happen to her.

As we sit on the tracks and catch up, I try to imagine a better future for Santos. I need things to work out for him because I know deep down he is trying hard to make the right decisions (whatever that means). I want everything to be okay for him because I am awed by the optimism he has somehow held on to despite what he has been through. I also think to myself that maybe the two hellish years he spent in prison somehow saved him by giving him distance and perspective on a lifestyle that was potentially going to get him killed.

Jason: Do you miss being a *guía*?

Santos: No, because being a guide always means you can end up dead. I would prefer to battle on the street. I would prefer to ask

people for spare change. That's how I got here to Nogales. I've just been riding the train and then getting off and begging for money at stoplights. It's hard moving around, but I'd rather be struggling on the streets than taking orders from people who could end up killing me. I'm about to turn twenty-five and I don't want any of this life anymore. I've been doing this for years . . . and the only break I've ever had was the little bit of time I spent working in Phoenix. My life has been pure suffering with so much pain on these train tracks. So much moving back and forth. I am tired of moving and just want to get out. I just want to live my life. That's why I'm battling to get to the U.S.

Jason: What would you do in the U.S.?

Santos: I'd do whatever comes my way. I just want to work. All I want is a normal life, because there is nothing good here on the train tracks. God willing, I will get out of here and make it north.

After several hours of talking, Santos and I prepare to part ways. He will hop a train to Mexicali, and I will walk across the border back to Arizona. He is physically so close to the place he hopes will change everything for him, yet it is just out of reach. Will he make it to the United States, or die trying? How long can he maintain the stamina to keep fighting for a semblance of a normal life, where he no longer has to beg for money or sleep on the dirt? I am inspired by his tenacity and shamed by my own privilege.

We hug. I give him all the money in my wallet and a bag of beans and tortillas I brought. "I'll share this food with people I see on the train," he tells me. I worry this could be the last time I see him. I don't really know what to say. He is about to walk off into the distance and into the unknown and it scares me. Years later I remember this goodbye being difficult and awkward. When I listen back to the audio recording, I hear my own stupid voice saying to him, "I'll come visit you soon in Mexicali, but I should go

because the line to get across the border starts to get long right around this time.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Xibalba

It's a slow march toward something ominous. Despite her intuition, Jesmyn follows the men deeper and deeper into the jungle. The late-afternoon sun paints menacing shadows that cut across the train tracks and the surrounding foliage. Their feet step across geometric designs of light and dark, a metaphor for the divergent paths offered up to those on this long road headed north. The Maya, who settled this landscape thousands of years ago, believe that people pass between two worlds when they die: the realm of the living, and Xibalba, the parallel unseen Otherworld where death gods and their helpers rule. Xibalba is where souls go after death. It is also a place where gods are appeased by human sacrifice.

Chino is arrogant and defiant as he walks. "*No pasa nada, mi amor*," he tells Jesmyn. "Nothing will happen, my love. Everything is going to be fine." She nervously watches as houses get fewer and farther between. The voices of neighbors and small groups of migrants milling about become faint and then disappear entirely. The only sounds left are the buzzing of insects and the crunching of gravel under their feet. Jesmyn is alone with her thoughts and the uneasy feeling growing inside her. Bin Laden and the Breadman say they just want to talk to Chino in private. They need privacy so that they can work out a problem that has been brewing among them for weeks. Bin Laden reassures her nothing will happen. He even invites the three Guatemalan migrants who have been hanging around with Chino to accompany them to this meeting. Still, the internal voice that has protected her all her life is telling her that something bad is coming.

WE ARE SITTING in a restaurant in coastal Honduras, gazing out at the Atlantic Ocean, when Jesmyn recounts this story. The offshore breeze cools our skin as we sip cold drinks and watch the sun disappear over the horizon. It's a beautiful backdrop that feels far away from any danger. This illusion is shattered when our waiter brings our food and I glimpse the 9mm Glock hanging off his waist. Jesmyn unravels a story of violence in the distant Mexican jungle while we take in an ocean view and wonder what dangers might be waiting just outside.

> **Jesmyn:** I remember how it all started. Bin Laden and the Breadman had been assaulting migrants on the train tracks and they had gotten mad at Chino because he didn't want to help them. They were robbing people with some Guatemalan guys we knew. They were guys who had been working with Sombra before he left. Bin Laden and the Breadman were robbing their own *paisanos* and they wanted Chino to help. But Chino was changing. He'd been doing bad stuff on the tracks for a long time, but that was usually because his friends pressured him to do it or because he was fucked up on drugs or alcohol. He was starting to change and didn't want to do those things anymore.

By this point, Sombra and Santos have already left Pakal-Ná with the group of female migrants they were moving north. Chino's decision to stay behind is his first major step toward separating himself from gang and smuggling life. His refusal to assist others robbing migrants adds to the impression that he has become soft and potentially vulnerable. Jesmyn has a front-row seat to building tensions.

> **Jesmyn:** Things were getting bad between Chino and the Breadman, especially after Sombra left. One night the two of them got drunk

and started fighting about a cell phone. Chino was mad at the Breadman for robbing people, and the Breadman told him to leave the train tracks or he was going to kill him. A few days later, we were at the house and Chino said he was going to buy some marijuana. I got worried and told him, "Don't go outside. Don't go looking for trouble. If you want marijuana, ask someone else to go get it." But he was insistent that he would go, so he grabbed a machete and went out. Suddenly, he came running back to the house. He came back so fast that I got scared. At first, I thought maybe he had done something or killed somebody because of the problems he was having. But nothing had happened. He just said, "Don't go to the train tracks right now because it's dangerous." He said that the Breadman was with some people robbing migrants near where he went to buy marijuana. I now wonder if the Breadman saw him with a machete and thought he was going to attack him.

The next morning the Breadman came looking for Chino at our house, but he was at work. He told me that Chino needed to leave the tracks or he was going to kill him. At this point, there was no one left in Pakal-Ná who would stick up for Chino if something happened, so I knew we had to get out of there. We were both scared, but we didn't have enough money to leave yet. I kept telling Chino we should go, but he wanted us to stay and keep working to save money so that we would have enough to start over someplace else. I think the Breadman heard that we were scared. He knew that no one would protect us if he did something.

The events Jesmyn describes took place a week after I left Pakal-Ná and returned home to teach classes in the fall. I knew the Breadman and Bin Laden, but they had largely been peripheral in my research. I had spent time with the former, hanging out at the Pleasure Palace while he smoked weed and quietly knit handbags that he sold on the streets. I would also chat with him while he hawked pastries he got from the bakery where he and Bin

Laden worked and slept. The Breadman was often guarded about his story, and I never pushed him to talk. He was mostly hanging around while I talked to others. Still, he was always friendly with me, and our conversations often revolved around how much he missed his children and his growing knitting business. On a few occasions, he mentioned in passing that he and Bin Laden had just been released from prison in Honduras and that they had fled to Mexico to avoid an issue that had arisen in their neighborhood.

I had no problems with the Breadman but could tell that others were suspicious of him. I watched Santos get openly hostile toward him over his propensity for never sharing his marijuana or food but always asking others for handouts. Bin Laden, on the other hand, was someone I found to be a complete asshole; he was often aggressive and condescending to practically everyone. I watched him bully other migrants a few times, and he seemed especially focused on trying to corner newly arrived women. On several occasions he was openly belligerent toward me and vocally unhappy with my unwillingness to give him money for various problems that he seemed to invent on the spot. Some days he told me he was a desperate migrant trying to bring his wife up from the south. Other days, I would run into him on the streets with a client and he would play the role of cocky smuggler. In general, Bin Laden was exceptionally suspicious and I tried to give him a wide berth.

Many people shared my sentiment, and Jesmyn's descriptions of tensions reaching a boiling point in Pakal-Ná are not surprising.

> **Jesmyn:** Me, Chino, and the Guatemalan guys were hanging out at our house when Bin Laden and the Breadman came by saying they wanted to talk. I knew they just came to make trouble. I told them, "If you want to talk, do it right here in front of all of us." The Breadman got pissed. He said, "No, we need to talk about this in private. Let's go down to the tracks and talk." Chino just sat on the porch and tried to stay calm. I kept saying, "Work it out right here. Problems don't get solved by fighting. They get solved by talking

about it, so let's talk here." Finally, the Breadman said to Chino, "Let's go. You can bring your girlfriend and your friends with you if you want." So all of us, including the Guatemalans, started heading down the tracks. I never imagined what we were walking toward.

The group stops at a secluded area just outside Pakal-Ná. It's a blind spot where migrants are known to get robbed. Chino and the Breadman begin to have words. "I told you there was going to be trouble around here if you didn't leave," the Breadman tells him. Chino stands his ground. He is scared but refuses to show it. He has a reputation to protect, especially in front of his girl. Jesmyn and the Guatemalans watch as the two men bark at each other. Bin Laden has his back turned to the group and is digging an object out of his pocket.

"That's when I knew they were getting ready to do something," Jesmyn says. "Bin Laden turned back around and I could see he was holding something in his hand. I got really scared, but at the same time I couldn't believe what was happening. I'd never seen anything like that. I never would have believed they could have done something like that."

Chino doesn't see it coming. But Jesmyn does. "When I saw the knife go in I wanted to cry, but at the same time I couldn't. I was frozen."

Bin Laden's blade enters deep into the right side of Chino's chest. He falls to the ground, yelling, "You son of a bitch!" Bin Laden moves quickly to stab him again.

Jesmyn: Chino was screaming. I saw his hands try to block the blows. One wound punctured his lung and the other almost went into his heart, but he grabbed Bin Laden's hand and blocked part of it. I started to cry. I couldn't stand it, Jason. I wanted to jump in to help him, but I knew that if I got in the middle of that, I would have been fucked too."

Jesmyn is rendered immobile with terror. She turns and pleads for the Guatemalans to help, but by now they are halfway down the tracks. She finds herself alone and crying as she watches someone she loves scream for help. Is this what it looked like when her father was stabbed on a street corner in San Pedro Sula fourteen years ago? Have her past and present somehow merged? Bin Laden and the Breadman are enraged, and she worries she may be next.

> **Jesmyn:** I wanted to stay with him, but there was nothing I could do, so I ran. Bin Laden yelled at me as I ran away. He said he would kill me if I called the police, so I went home and hid behind the front door. I strongly believe in God, so I started praying. I said, "Chino is in your hands, God. No one can do anything to him unless you want it to happen." I prayed for twenty minutes and then I got the courage to leave the house and go back to where they had attacked him. There was no one there when I went back, but I saw one of Chino's shoes lying on the tracks. When I didn't see anyone, that gave me hope that he was okay. I thought to myself, "God, please protect him."

BIN LADEN and the Breadman barge through the apartment door excited and out of breath. With eyes running wild, they pace and gesticulate. They smile and laugh.

"We killed him! We killed him! We killed that fucking *culero*!" Bin Laden yells.

"What are you talking about?" Papo asks.

"We killed Chino!" responds the Breadman.

"I thought they were lying," Papo recalls. "They came into the house happy and joking and saying that they killed him. I didn't believe it."

Alma remembers the moment with anger. “These fucking killers showed up and I couldn’t believe how they were acting. They were smiling and excited, but I could also tell that they were scared at the same time. They were fucked up on something. ‘How could you do that to Chino?’ I asked them. ‘We are all migrants here. We are all from the same country.’ ”

JESMYN CAUTIOUSLY WALKS down the train tracks back toward Pakal-Ná. She wonders if she will find Chino lying dead in the bushes. Are Bin Laden and the Breadman now looking for her? She turns a corner and sees a group of people forming several hundred meters away. A police siren starts to get closer. She is too scared to approach.

> **Jesmyn:** I’ve never felt fear like that, so I stayed away from the crowd and watched from a distance. I didn’t want to get close if the police were there. I was worried that Bin Laden would think I called them and then he would try to kill me. As I was standing there watching the crowd, a girl I knew saw me and came running. She said, “Your boyfriend is down there. Go to him. He is asking the police where you are.” In that moment I knew that if he was talking he might be okay, so I was relieved. Then I heard an ambulance and I was sure that he was alive, so I ran home and grabbed some of our stuff and went back outside. But as soon as I left the house, I got a bad feeling. I felt something and got worried and then didn’t want to walk on the tracks again. Something felt really off, so I took the long way to get to the center of Pakal-Ná where all the taxis are. I ran into one of the Guatemalans that was there when Chino got attacked and I told him I needed to get a taxi to the hospital. I told him we should avoid the tracks. We started walking and I could tell he was scared. We turned a corner and that’s when we saw Bin Laden and the Breadman coming towards us.

I was so angry. I really wanted to do something to them. I was so pissed, and at that point I had no fear anymore. I was so angry that I had to do everything I could to control myself. It was in that moment that I wished I had the power to destroy them. The Guatemalan guy got scared when we saw them coming and he crossed the street. I whispered to him to not be afraid and I just kept walking toward them. I showed no fear.

The Breadman stops her. "What's up?" he asks.

"Nothing," she coldly responds.

The two men eye the backpack and bag of clothes she is carrying.

"Is that son of a bitch dead?" the Breadman asks.

"I don't know. I don't know anything," she replies.

"Well, if he is not dead and is in the hospital, we are going to go there and finish the job."

Jesmyn: I wasn't sure if I was mad at them or happy that Chino was alive.

I just looked at them and they could see that I wasn't afraid. They started asking me where everyone else was. I said that I had no idea. At this point, the Guatemalan guy was on the other side of the street and they said to him, "We don't want to see you around here anymore. If we do, we will kill you." Then the two of them started giving me hard looks like they hated me. I think it made them mad that I wasn't acting afraid. I wouldn't show them any fear and they hated that. So then they started trying to sweet-talk me, especially the Breadman, who always liked me. He started talking to me like nothing had happened. He was saying stuff like, "You have such pretty eyes. You are going to have beautiful kids. Why would you be with someone as ugly as Chino? That guy is garbage. You know he has AIDS, right?" They were trying to get a rise out of me and I just kept brushing them off. I said, "I have no idea what you are talking about. I have to go."

> They wanted me to take them back to my house, but I knew I had to get out of there. There aren't a lot of streets in Pakal-Ná that you can use to escape. I thought that they might catch me on one of those small streets and stab me and leave me to die. My mind was running crazy thinking about those things, about what had happened to Chino and what could happen to me next. In that moment I couldn't say anything. I felt like the most voiceless woman in the entire world. I finally just walked away from them and headed to the center of Pakal-Ná where the taxi stand is. I thought that they were going to follow me. I was scared, but I couldn't wait there. I had no choice but to go. Whatever was going to happen was God's will. I just knew I needed to find Chino.

Jesmyn flags down a taxi and heads toward downtown Palenque. By now, darkness has settled over the town as she walks around the central plaza clutching her bags. The place is full of people waiting for a nearby concert to start. She approaches a police officer and tells him she is looking for a friend who has just been hospitalized.

"Which hospital is he in?" the cop asks.

"I'm not sure. How many are there?" she replies.

"Palenque has three. If you want, I can give you a ride to each one until we find your friend."

Once again, Jesmyn gets a bad vibe. It's dark and she's a Honduran woman in a small town in Mexico with no papers. The officer gets visibly annoyed when she politely declines his offer. She quickly heads down the street and hails a taxi. "How many hospitals are there in Palenque?" she asks the driver.

"There's only one," he tells her. "Do you want me to take you there?"

As she drives toward Chino, she wonders what would have happened to her had she accepted that free ride.

Escape

As soon as Jesmyn confirms with the front desk that Chino has been admitted to the hospital, she approaches the security guard at the entrance. “There is a Honduran guy with a stab wound that they just brought in,” she tells him. “If someone comes looking for him or his girlfriend, please don’t let them in. He has no family around here and should have no visitors. Please don’t tell anyone where we are.” The guard assures her that they will be safe.

When she enters his room, she sees Chino laid out on a bed with numerous bandages, tubes, and sensors attached to his half-naked body.

> **Jesmyn:** When I saw him, his eyes were closed. I thought that maybe he was in a coma. But then I got closer and I think he could sense I was there. I got close and he opened his eyes. He looked at me and said, “I didn’t think you were going to come.” That’s when I started crying. I couldn’t hold it in anymore. I was so happy that he was alive, but I was also sad at the same time. I kept telling him he needed to rest and not talk. He was on a lot of painkillers, but he wouldn’t stop talking to me. He just wanted to talk.

For nine days, Chino and Jesmyn sit in his hospital room making plans for the future. The nurses pump him full of saline and donated blood. They feed him oxygen to help with his labored breathing while they drain fluids from his punctured lung. They kindly let Jesmyn sleep in his room as long as the two of them promise not to screw around. When the nurse says this, it makes her blush. For all of her toughness, Jesmyn is a churchgoing young woman who would never think to act inappropriately in such a place. Chino keeps the mood light with his incessant joking about having to wear a diaper and use a catheter. He makes all the nurses laugh with his potty humor. By his second day in the hospital, he is feeling better. He calls me

and texts photos of his injuries. “Jason, look what the Breadman and others did to me,” he says. “They tried to kill me.”

I ask him how I can help and he reassures me that Grupos Beta, the wing of the Mexican government charged with assisting migrants, is going to cover his medical bills and his bus ride home.

“Can I call you back on this number to check in with you later?” I ask.

“Don’t call me. I’ll call you,” he says. “I stole this phone from a security guard, so I keep the ringer off so that he doesn’t figure out I have it.”

“*Pinche Chino*,” I say as we both laugh over the phone.

As his condition improves, he and Jesmyn get more serious about the next steps. They call their families to discuss their plans to leave Chiapas and start over someplace else. Maybe Chino can go back to building houses. Maybe he can even build a little house of their own. They hold hands and pray. Chino talks to Jesmyn about love and God and new beginnings. He speaks to her with a kindness that she finds rare. “In Honduras, a lot of men speak roughly to women,” she tells me. “There are a lot of *machistas* who yell and beat women and then don’t expect them to fight back. Chino never yelled at me. He never treated me poorly. Even when he would get mad at me, he would just stay quiet and then later apologize. He said that I reminded him of his sister Marina.”

At one point Chino thought he was the one saving Jesmyn from Sombra and whatever was waiting for her at the end of the train tracks. As he ponders a new future from his hospital bed, he begins to rethink who is saving whom. He tells Jesmyn, “I thank God for putting you in my life and putting me on a different path.”

A few days before Chino is discharged from the hospital, Jesmyn strikes up a conversation in the hallway with a Honduran patient who has been brought in handcuffed by the police. She explains what has happened and why she is there. The prisoner listens to her story and then hands her 500 lempiras [$20]. “I saw this act of kindness as a sign from God that he wanted us to go home,” Jesmyn recalls. Forty-eight hours later Chino is bandaged up and holding a bottle of ibuprofen as he stares at the passing Mexican countryside through the window of a bus headed south.

He is banged up and frail but feeling happy. The photos Chino sends me from his journey home show him smiling and wearing new clothes. He has lost some weight in the hospital and is looking forward to fattening up on some home-cooked meals at his grandmother's house. At a bus terminal in Puerto Barrios, Guatemala, Jesmyn and Chino strike up a conversation with a Honduran woman and her child who are headed north. "Once you get into Mexico, take a *combi* if you can," Chino tells her. "The roads are very dangerous. It's ugly out there. It's not like it used to be. Please be careful." As he says these words, he gently touches the woman's son on his shoulder and tries to reassure the child that everything will be okay.

When the bus pulls away, Chino remarks to Jesmyn, "After all this, I just want to start over. I want to erase everything and begin again. I know where the Breadman lives in Honduras. I could go to where his family is and pay him back, but his family doesn't deserve revenge and I don't want to retaliate. I don't even want to talk about it anymore." The two of them fall asleep as they make their way back to Honduras and new beginnings.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“We Aren’t Playing”

I’ve been back in the States only a few weeks and I can already tell something is wrong with Kingston. We have parted ways so that I can return to teaching classes at my university. It is difficult to leave him, especially knowing the economic problems he has and the looming danger he is in. We part on good terms, but I can tell he feels like I am abandoning him. I am leaving him behind like practically everyone else he has ever known. But I have to return to work, and being with Kingston has proven expensive for me. Over the many months we were together, I found myself paying for a whole range of things. I covered the cost of transporting his murdered nephew’s body from northern Mexico all the way back to Honduras. I bankrolled his failed attempt to start a food stand out of his apartment. I also occasionally paid for some of his day-to-day expenses, including food and his phone bill.

It is standard practice for anthropologists to compensate the people they work with in various ways, including cash, gifts, and the formation of social bonds (e.g., becoming a godparent to someone’s child). After more than a decade of doing ethnographic fieldwork on migration, I have developed my own set of rules on how to dispense money and resources so that people feel adequately compensated for the time and information they share with me and so that I don’t feel like I am being taken advantage of. In general, I try to pay more than a fair wage if I am taking up someone’s time that they could be using to work a regular job. This was often not the case with smugglers, whom I tended to interview when they were on the clock and

hence were already making money. In these instances, my contribution was usually in the form of things like food and phone credit.

Working with migrants, I have found that people are hesitant to ask for money, and I often have to insist that they let me pay them for their time. Smugglers, on the other hand, have no trouble constantly asking for cash. This makes sense given that a key part of their job is fostering relationships of negative reciprocity with their clients. In other words, get as much money out of someone today because you don't know if you will see them tomorrow. That being said, I created a lot of boundaries with smugglers regarding how much I would give and when I would compensate them for working with me. I wanted to be viewed not as a client but rather as someone who was invested in maintaining a long-term relationship with them. I made it clear that I could be relied on in emergencies, but I didn't want to be viewed as an endless supply of cash. These boundaries seem to have worked well with everyone except Kingston.

With Kingston, things are different and it's partially my fault. With him, it's like I've completely forgotten all of my own rules. I've become a pushover and practically open my wallet whenever he asks, which is often. For some reason, I find it hard to say no to him even when I know he is using me. But I can't help it. He's charismatic and likable, and when things are good, I love being around him. I've gazed into his difficult past and I feel for him. I also know that he is always on the verge of going back to a lifestyle that can land him in jail or the morgue. I want him to find something better and more peaceful than the violent world he was brought up in. Foolishly, I feel like I can help him stay away from danger. Sometimes I think I am being overly nice to Kingston to make up for my own feelings of guilt for my privileged position. Sometimes I think I'm too afraid of him to say no. I have created a relationship in which he thinks I can solve all his problems, and maybe I do too. This situation is not a good place for me mentally, so I am slightly relieved to get away from him for a little while.

The thousands of miles that now separate us give me some perspective on the relentlessness of his requests for money that begin only a week after

we part ways. We exchange text messages almost daily. Our interactions revolve around his paranoia that someone is after him, how broke he is, and a series of catastrophes that may or may not be of his own invention. First, he tells me that he is being chased out of Mexico: "*Mira, mano*, I am at the border and it's really *caliente*. I can't stay here long, brother. I have $200 but need $500 to get across the river. I gotta get out of here." His message comes late at night and I don't see it until the following morning. I call and ask what is happening. He then tells me he is not at the border but is actually in Mexico City and wants to buy a plane ticket to fly north. He just needs me to send him $150 for the ticket and another $300 to get across the river. I suspect he is on a drug bender given the timing of the calls and the sound of his voice. When I tell him I can't send money to pay for his crossing, he stops texting. A week later he calls and says that a family member has been killed in the United States and he wants to send money to help pay for the burial. His call is accompanied by a series of gruesome photos of a young black man in a coffin. I remind him that I previously sent a significant amount of cash to repatriate his nephew's body back to Honduras, and as much as I want to help, I can't keep paying for funerals. Still, against my better judgment, I wire him a little bit of money.

Two days later he calls and says he is getting ready to cross the border by himself to get away from people who are after him. Is he really being chased, or is this drug-fueled paranoia? It's unclear. I wish him luck. Three days later he calls and says he needs help. He is now moving a group of migrants, even though he swore many times that it is too dangerous for him to be on the train tracks.

> **Kingston:** Hey, *hermanito*. Good morning. I'm sending this message to see if you can do me a favor. Listen, man, I need $40 because I'm in trouble. I got people with me, but I can't do nothing because their family is pulling some bullshit and haven't sent no money. I gotta eat and I got babies with me. [*A baby cries on cue in the background.*] I apologize, but please send me money if you

can. At least $20 or $30 just to eat. Last night, someone tried to get me. I'm trying to get to Piedras Negras. Even $10 would be great.

I tell him I can't send any money right now. He says he understands. The next day his pleas increase in frequency. He sends a barrage of messages: *I need money to put credit on my phone. I need money to eat. I need money to buy a bus ticket. Someone is after me. I need money to get away. $20. $30. $50. Send what you can, hermano.* I feel my cortisol levels spike every time he texts me. Is he really in trouble? If something bad happens to him, will it be my fault for not helping enough? I start keeping my phone on silent. His unheard messages pile up. I start to think that what I am feeling is potentially similar to how families of his clients must feel when he squeezes them for more and more money to deal with the real and fabricated expenses and calamities that happen on the migrant trail. I remind myself that fleecing clients is something that Kingston does very well. I have become a client. I stop replying to him. A few weeks later, things ramp up when he starts sending voice messages via WhatsApp.

Kingston: Jason, Jason, Jason. Good morning, brother. Look, I'm having a little problem with this guy here. I need you to call Andy and Snoop. Call all the guys. Tell them they have me. [*Someone mumbles in the background and Kingston speaks to them.*] Give me a chance, *loco*. I'm just trying to talk to my friend. I need to explain to him what is happening so he can call my family. [*Someone grabs the phone and starts yelling at me.*]

Kidnapper: *Oye, güey*, we are from the Mara Salvatrucha and we have been looking for this *cabrón* for a long time! Now we finally have him. We are going to kill him if you don't respond. We are going to send you a video right now to show you what is happening.

If this had occurred early in the course of my fieldwork, I probably would have sent these assholes money without even thinking. But after so

many years of documenting the ways that smugglers swindle clients and their families, I have become overly suspicious of everyone, including some of the people I work closely with. I try to imagine what is happening to Kingston at that moment. I then remember a story he told me many times about being kidnapped in northern Mexico.

> **Kingston:** Once, these dudes grabbed me and some people that I was moving. They locked us in a room and tried to get money from my family. All I had to do was make a phone call to my bosses and I was out of there in just a few hours. The people that had me started to apologize once they figured out who I was and who I worked for. That's the only time I've ever been kidnapped.

Kingston trying to sound afraid on the phone is unconvincing and uncharacteristic given all I know about him. It's also strange that he is asking me to call Andy and Snoop, soldiers who are usually more broke than he is. Plus, he has their numbers. Why isn't he calling them? I send a voice message back to his kidnappers telling them that none of Kingston's friends are answering their phones. The kidnappers call back twice. I don't answer, so they start leaving voice messages, which sound like they are reading from a poorly written script.

> **Kidnapper 1:** We have Kingston. We need you to contact all of his family so that they can send 500 pesos, I mean $500. If not, we are going to kill him right now . . . If you want some video proof, we will send it.

Someone else gets on the phone.

> **Kidnapper 2:** *¿Qué pedo, güey?* What's up, *maricón*? I'm gonna send this faggot back to you piece by piece if I don't get my fucking money. I need my fucking money, *puto*.

Then Kingston sends a voice message. “Jason, do me a favor and call Priest and Snoop and tell them these niggas got me.”

I hear a voice yell at him, “Hurry up, faggot!”

Kingston’s voice is desperate: “Please, man, just call those motherfuckers. Please. Please. Please.”

In the background it sounds like someone is hitting him.

> **Kingston:** [*Speaking to a kidnapper*] *Tranquilo*, brother. Jason, listen, man. They got me and they trying to do some dirty shit to me. These niggas is crazy. [*His breathing gets heavy.*] They crazy, but they gave me a chance to call you so that I can try and get what they are asking for. My family sent like $100 dollars. I just need like $400 more. I gotta pay these niggas because like they said, they gonna kill me! Please talk to my people for me!

Kingston immediately sends another voice message, but now the amount the kidnappers are asking for has changed from $500 to $1,500 and he has miraculously come up with $1,000.

> **Kingston:** Tell Snoop that they want $1,500. I found $1,000. I just need $500 more, brother. That’s what they are asking for. [*His voice cracks as if he is crying.*] We are missing $500. Call those niggas. Tell them to sell all my stuff, my plasma TV and whatever else they can to get the money.

I try to remain calm and send a voice message back.

> **Jason:** Kingston, I called Snoop but he didn’t answer.

> **Kingston:** Snoop ain’t going to do nothing. He is on the street begging for money. I called him but he says he has nothing. Brother, they have me. Please help. They are only giving me like

half an hour more and then they are gonna make a video. [*His breathing gets heavy again.*] Oh man, I gotta make things right or they will make a video with me. They already got me fucked up. See if my people can send me another $250.

In a matter of minutes, the amount he owes has gone from $400 to $500 to $1,000, then down to $250. I can't keep track of the evolving debt. I call back to tell him none of his friends are answering their phones. I then receive the video his kidnappers have been threatening to make. It shows Kingston lying on a concrete floor surrounded by dirty clothes and an electric fan. He is barefoot with his hands and feet loosely tied. His pants are falling down, exposing his boxer shorts. Two men in hooded sweatshirts halfheartedly kick him a few times. It is clear that they are not kicking very hard. Kingston asks them to stop, but he can't help but crack a sly grin. He thinks this shit is funny. I wonder how high he must be to make this video and believe it will be convincing. One of the men leans down with a giant kitchen knife as if he is going to stab him in the face. He then suddenly turns to the camera and says, "Turn that shit off." The video lasts eight seconds.

The acting is so bad it's comical. I don't imagine anyone taking it seriously as a threat on a person's life. What makes it even more unconvincing is the fact that despite being hooded, the assailants' hands are visible, making it clear that both men are black. Given the tight-knit Garifuna community in Mexico, it is hard to believe they would be doing this to one of their own, especially someone as notorious as Kingston. I watch the video over and over. Part of me thinks it's ridiculous and laughable. Another part of me is angry that Kingston would resort to these tactics to extract money from me. But I can't really blame him. He is desperate for cash, and in his world this type of extortion is a well-worn strategy. I don't respond to the video, so the "kidnappers" start sending more voice messages.

Kidnapper: All right, *güey*. We have $150, but you still owe us $250. You want to see another fucking video? You want us to cut his

dick off? We are going to send you a name to wire the money to. We aren't playing, *culero*.

I send one final voice message.

Jason: I don't have the money, but I will call his friends and see if they can help.

Kidnapper: All right, tell them I'm not playing. If nobody sends the money, we are going to fuck him up.

I put my phone on silent and go for a long walk to clear my head. A few days later Kingston sends a voice message on WhatsApp.

Kingston: Hey, Jason. Holla back.

Jason: What happened?

Kingston: Look, man, those guys grabbed me in Piedras Negras and fucked me up. They tortured me for three days. I'm going to send you some photos. It's a miracle they didn't do more damage. [*He never sends the photos.*] I finally got the money and thank God they let me go. Now I'm trying to get out of here. Can you send me $25 so that I can get a bus ticket?

THINGS SOUR between Kingston and me after the fake kidnapping. We stay in sporadic contact, but it often takes numerous messages from him before I feel too guilty not to respond. I just don't have the energy to keep up with his evolving problems, and most of the time when he calls, it is only to ask for money. I try to be there for him, but it becomes harder to do over the phone. He starts talking more and more about being persecuted. He can't go home to Honduras, and Mexico is growing increasingly dangerous. "I'm done with this gang shit," he says. "But people don't believe that and they

are looking for me. I might turn myself in to the Border Patrol to get away from them."

There are long periods of time where I don't hear from Kingston. Then I will receive out-of-the-blue updates from new phone numbers. *¿Qué onda, carnal? What's up, my lost brother? Where are you?* People are still after him. He is still trying to get away. He is running from his violent past but also from himself. He dreams of a reinvention somewhere in the United States, far away from gang life. Maybe Arkansas or Miami or New Orleans. I start to run away from him. I feel guilty as I watch his calls go to voicemail. I return to fieldwork in Mexico, but I keep that fact hidden from him. I avoid places where he might be and I never ask other Garifuna soldiers about his whereabouts. When people find out that he and I were friends, they give me worried or dirty looks. Sometimes they hear his name and spit on the ground. I feel better not knowing where Kingston is. In many ways, it feels like we have reached the end of our relationship. Perhaps we both extracted as much as humanly possible from each other and there is nothing healthy left between us. Maybe I've abandoned him just like everyone else in his life. Maybe I was always just a client. I have dreams sometimes of him dropping me off at a park and saying, "I have to go pick up some money and then I'll get you across." In those dreams he never comes back. I wonder if that's how he feels about me.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Temptation

The words roll off his forked tongue and poison the air. A devil's whisper. "I've got a job for you, Santos," he says. "It's a fucking badass job that I know you can do." This is how the beginning of the end starts. The seduction of desperate young people looking for a way out. Predators peddle hope and prosperity to those who are unsure if they will see the other side of thirty. They offer fast money and power that materializes from flashes of gunpowder and screams for mercy. Profitable violence that becomes addicting and then unsustainable. This new life could be your life. No more sleeping outside. No more feeling like the whole world is shitting on you. No more feeling powerless and unimportant. This could be the real deal. It's only a few months of dirty work until you can save up enough money and then walk away clean. The devil whispers to him, "I know you've got the balls to do this type of work."

Santos thinks about his life up to this point and the continuous cycle of crushing poverty and loss. Hand to mouth and fists to head. Blades inscribing nightmares onto brown bodies. Too many young men like him running for their lives. Too many young men like him no longer drawing breath because they talked out of turn or just had a run of bad luck. He sees his many possible futures through a kaleidoscope: he clings to a screaming freight train, he bangs his head against cell bars, he opens his palms to receive tossed coins from a stranger. All he really wants is to lay his head on a soft pillow and for a little while dream of worlds free of panic and madness. He turns down the offer to join a cartel: "*No, viejo*, I can't do it. I

already know too much about the things you are asking me to get into. I've already lived that life. I know what you're offering me and I just can't do it."

THE AIR-CONDITIONING UNIT jammed into the roughly cut window is working overtime to combat the triple-digit heat that makes Mexicali an inferno in June. The room is dark and cool. We only know it's eleven a.m. because we are blinded every time someone opens the front door and lets in the midday sun. Santos sits on a wobbly chair in basketball shorts and a tank top. He has grown his hair out and now has a long black ponytail sticking out the back of a baseball cap. We lazily sip beers fished out of a paint bucket full of ice water as he describes what happened to him after we last parted ways. "I was living here in Mexicali with these guys I knew from Honduras. They got caught up with *la mafia*. They kept trying to convince me to join them, but I knew better. I knew what they were offering, and it wasn't good. Somehow they convinced my brother Marvin to go with them."

Marvin had always been the family's rock. The mature one. The voice of reason. The oldest of six children who became the de facto patriarch after they put Santos's father in the ground.

> **Santos:** Marvin was still in the army when our dad died. I remember him coming home for the funeral in his military uniform. He was only twenty-three at the time, but he took care of everything. In many ways, he became my father. He started taking care of all of us. I remember him always giving me money and buying me toys. We had been close but became even closer when our dad died.

After serving almost ten years of a distinguished military career, Marvin leaves the army and starts a family. He finds work in an American-owned factory in Honduras that helps him provide for his wife and young child

while also supporting his mother and siblings when possible. The money Marvin earns while working for the Americans is not much, but at least it's stable and less dangerous and demanding than the military had been. For years, he scrapes by at the factory and tries to look out for Santos even when his baby brother is off riding trains across Mexico. It is Marvin who cobbles together the money to get Santos a Mexican lawyer to reexamine his case. It is Marvin who saves Santos from having to serve forty-nine months in prison. The older brother has come through for him in ways that no one else ever has. So when Santos is deported back to Honduras after his stint in prison, he feels like he owes Marvin for saving his life. This is why, when his brother tells him that his marriage is in ruins and he wants to try his luck in Mexico, Santos agrees to guide him north.

Mexican drug cartels have two types of preferred recruits: impressionable teenagers they can mold into young soldiers, and well-trained ex-military personnel who can be motivated with cash to do dirty work. Marvin had never been involved in gangs or criminal activity in Honduras. He is so straitlaced and serious that the *mareros* in his neighborhood respect him and keep their distance. They leave him alone because he is one of those quiet military men who is committed to protecting his family. He gives the impression that he is not to be messed with, which is close to the truth. But Marvin doesn't have much experience on the streets, nor does he fully comprehend what he is getting into. As Santos remarks, "My brother had been in the army and was well trained, so I think he thought it would be easy. He thought it would be simple to get in and do the things the cartel wanted and then he could get out clean. But it didn't go as planned."

Brotherhood

It is ironic that none of the bullets that shatter the windows or rip through the truck's door kill him. Instead, one of those stray projectiles pierces a

flash grenade Marvin is wearing on his tactical vest. It sets off an explosion in the cabin of the vehicle that scorches a significant percentage of his body. Flames run up his arms and back and across his face. His skin peels off like layers of an onion. When he texts Santos images of his heavily bandaged body and head, he is unrecognizable. The brother who had saved his life now seems to be on death's door, another casualty of Mexico's drug war. "I have a feeling that I'm going to die," Marvin tells Santos from an undisclosed location in northern Mexico. "I don't think I am ever going to get out of here. Please come see me," he begs. "Please come say goodbye."

Maybe it's because Marvin has been a loyal soldier, or maybe it's because someone wanted to grant a dying man's last wish to say goodbye to his family, but for whatever reason, the cartel agrees to let Santos see his brother. This sets off a chain of events that could have been pulled from a telenovela.

> **Santos:** The cartel called me and told me to go to a particular train station and they would come for me. I got to the station and waited. A truck picked me up and then we drove for several hours to an airstrip. Then they put me on a little airplane and flew to a small town up in the mountains where my brother was. They had him in a house with a private doctor. The cartel had their own doctors to take care of their soldiers. That's how I ended up in the mountains working on a farm.

At the time this was all happening, Santos and I were in contact via phone. He began sending me photos of himself working in agricultural fields and corralling horses. The COVID-19 pandemic had just started and I was concerned about his potential exposure to the virus. He kept reassuring me that he was fine and that the community he was in had a low risk of exposure. Little did I know that he was living in one of the many remote villages in northern Mexico that are completely controlled by drug cartels—places where no one comes or goes without permission. Places far beyond

the reach of any governmental control. Santos didn't reveal that information until much later, when it was safe to do so.

AT FIRST, NO ONE EXPECTS Marvin to survive. But after a month it becomes clear that he is on the mend. Santos is constantly by his bedside playing the role of nurse as he helps his brother heal and regain movement. Although severely disfigured by the explosion, Marvin is back on his feet in seemingly record time. In just a few months he is well enough to start preparing to go back to work. It is at this point that Santos begins asking about arrangements to return to Mexicali, where he has been renting a room and doing construction work for the last few years.

Jason: How long were you on that farm?

Santos: I was there for like six months. I was trapped up there and they wouldn't let me go. I kept asking them to take me home, but the boss told me I couldn't leave. I said, "Why not? I don't work for you guys. I was just here to visit my brother." They told me that I had seen too much of their business and that if I tried to escape I would have problems. One guy said to me, "If you try to leave, we will kill you."

Jason: What were you doing for those six months?

Santos: After they threatened to kill me, I tried to be nice to them. I tried to do whatever they asked of me. I started working in their fields picking fruits and vegetables. They have their dirty business up there, but they also have their regular business, and so I just got to work doing the regular stuff. Remember when I told you I was working on a *rancho*? That's what I was doing. I was working for them.

Jason: You know, I kept wondering what the hell you were doing on some ranch in the middle of nowhere. I was having a hard time picturing you as a farmer.

Santos: [*Laughing*] I started working for them and didn't complain. I did whatever they asked me to do. I'm not someone who likes to be lazy, so I was always moving around. When they saw that, they started to appreciate me. They said, "This *cabrón* is a real hard worker." They started to like me. I tried to be good and not cause problems, but they still kept telling me I could never leave. My brother started to get better. He began reminding them that I was there to see him and not to work. This is when things started to get tense.

THE EXTENSIVE BURNS across Marvin's face make him look perpetually menacing. But it's not the facial disfigurement that is unsettling. It's the quiet and assured tone of his threats. "You don't want to test me," he says. "You don't want to make problems. You can kill me and my brother, but I promise that I am going to kill a lot of you first. You can kill me, but not before I get at least five or ten of you."

"You seem so sure about what you're saying. How can you be so confident?"

"As long as I have a gun in my hand, you will die too."

"Look, you're going to have to work it out with the boss. I'm going to have to call him."

"I don't care. Get on your radio and call whoever you want. You are the ones who are going to have problems if you don't let Santos leave. My brother didn't come because he wanted to. He is here because I asked him to come. He came here to say goodbye."

"Yeah, but you know the rules. Once you're here, you can never leave. He has seen all of our business and knows our movements."

“Santos is my brother and he won’t say anything. He sees this stuff, but he doesn’t care. He lives far away from here. He doesn’t know anything about this place, nor does he want to. He came to see me and not all the dirty shit you are doing up here.”

They call in the *comandante* to deal with Marvin’s request. He makes one final plea for Santos’s release, coupled with a dark promise.

“Please let my brother leave. He came because I asked him to, not because he wants to work for you. He came to check on me, to see how I am. I will stay here because this is my home. I will die here, but please just let him leave.”

A few days later Santos is running along a slow-moving train headed toward Mexicali. He reaches out for something to grab hold of that will take him far away.

Dancing with the Devil

Months after he is released from the farm, Santos and I are in the house in Mexicali that he shares with a rotating cast of migrants who come through on their way to the United States. He cohabitates with a mix of Mexican and Honduran men who might find local work in construction or landscaping for a few months until they can save up enough money to attempt a border crossing. Santos is one of the few in the group who has not tried to migrate to the United States in recent times. Instead, he has chosen to commit himself long-term to backbreaking manual labor in the punishing Sonoran heat. Aside from his six-month stay with the cartel, he has spent the last couple of years trying to make a go of it in Mexicali. He has watched his friends stay in the house for a few weeks or months before entering the desert on foot. Some have made it. Others have found themselves back in Honduras only to start the journey all over again. Santos desperately wants to get to the United States, but he is also fearful of

detention and deportation. The thought of being incarcerated again is enough to make him gun-shy.

Still, he makes periodic trips to different parts of the border to scout a potential crossing attempt. In one video he sends me from Los Algodones in Baja California, he pans across the unfinished border wall. In the distance a group of migrants are being chased by the Border Patrol. In another, he strikes up a conversation with an immigration agent through slats in the fence. These videos are painful reminders of just how close he comes to finding that new life he desperately wants. But each time he stares into the desert, he thinks about his previous trips through that hellscape and the young *catracho* on death's door that his fellow drug mules wanted to leave behind. He imagines his mother weeping for a son who disappears and is never heard from again. He remembers the drug mule who told him that he was too soft and not capable of doing the bad things required to make it. Maybe that person was right. But that's okay. He doesn't want to give any more of himself away to the darkness. For now, he is content to move cinder blocks under a fiery sun instead of carrying tightly packed bales of marijuana on his back. The work he does in Mexicali is honest, and he feels good about it. This is home for now.

Santos's phone rings. It's Marvin on the line. "Happy birthday," he says to his older brother. "Did you get the 500 pesos I sent you? Okay, good. Use that money to buy a birthday cake and some sodas. My friend Jason, the gringo, is here. We were just talking about you."

Santos hands me the phone, and Marvin and I exchange pleasantries. I wish him a happy birthday and ask if I can come visit. "Yes, please," he says. "You can come see me whenever you want." Marvin is right; he has plenty of time now. Right after Santos escaped the cartel, his brother jumped back into the fire. Today he is celebrating the first of at least twenty birthdays he will have behind bars while serving time in Mexico for murder. In the end, he kept his promise to the cartel that he would continue to be a good soldier.

The life Santos has carved out in Mexicali is not easy. His situation is perpetually precarious, and work is sporadic because he is undocumented.

His movements are all well planned because one stop by a Mexican immigration official can land him right back in prison. But he's currently not begging for change at a streetlight and doesn't worry about someone smashing his head in with a brick while he sleeps on the tracks. He's not living his American dream. But he is also not living the nightmare that characterized almost a decade of being on the streets and locked up. The only fight he is interested in these days is the fight to keep going in hopes that tomorrow brings something better.

He extracts another beer from the paint bucket and begins to shake his ass to Plan B's "Fanática sensual." His roommates and I laugh and cheer him on. It's been many years since I first watched him dance to this song in the jungles of Pakal-Ná. He is older and wiser now but also wearier. However, for a moment it feels like we have time traveled and things are going to be okay. This world still has time left in it to be optimistic and hopeful. There is time to keep dancing in the living room of a dilapidated house on a dusty street less than fifteen kilometers from the United States. This moment reminds me of something Santos once said about working for the *maras* and the cartels: "It's like the devil has a gun and is shooting at your feet to make you dance. You have to keep dancing as long as those bullets are flying, because once you stop, he puts a slug in your chest."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Future Belongs to Those Who Dream

The first explosion scares the shit out of me. I look over just in time to see Flaco lighting off a second firework and tossing it out the car window. "Hahaha!" he screams in delight. I'm driving around with a goddamn oversized Dennis the Menace, but obviously I think it's funny and start laughing. "Play some music," he says. "Play some 2Pac. Play 'Dear Mama.'" A thick bass drum and sharp rim clicks come out of the car's speakers. *If you can make it through the night, there's a brighter day.*

Much has changed since the last time I saw Flaco. He looks a lot rougher around the edges. Bags under his eyes. Deep wrinkles on his face. A few missing teeth. Hardship has sped up the aging process, making him appear much older than he is. He is also the most broke I've ever seen him. "Let's get some beers, foo," he cackles. "I haven't had a beer in like a month because of the new baby. All my money goes to diapers." The last time I saw him in person he was overly concerned about the welfare and future of his then five-year-old son. That child and his mother fled to the United States to seek asylum soon after Hurricanes Eta and Iota battered Central America. Flaco is now in Chiapas with a new teenage Honduran bride and a three-week-old baby girl. "Let's take a ride and I'll show you around," he says.

We begin cruising through Tapachula, a midsize industrial town less than twenty kilometers from the Guatemala border. One of the first things one notices is that the place is populated with thousands of Haitian refugees. In

most parts of Mexico, it's rare to see a black person. In Tapachula, they are practically everywhere: selling bottled water and sodas in the central plaza, standing in line at banks waiting for money wires, sitting on street corners and park benches waiting for something to happen. To get here, many of these folks crossed the Caribbean and traveled for months up from South America. They then had to evade immigration checkpoints on the main roads from Guatemala. To capitalize on this, enterprising Mexican smugglers now offer half-hour rides through the jungle on the back of motorcycles for $100. Where there is desperation, there is a profit to be made.

On our way out of town, we pass a soccer stadium with a parking lot crowded with hundreds of migrants waiting in an enormous line for bus tickets. The Mexican government has offered to transfer them for free to another part of the country where they can attempt to fix their immigration papers. It's unclear exactly where they go. Over the last several months, thousands of Haitians have slept in this parking lot for days and weeks at a time, and it shows. Plastic water bottles and soiled clothes are scattered everywhere. The ground is littered with the remnants of makeshift cardboard mattresses and tents made from plastic sheeting. The smell of overflowing porta-johns is thick in the air. Driving by, it feels like I am looking into a crystal ball. Masses of displaced people fleeing earthquakes, hurricanes, viruses, corruption, violence, and of course, poverty. No disrespect to my Mexican family and friends, but shit has to be pretty unbearable in one's home country if you're seeking refuge in Chiapas, the poorest state in Mexico. All this parking lot is missing is a neon sign that reads *Welcome to our global future*.

WE LEAVE TAPACHULA and head to the nearby coastal town of Puerto Chiapas to grab some beers and seafood. Flaco tells me we don't have to worry about any checkpoints because he can now legally travel across Mexico. He previously lost his humanitarian visa after being arrested on suspicion of smuggling. He proudly shows me his new Mexican residency

card that an immigration agent sold him for $1,500. He is officially documented and can now come and go as he pleases. We sit down to lunch at an oceanfront *palapa*. Flaco starts slamming Modelos and talking about his current situation.

He's been holed up in Tapachula for over a year after surviving COVID and narrowly escaping back-to-back hurricanes. Mexico City and Guadalajara, once places of refuge, have become too dangerous for him. Heading to the United States is also an impossibility given his criminal record there. He would face several years in federal prison if arrested for unauthorized entry. At least in Mexico he can work legally. He might be destitute in Tapachula, but the city is relatively safe compared with his other geographic options. Even though he is largely out of the smuggling game, his reputation precedes him. If he shows up in a place like Lechería or Pakal-Ná, the assumption is that he is moving people. That assumption, even if it's incorrect, makes him a target of scrutiny for the *maras* and the cartels.

It's better to lie low in Tapachula, where he can make ends meet by doing odd jobs and occasionally transporting people from Honduras to southern Chiapas. There is also currently no *cuota* here, so for the time being he can bring migrants with little risk. "I'm not moving people like I was before," he says. "Now I just do little jobs for friends who need help getting here. It's easy because I know the routes and have a visa. I have lots of friends between Honduras and Tapachula." He has just returned this morning with a young man from his old neighborhood who had recently been shot by gang members and needed to escape. It took Flaco three days to go back and forth from San Pedro Sula. These short trips are few and far between, and he usually makes no more than a hundred dollars at a time. Still, it brings in much-needed income, and he doesn't have to be away from his family for weeks or months like before.

A lot has changed about the smuggling game in the seven years that I have known Flaco. For one, more people are migrating across Mexico and headed to the United States than ever before. For Central Americans this increase is the result of unwavering levels of violence and poverty

augmented by the impacts of COVID and the displacement caused by hurricanes. Added to this mix now is a steady stream of people coming from places like Brazil, Venezuela, Cuba, and Haiti. In response, cartels have increased the price of head taxes and frequency of kidnappings. Crossing Mexico is more deadly and costly than ever before. Flaco reflects on these changes when I ask him about the old days.

Jason: Do you miss the life?

Flaco: Well, the truth is that I miss being on the streets like before. Like when you saw me in Mexicali. There was always weed, beer, women! You know how it is. It was always like, "Let's fucking do this!" [*He mimics snorting cocaine off an invisible key.*] I miss all that. Before I used to have *billete*. I was moving a lot of people. Sometimes I had like forty to sixty people on the train and was taking them all the way north. I had money then. In those days the *mareros* were only charging $100 in Palenque and the Zetas were only charging $100 in Coatza. Then it was another $100 for the *maras* in Tierra Blanca and another $100 in Orizaba to the mafia. It only cost $400 and then you could get all the way to the northern border. Those guys that you paid the *cuota* to even took care of you, but now it's different. If you don't have money, they kidnap you. Even if you do have money, they still might kidnap you. It's a lot uglier now and there's more costs. Places that used to not have *cuotas* now have them. You have to pay $100 in Huixtla and $100 in Villahermosa. You used to be able to go through those places for free. Now the mafia is even making the guides pay. Before, you could go from Honduras to Houston for $7,000. You would pay $1,000 per person to the mafia and they would let the guide pass for free. Now they want $4,000 per person to cross Mexico and they even make the guide pay. The *pollero* has to pay $4,000. Honduras to Houston now costs like $12,000 to $15,000. It's bigger money these days, so if they catch

you without paying or with no cash, they will kill you. Now everything is harder and you make less *dinero*. It's more expensive for everyone. I mean, imagine having to pay $4,000 yourself just to smuggle a group. It's not worth it. But people are still willing to pay that money, and guides are still taking them. But not me, I'm done. It's been three years since I took a group all the way north.

As we eat and stare at the crashing waves of the Pacific, the topic of kidnapping comes up, another factor that led to Flaco's decision to essentially retire. He tells a story about a Garifuna guide who was recently assaulted in Veracruz and robbed of several thousand dollars.

Flaco: The *moreno* had a whole bunch of people with him in a hotel. The mafia came and kidnapped him and made him pay a shit ton of money. He thought he was all tough because he had the cash to pay them. He tried to pay them off and be on his way, but the mafia didn't care that he could cover the *cuota*. He had a lot of people in his group, so they just decided to torture him and take all his money. They cut off one of his fucking fingers with a cigar cutter, bro. It's not worth it anymore. The kidnapping and torture are too out of control. I'd rather be selling vegetables in the park than be back on the train tracks.

I show Flaco the video that Kingston sent when he tried to convince me that he had been kidnapped. He scoffs at it and then describes a recent run-in that his sister had with the cartels.

Flaco: That video of your friend is *puro show*. When they kidnapped my sister, they sent me videos where they had a knife up to her neck. It scared the hell out of me. I thought it was a joke, but then I saw it and man it was fucked up. They had her two-year-old kid. They sent me a video of my little nephew with a black plastic bag wrapped around his head and a knife to his throat. I

thought they were going to kill him. I was shitting my pants. But that video you showed me is a joke. When they send real videos you know it. They send videos where they hit some *vato* in the head or the face with a machete and then blood comes out. Then you know it's real. That video you showed me is *pura mamada*. If that was real, he would have been begging and crying for help. Look, I don't even like my sister. She is an *hija de puta*. But she is still my sister, and her child is my nephew, so when they sent me those videos, I didn't have any choice but to help them get out of there. What the mafia is doing now really scares me. I'm afraid of getting kidnapped and killed.

Jason: But is it hard not to go back to all that money?

Flaco: Yeah, but it's different now because of my baby. I can't do that kind of work anymore now that I have my little daughter. I have seven other children, all of them boys, but they are all okay. It's my daughter that I really worry about. She is so little and I have to take care of her. I have to find safer work so that I can provide for her and my wife.

Flaco often talks about his other children, but it is clear that he has largely abandoned them.

The last time he went missing, I reached out to his previous partner and mother of his youngest son to ask about his whereabouts. Her response was simple: "I don't speak to him anymore. I have no idea where he is or what he is doing."

In the beginning of our relationship, when I would hear Flaco speak about how much he loved his children, I found it endearing. Now when he says things like, "My other kids are okay," I can't help but think about him repeating the cycle of parental abandonment that often leads to life on the street. It's the road that Kingston and Chino followed early in their youth that led them directly to the train tracks. Will Flaco's children end up on the same path? Will he disappear from his new baby's life in a few years? It's

hard to know. I will, however, say that in Tapachula there is something different in his voice and demeanor when he talks about his daughter. Her birth seems to have already slowed his pace and discouraged him from getting back on the migrant trail. Perhaps things are different now. Maybe he is out of the game and will see his fortieth birthday. Maybe his love for this little girl will help him break the cycle of walking away from his family.

Hold on Hope

Flaco leads me through the house where he and his wife and daughter are staying. It's a run-down structure on the outskirts of Tapachula, just a few blocks away from the Río Coatán, a body of water that snakes all the way to the Pacific Ocean. There are several rooms in the front portion of the house, followed by a covered concrete patio with an outdoor bathroom and kitchen. Behind the patio is a separate building with a studio apartment currently occupied by a Haitian family. "That's where the baby sleeps," he says, pointing to a hammock hanging outside. "My wife and I sleep on the patio floor. I can't afford to pay the rent on the rooms inside, but the landlord lets us sleep out here for free because of the baby. Whenever the rooms aren't being rented, he lets us use them." I knew Flaco was living rough, but I wasn't expecting to see him this impoverished. Gone are the days of making thousands of dollars per trip and maintaining houses in Pakal-Ná, Guadalajara, and Honduras. The king of the train tracks now sleeps on the ground. There is no plasma TV, no booming stereo, no bags of cocaine. Just a cold concrete floor and a few personal possessions tucked away in a corner.

Flaco introduces me to Salvador, a Nicaraguan man who rents one of the front rooms. He has been in Tapachula for a few months and is planning to start working his way north soon. We sit on the patio as Flaco holds his new daughter and talks about his recent struggles.

Flaco: It's been hard, *hermano*. I couldn't pay the rent on time at our last place because I had to use the money to buy stuff for the baby. The landlord didn't care. He kicked us out the day after my daughter was born. Can you imagine that? We were lucky that the landlord here let us move in.

Jason: So what are you going to do?

Flaco: I just got to keep working. I've been helping clear land for construction projects and sometimes bringing people here from Honduras. It's not easy, but you got to do it.

Salvador: I've been telling Flaco he needs to get out of this house. He needs to get his own place so he doesn't waste money paying rent. He needs to settle down.

Flaco: Let's go to the river. I want to show you something, Jason.

FLACO UNRAVELS the rusty chain that keeps the front gate of the shanty closed. "This is my friend's place," he says as we enter the one-room shack made from salvaged scraps of wood, sheets of corrugated metal, and black plastic tarps. A fence made of chicken wire surrounds the tiny property. Two mangy dogs are tied to a pole out front. Flaco rounds up a few buckets and tree stumps for people to sit on. His wife, Susana, a quiet nineteen-year-old, gets settled in the corner and rocks the baby to sleep. Flaco seems to be on his best behavior around her. He is still loud and occasionally inappropriate when talking to others, but he speaks to her in soft tones and constantly checks to make sure she and the baby are comfortable. Earlier, at lunch, I watched him chug six beers in fifteen minutes, but now he nurses his Modelo. We sit on the patio while Flaco rolls a joint and the sun sets over the nearby river. Everything feels momentarily simple and beautiful.

Flaco: No one owns any of this property here. If you clear the land, you can build a little house and no one will bother you. You don't have to pay rent. There's a Mexican family down the way that just built a place. There are some Hondurans I know who also want to move in here.

Salvador: I keep telling Flaco that he needs to build a little house. It's smarter to buy some sheets of plywood and make something. Then you aren't wasting money paying to live in someone else's house.

Jason: Flaco, how much do you think you need to build something here?

Flaco: Maybe like $1,500. That's why I gotta keep working. No money, no honey [*laughs*].

Salvador: Flaco says you are writing a book. What's it about?

Jason: It's about the lives of *guías* and how they end up doing the job. I think most people believe that smugglers make a lot of money and that all that they do is bad stuff. But the story is not that simple. Obviously, a lot of guides do terrible things like steal from people and abuse them. But I also think that some actually try to help people. I also know that a lot of smugglers are struggling themselves. Many of them are living on the streets and have nothing.

Salvador: Well, that's true. Just look at Flaco. He's been doing that work for a long time and he has nothing. He sleeps on the floor.

Flaco nods in agreement. He stands up and tells Salvador and me to follow him to the river. The sun is disappearing over the horizon, but its final rays cast a warmth over Flaco's weary brown face. It's the golden

hour, and he looks like street royalty, holding a joint in one hand and a beer in the other. Printed on his shirt is *The future belongs to those who dream*, next to a drawing of a skull. He makes gestures at the surrounding landscape like a real estate developer with grand ambitions. “I would clear this area first,” he says, pointing to a patch of dirt and rubble. “Then I’d bring in a bulldozer to flatten the land and put a little house up. There’s a well nearby for clean water. Over there I would plant some fruit trees. God willing, I’ll build my family a home here. It could be really nice.” He’s right. This could be a good place to settle down. A refuge away from the train tracks and all the violence and misery and ghosts that haunt that place. Maybe he *can* build something here.

As we are talking, I get a text message from a friend in Mexico City. A tractor trailer with more than one hundred migrants inside has just crashed in Chiapas a few hours north from where we are. Fifty-four people have died. In the not-so-distant past, Flaco could have been riding shotgun and giving the truck driver directions. Jesmyn, Alma, Papo, and the kids could have been in the back. I tell Flaco the news. He shakes his head and says, “It’s only getting worse.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Soldier Who Would Be King

Chino slumps into a plastic chair and surveys his surroundings. The room is uncomfortably full, mostly with gray-haired old ladies and small children. Many of the men his age and social class are out on the streets or the train tracks, both groups chasing something elusive and often unfulfilling. He stares at the machete scars running across his arm. They have become a road map guiding him to this moment in time and space. The fingers on his right hand twitch uncontrollably, as if tapping out some secret code, perhaps an SOS. He's been asking for help his entire life. But why ask for help in a world that only abandons and disappoints? The pastor eyes the nervous young man from across the room. He knows the type all too well. Kids like him come here only when they are on the verge of something. This person has been brought to the house of God for a reason.

The pastor calls out, "Brothers and sisters, something powerful has just entered our church. I can feel it. Can you feel it? Is there someone who wants to come forward and confess?" Chino knows that the pastor is talking directly to him. He suddenly feels all of his pain and sorrow welling up inside; it's a lifetime of grief and rage that boil his blood and sometimes turn him into a monster. "Does anyone here want to confess?" the pastor repeats. Chino is suddenly on his feet as if someone or something has picked him up.

"The next thing I knew he was at the front of the church," Marina remembers in awe. "I didn't see him walk. It was as if he flew across the

room. It was like he levitated."

The pastor puts his hands on the young man's shoulders and asks, "What is your name, brother?"

Chino pauses for a moment. He knows that in God's presence he must be honest. "My name is Roberto."

"Dear God, please help this young man," the pastor cries. "He has a powerful demon inside of him! Help him, Lord! Help him! Who in here is with Roberto today?" Marina raises her hand and the pastor beckons her to the front of the room. "We need you, *hermana*," he tells her. "Your brother has an evil force working on him. He needs your prayers." Chino begins to weep and tremble. He starts to release something dark from deep inside him. His aching voice fills the room as he begs God for forgiveness.

"Marina, I am burning!" he tells his sister. "I am burning! My feet are on fire!" His words and his writhing scare her, but she reaches out to give him comfort.

"I grabbed his arm and it felt like something powerful was holding on to him," she recalls. "His skin was hot to the touch and he was shaking wildly. He started testifying to all the bad things he had done in his life. He testified in a way that shocked everyone in the room."

"Demons!" the pastor yells. "Demons! He has demons inside that are stronger than him! We must pray them out!"

Tears roll down Chino's face as he pleads to the heavens for forgiveness. He promises God he will change his ways. He repents and repents and cries until he hits the point of exhaustion. He releases the darkness festering inside him. When he has nothing left to give, he quietly returns to his seat. He whispers to Marina, "Thank you for bringing me here. I feel like a burden has been lifted. I feel so much lighter now."

On their way out of church, the pastor pulls Marina aside and says, "It's good that you brought your brother here today. The spirit of death is very strong inside of him. Your brother walks with death. It persecutes him." A few weeks after his confession, Chino will walk toward Mexico for the last time.

IT TAKES JESMYN AND CHINO three long days on buses to get from Palenque to Villanueva, Honduras, where his sister lives. Three days of rattling mufflers and ceiling-mounted TVs blasting poorly dubbed American movies. The two of them hold hands and whisper secrets as they take in the changing views outside their window. They are happy to put Pakal-Ná in the rearview mirror. They are happy to finally escape the train tracks. Honduras is still the place of insecurity and uncertainty that the two of them have been running from their entire lives. But at least they will face it together. There is hope in unity.

MARINA WELCOMES CHINO and his new girlfriend with open arms. "When I saw him," she remembers, "I was so surprised. I thanked God for bringing my brother back to me because he was different. He wasn't aggressive anymore. He was talking about having kids and getting a job and having a better future. He wasn't the person who I watched leave before. He had changed."

Chino is exhausted and pale but assures everyone that he is feeling better. He just needs time to recuperate from the knife wounds and the long bus ride. The couple plays house at Marina's for two days. They make plans to find their own place while Jesmyn starts plotting out job prospects. Chino takes restless naps and finishes what is left of the ibuprofen he brought from Mexico. "I'm okay," he keeps telling everyone. "I just need to get some sleep."

On the third day home, he takes a hot shower and then tries to change the bandages on his chest. Finally, he admits to Jesmyn that something is wrong. "I can't take it anymore," he tells her. "The pain is too much. I think I need to go to the hospital."

Being broke and sick in Honduras is often a death sentence. The closest poor people usually get to a doctor is whatever advice they can elicit from a neighbor or a pharmacist. If you are lucky, maybe you can access a free

clinic. If the clinic can't treat your ailment, people will reluctantly and begrudgingly go to the public hospital, where they encounter long lines, overworked and often indifferent staff, and the wails of those close to dying. Everyone knows that the quality of care you receive is dependent on how much cash you are carrying in your pocket. This is why poor people don't go. The hospital is usually the last option.

Marina and Jesmyn bring Chino to the neighborhood Red Cross. He can barely walk or breathe. He is ghostly white and dripping with sweat. The staff take one look at him and tell the family that he needs emergency surgery right away. They pile into a taxi and head toward San Pedro Sula. Roberto starts to break down. He hugs and kisses his sister and says, "I'm bad, aren't I, Marina? I'm a bad person."

"Why would you say that?" she asks.

"I'm bad because I'm going to make our mom suffer when I die. My poor mom. Please don't tell her when I'm dead. It will kill her."

Esperando

The Honduran public hospital is the medical nightmare you might expect it to be. It is clear that Chino needs immediate attention, but the family hits a series of frustrating financial and logistical roadblocks. Marina bitterly recalls checking her brother in.

> **Marina:** In Honduran hospitals they don't treat you like humans. They treat you like an animal. In other countries you walk through the front door and there is someone there to help you. Someone to ask what you need. Not here. When we finally saw a doctor, they just gave Roberto a saline drip. They said they needed to operate on him, but no one explained to us what was going on. They said he needed an operation, but they couldn't do it for four days. It

was clear he needed surgery the day we checked him in. He had a punctured lung and couldn't breathe.

Chino struggles to draw breath and can barely move. They are in a hospital, but it feels as if the family is on their own in this living nightmare.

Marina: You wouldn't believe how bad the hospital was. No one would help us. We had to carry Roberto up three flights of stairs to his room because he couldn't walk. We had to rent a machine that cost 2,500 lempiras [$100] because his lungs weren't working. Thank God we found the money. I can't tell you how happy that little kid was once we got him on that machine. It was like God himself was giving him breath. After we got the machine, we then had to go out and buy everything else ourselves, including syringes and cotton balls. I had to find seven pints of blood before they would perform his operation. In that hospital they only cared about money, not the patients.

After securing a ventilator, Chino's condition stabilizes and everyone nervously awaits his surgery. He passes much of this time with Jesmyn and Marina by his side. Both of them pray and speak to him about the power of God to help him heal and find a new way in life. Jesmyn begins to open up to him about her own religious beliefs.

Jesmyn: In Pakal-Ná I never really talked about religion or prayed in front of him. But in the hospital I prayed so that Roberto could hear me. I was praying for him. I wanted him to hear me because he needed God more than me. I would read Psalm 91 to him.

" 'Because he loves me,' says the Lord, 'I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call on me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.' "

> In the hospital we talked a lot about how he was going to change. He said he was going to stop using bad words and start going to church. We had so many plans, Jason. Everything was going to turn out okay. My mom and sister were going to help us find an apartment. We were going to get jobs and live together. Everything was going to work out. He had started changing his ways and how he thought about things [*crying*]. I was happy when he found religion. He said to me, "God put me on this road that I am on. This is my opportunity to repent."

For four days, Jesmyn and Marina keep Chino company. They pray and laugh together and try to keep his spirits up. The women sleep on the floor and refuse to leave his side for longer than it takes to go to the bathroom, grab something to eat, or chase down medical supplies. But every time Jesmyn leaves, Chino gets nervous and agitated.

> **Jesmyn:** He would get mad if I was gone too long. He would get jealous if he saw me talking to a security guard and be upset when I came back. It would make me sad, but I thought about it later and I think he always felt abandoned. His birth mother left him, and later on she loved her boyfriends more than him. I think he was suspicious of women because he had been abandoned. I think he was worried that I was going to leave him too. But he was a kind person and we were friends. I really loved him.

The family waits and waits and grows increasingly frustrated. The rotating cast of physicians they encounter are often condescending and dismissive of the family's questions and concerns. One doctor comes to the room and tells them everything is fine. Another comes in and says they need to operate soon. Every day they hear a different story. All the while, Chino writhes in pain as his lungs fill with fluid and his breathing becomes more labored. He starts to lash out at any doctor who comes within earshot. He begs Marina to take him away from this house of horrors.

“Marina, what are the doctors saying?” he asks.

“They say that you will have your surgery very soon and that you will be okay.”

“No, Marina, these people are lying. Make them tell you the truth.”

“Roberto, what can I do? I am asking every doctor I can for news. Some of them just ignore me. Others keep saying, ‘Trust the process. You must be patient.’ ”

Understandably, Chino is losing patience. It’s hard to trust the process while drowning from the inside. Marina agonizes over having to bear witness to her brother’s pain and frustration.

> **Marina:** After four days he wanted to get out of that hospital. He kept saying, “Move me! Move me! Get me out of here, Marina! I’m dying in here!” I kept asking him, “What can I do?” He was screaming, “I don’t want to die here! Please ask the doctors what is wrong with me. Please help me!” We were so desperate and it hurt so much to see him like that. I started wishing that I had all the money in the world so I could get him to a private clinic or make them operate on him right then. I would have done anything. I wanted to help him so bad, but we just didn’t have the money. If we had 20,000 lempiras [$825] they could have operated on him right then.

At this point, it has been a week since I have had any communication with Chino or Jesmyn. Neither one of them has a cell phone, so I can’t directly contact them. The last message I received from them was from a stranger’s phone they borrowed in a bus station in Guatemala. I am at my house in Michigan and have no idea that at that moment Roberto is dying in a hospital because his family can’t raise $825 to expedite his operation.

Four days after being admitted, Chino finally gets his surgery. For three hours, a doctor works to repair the large stab wound in his right lung that has been filling his chest with fluid. They close him up and wheel him back

to his room, where his sister is waiting. He is groggy but happy and optimistic. Marina's voice quivers as she remembers this moment.

> **Marina:** At six p.m. they brought him back. *Mira*, Jason, when I saw him he looked like such a tender child lying there. He was in his bed and had all these tubes coming out of him. He looked at me and said, "I told you that I was going to make it. I told you I would get out of this." I held his hand and he asked me if everything was going to be okay.

Chino is in a lot of pain but is still lucid enough to become angry at the doctors for their slowness. Jesmyn and Marina recall tense moments with medical staff immediately after he returns to his room.

> **Jesmyn:** After he finally had surgery, Roberto was pissed at the doctors for making us wait so long. He started yelling, "Let's get out of here. These sons of bitches are killing people in this place! Look at how they have abandoned me in this room! They won't even give me any water!" At that point because of the operation and the medication he was on, he couldn't drink any water. He was only getting fluids through a tube. The doctors were bad, though. They kept yelling back at him, "Please stop screaming or you will rip your stitches. If you want to die, then go ahead and drink water."

> **Marina:** By this point he had gone eight days without drinking water. All he could have was a saline drip. He was crying to me, "Marina, please give me water. Please help me! I can't take it anymore." His words hurt so bad. It felt so cruel to not be able to give him anything to drink, but the doctors said that even if we put water on his lips it could kill him.

Chino has a restless night of sleep. He struggles to draw breath while feeling as if he were dying from thirst. In the morning, his condition takes a bad turn.

> **Marina:** He started getting worse after the operation. The next day he couldn't breathe. One of his lungs had stopped working. They did an X-ray and saw that the fluid in his chest had moved to his other lung. After the X-ray he came back to the room and was a lot worse. By that point they had to intubate him because he couldn't breathe. They didn't have a machine available, so a nurse had to manually pump air for him. They said the machine he needed would cost 50,000 lempiras [$2,000]. If I couldn't buy one, the other option was to try and rent one from an NGO, but they didn't have one available. I went to the head of the hospital and begged them, but they said I would have to wait until someone died and then they could give the machine to my brother. They gave me numbers to call to try and rent one, but we had nothing left. We had just enough to cover the small things like medicine. But I kept believing that God was going to help us find the money to rent a machine, but that didn't happen. The doctor told me, "Your brother is very frail, so I am going to be frank with you. If you don't find a machine, he is going to die."

Chino has walked with death his whole life: The sickly baby cradled by his grandmother in the back of a truck lumbering toward a free clinic in hopes that they can save his life. The teenager who dodges a bullet because he is asleep in a nearby hammock when a gunman murders his friend. The young man whose dead heart miraculously comes roaring back to life after losing so much blood on a street corner in San Pedro Sula. But you can cheat death only so many times before your luck runs out, and luck is a lot harder to come by when you are poor.

Juan Roberto Paredes, aka "Chino," is barely twenty years old when he says goodbye to a world that has rarely been kind to him. He takes one last walk with death but is surrounded by two people who love him very much.

Marina: The last time I saw Roberto he was intubated and moaning. I kept saying, "Fight, *papito*! Fight! Don't give up. You can beat this!" He tried to hang on. We were there with a pump, manually giving him air by hand. In the end, he was just gasping for breath and the suffering he was going through was hurting me so bad. I was praying hard every day for him to live, but I also didn't want to see him like that. After a while, I couldn't bear it. I had to leave the room. I touched his face and then let go of his hand. His hand just fell to his side. I had to run out of there. I was praying in another room with Jesmyn when a doctor came in to tell us that he was gone. He died on August 21 at nine o'clock at night [*crying*].

Jesmyn: The last time I saw him, he was asking God for help and for strength. I was holding his hand and he was struggling to breathe. By then, the doctors knew he wasn't good. He was in bad shape and was getting worse. We were all praying in another room that he would get better. But at the same time, we didn't want him to suffer anymore. When the doctor came in to tell us the news, I knew what it was right when I looked at her. She told us that he was dead, and it was like a stake in my heart. The doctor said, "We did everything we could. There was nothing more we could do." I wanted to see Roberto because I didn't believe it, especially after all the things we had been through. I went to see him and I thought he was just sleeping, but he wasn't. In that moment I couldn't cry or anything. I didn't believe it. I don't know . . . It's like you're with someone and then you're not. [*She pauses for a long silence and then begins whimpering.*] I never imagined that God would have it turn out like this. I never imagined this happening. Roberto was so strong. He didn't want to die. But God knows what He is

doing. I won't deny God, because He is perfect, but it hurts getting used to not seeing Roberto, to not being with him and hearing his voice. I know that I will have a better life than he did, and now I just have to do my part so that I can see him again one day when God comes for me [*Jesmyn and Jason crying*].

Even as he died a slow and painful death, Chino seemed to have found something to ease his pain.

Marina: In the hospital he asked us to pray for him. He asked me to read the Bible and sing hymnals. I even brought a pastor who he told his sins to. Roberto repented for everything. Then the pastor prayed and did the oration for reconciliation. Roberto reconciled with God. Afterward he said, "I feel better, Marina, because now God knows all that I have done, but please don't hate me." I told him that I could never hate him because I understood all the things that he had been through in the past. From then on, Roberto was able to leave all of his suffering behind. Sometimes I wonder why this happened, and other times I thank God that it is all over because in some ways Roberto is not suffering anymore. When he was alive, he suffered. When he was sick, he suffered. When he was in Mexico, he suffered. When he was with us here in Honduras, he suffered. So in some ways he is not suffering anymore, because honestly, that was not the life that I wanted for Roberto. That was not a life I wanted for him, because all of my brothers had suffered. Now they are all gone. But in his final moments, God gave Roberto an opportunity to repent, and he went with Him in peace.

Velorio

Chino's body is sent to his parents' house for the wake. They dress him in a white shirt and black slacks and place him in a coffin outfitted with a window that exposes his shoulders and head. His puffy, waxen face is visible through the glass frame, which has a large crack across it that someone has tried to repair with packing tape. Embalming fluid has leaked out of his body, and his white shirt and the pillow under his head have a smattering of red stains. The coffin is flanked by flowers and a photo of him in the hospital smiling. As hard as it is to look at him, he has a slight grin on his face, as if he is laughing in his sleep.

The wake goes on all night. The neighbors bring food and drinks. Soft music plays in the background. Marina holds her mother's arthritic hands while trying to keep her composure. She worries that any display of her own overwhelming grief could kill the frail old woman. Jesmyn hasn't yet allowed herself to grieve but finally loses it when she sees the coffin. The tears she has been holding in for days (maybe years) come out of her at full force. The tears will come for a long time afterward as she tries to make sense of this new reality she finds herself in.

Roberto's grandfather Inocente, who is not one for displays of emotion, will break down crying as he faces the prospect of burying another child. He tells Marina, "I will stay with him as long as I can. I will stay with him until the final moments." The old man sits all night with his little boy until it is time to bury him next to his other sons.

All of Chino's wild friends come to the wake. They bring booze and revelry and shovels to dig his grave. They get shit-faced on *guaro* and scream in the street, "Chino! *¡Mi perro!* Why did you leave us!" They act out a mourning ritual that they seem to have memorized. It's a ritual that Chino himself knew all too well from having to say goodbye to his brother and the many friends he outlived in his twenty years of life. Later the young men from his neighborhood will congregate in the cemetery and cry into the night, just as they have done many times before.

CHINO IS BURIED next to Miguel, the older brother he worshipped and loved. As I sit near his grave, I envision the many nights he spent here drinking and crying and cursing God for taking Miguel away. I find some comfort in the fact that the brothers are now together forever. Chino's young nephew and niece sweep the final resting spots of their father and uncle and then lay down bunches of wildflowers they have picked. "This cemetery is filling up with the youth," Marina tells me. "The old people are getting worried that there will be no space left for them." Her parents have buried all of her brothers and two sisters in this graveyard. I look at the children playing in the grass and hope that they will find a better world than the one those around them inherited. I hope that no one will have to find room here for either one of them for a very long time.

We walk back to Roberto's grandparents' house to have lunch. Before we start eating, I tell them that I forgot something at the cemetery and will be right back. It is an excuse to have a few minutes alone at his grave. As I stare off into the green valley just below the graveyard, I suddenly find myself transported back to my bedroom in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I am looking out the window at my neighbor's perfectly manicured lawn. My bare feet are warming in a patch of August morning sun projected onto the hardwood floor. In that moment I keep hitting Play on a short voice message from Jesmyn. The message is simple and direct. "Chino is dead." She has sent a photo of him on a gurney. His mouth is covered with a ventilator. Tubes and wires radiate off his body like snakes. His *catracho* tattoo is partially visible on his left arm. He is cold and lifeless under fluorescent hospital lights. I am motionless staring at my neighbor's lawn. I have no tears yet because I am in disbelief. I think about a kid on top of a freight train smiling and flashing a peace sign. I think about a kid scared shitless in the back of my car telling me he needs to find a way out or they are going to kill him. I think about me driving away as Chino waves goodbye from the train tracks in Pakal-Ná. It doesn't matter that I know full well that the violence and poverty and murderous desperation on the

migrant trail are beyond my control. The only thing that matters to me in this moment is that I left and he stayed behind.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Epilogue

Thank you for your presentation," he says. "It's obvious you were deeply impacted by Chino's death. I have a question, though, and I don't mean to sound callous, but why should we care? I mean, smugglers do horrible things, and many of them die because of it. There are a lot of Chinos in the world."

I stare back at this person and the mostly academic audience that has just listened to me talk about Chino, Kingston, and others for the past hour. I can see some people nodding their heads in agreement with this person's statement. Behind me on a PowerPoint slide is a picture of Chino lying bare-chested on a hospital gurney. It's been years since the photo was taken, but telling his story always makes me feel as if he died just a few minutes ago. Speaking of his death conjures up a range of emotions inside me. Sorrow for the loss of life. Regret for all that I didn't do. Anger because this nightmare is never-ending. Guilt because I stand here in front of a crowd peddling stories of other people's misery. The harsh lights of this university auditorium shine down on Chino's image, giving the impression that we are conducting an autopsy on him. Maybe we are.

I pause to think about the question posed to me. I have been asked similar versions of it many times before. I think I know the response this person is looking for. They want easy answers. They want me to make something as complex and unsettling as smuggling legible and digestible so that they can feel better and perhaps have something smart and concise to scribble in a notebook. Maybe they want me to say that in the end Chino was a hero for running away with Jesmyn. Maybe they want me to say something about forgiveness and the high price of redemption. But I am not in the business of hero-making. Nor is it my place to speak about someone else's redemption. Like the last page of a Willy Vlautin novel, this story

comes to an end, but there is no guarantee of a brighter future or happy resolution. Even after there are no more words on the page, the people you have read about will keep on struggling. They will keep moving from one place to another in search of hope. I'm not sure that I have the answer this person wants. All I know is that the realities of the violent world of undocumented migration are complicated.

Human smuggling is a brutal social process that people around the world experience every single day. Chino was just one person caught up in something much bigger than himself and that thing killed him. But he is not unique. There are many just like him around the world in the same predicament who will eventually end up dead or in prison because of the crucial role they play in our growing global migration crisis.

After my talk, someone will pull me aside and say they didn't like what I had to say about smugglers because it made them feel conflicted. They thought that my presentation might have humanized them too much. I respond that smugglers are in fact always complicated human beings. Don't get me wrong, I completely understand that because of the nature of their work they are unlikable, if not outright detestable. But perhaps it's not just smugglers we should be directing our ire toward. What about the larger forces at play that create the violent system of clandestine movement? Every year millions of people are illegally transported across international borders because they are looking for a better life and increasingly fleeing different forms of death. This process is helped along by the fact that there are many low-paying jobs that need to be filled in the Global North. Unfortunately (and often foolishly), migrants have to rely on criminals to protect them from the dangers created by border enforcement policies in places like the southern Mexican train tracks, the Darién Gap of Panama, and the Mediterranean Sea. Global inequality keeps Chinos of the world in business. His death should inspire empathy, guilt, and rage because in different ways, many of us are implicated in it.

As I write these words, news stories are spreading about fifty-three migrants who died after being cooked to death in the back of a tractor trailer in San Antonio, Texas. This story is shocking to the American public

because of the high number of fatalities and the barbarity of the deaths. Blame will be (and should be) placed on the smugglers who loaded the truck with people and then abandoned them in the midday Texas sun to die. This story is horrific, but it is not an anomaly. Migrants die every day along the U.S.-Mexico border and elsewhere, and there is largely no public outcry. Moreover, culpability cannot be exclusively attributed to smugglers. Border crossers die in the Sonoran Desert and the South Texas backwoods because global forces and inhumane border enforcement policies push people to make extreme choices in order to save themselves and their families. The unspoken logic is that if people can survive these various death traps and enter the United States, our government and society will turn a blind eye to their presence as long as they work shit jobs for low wages and don't complain about it. Smuggling is a symptom of border enforcement policies and capitalism itself. As tragic as the deaths of these fifty-three migrants are, there are people lining up right now to try their luck in the back of a semi-truck that will soon be barreling down the highway.

I guess we are at the point in the story where, as an academic, I am supposed to put forth my solutions to the complex issue of smuggling. Unfortunately, what I have to offer is far from satisfactory. I am an anthropologist, not a policymaker. The types of observations and recommendations that my kind tends to make only frustrate those who are looking for easy answers to incorporate into campaign slogans and white papers.

I want to be clear, though. Human smuggling is exploitative and violent. It also cannot be stopped. But it is not the problem. The monstrous injustices created by capitalism that drive migration are the problem: poverty, political corruption, the drug trade, transnational gang violence, climate change patterns created by the richest countries and disproportionately felt by the poorest. These are the things that make undocumented migration (along with its ugly symbiote, smuggling) a lifesaving necessity. These are the things that help make the Chinos, Jesmyns, Almas, Flacos, and Kingstons of the world. Border walls, anti-

smuggling task forces, and heightened security measures are expensive and ineffective tactics to deal with a worldwide crisis that has deep economic, political, and environmental roots. When we blindly ratchet up security, we only fuel the smuggling industry. If we want to eradicate undocumented migration, we have to address the push and pull factors that keep the global poor in perpetual motion. This perspective of course upsets those with the myopic and naive vision that migration is just a security dilemma to be resolved with concrete and steel. Those people can't seem to fathom how horrible things must be at home to make loading your family into the back of a semitruck or trudging through the jungle holding a baby feel like your best available options. Those people are also likely in denial about how much their daily life benefits from the fruits of undocumented labor. Perhaps the best way to start a conversation is to accept the fact that humans will forever seek places where they and their loved ones can thrive and feel safe. This means that wherever there are border walls separating the haves and have-nots, you will always find desperate people and enterprising smugglers working their way over, under, and through those barricades at all costs.

SANTOS CALLS from a truck stop in northern Arizona. In the background, engines grumble and jack brakes sputter, creating a rhythm that I imagine him dancing to.

In the photo that Alma texts me, an Alabama sun brightens up their living room as Papo helps Dulce blow out the candles on her birthday cake.

Jesmyn squeezes her two-year-old daughter tightly as she tells me about the nightmares of Hurricanes Eta and Iota. Everything she owns is now gone.

"Chino, stop moving!" I yell. "Hold still so I can take your goddamn photo. I want to take a picture because that shirt you have on is funny."

"What's so funny about it?"

"It's a shirt from a university called Brigham Young. That's where a lot of Mormons go to school. Mormons don't drink or smoke or do drugs, so

it's funny that you have that shirt on."

"How do you know I'm not a Mormon in training?"

Twenty minutes later Chino comes running down the street toward me.

"Jason, come quick. Immigration is here. There's gonna be a raid."

I grab my camera and chase after him. We turn the corner at the Pleasure Palace to see a Mexican immigration van blocking the end of the street. Several migrants and smugglers have congregated a few hundred feet down the road where it dead-ends. Some plot their escape, others plan their retaliation. Chino looks at me and flashes a defiant grin that burns into my brain forever. He picks up a rock and goes charging down the street. He screams into the jungle air, "Come get me, motherfuckers!"

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I can't believe the Undocumented Migration Project has been around for fifteen years. I have been privileged to work with such an amazing rotating cast of characters during that time, and I am proud to see so many of them flourishing while trying to make the world a better place. Thank you all for helping make this research possible in different ways. When is our UMP Arivaca reunion gonna happen?

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For those looking to learn more, I highly recommend Raúl Pastrana's 2019 documentary *Border South*, which provides an up-close look at the Central American migrant trail in the wake of Programa Frontera Sur. *¡Viva Pastrami!*

Over the course of writing this book, the Undocumented Migration Project legally absorbed the Colibrí Center for Human Rights (https://colibricenter.org), a nonprofit that works tirelessly to help reunite people with their loved ones who have died while migrating. I am incredibly proud to be associated with this organization and am awed every day by the commitment and care that Mirza Monterroso, Isabella Fassi, and Perla Torres put into advocating for families searching for answers.

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Appendix: Soundtrack

When I write, I need complete silence. But whenever I hit a brick wall (which is often), I take long walks with my headphones on. I usually need to fill my brain with music to kick-start or restart whatever it is that allows me to bang words out of a keyboard. Sometimes the music I need to get me going is what was playing in the unforgiving heat of southern Chiapas. Other times, I have to pull a song out of the ether[*] that reminds me of a moment or puts me in a mood to write about certain people, places, times, or feelings. Those songs are played on repeat for days or weeks or sometimes months (writer's block knows no time limit). I play songs over and over and over again until I feel good enough to trust the words coming off my fingertips or at least not totally hate them. This is the soundtrack that got me through the making of *Soldiers and Kings*.

Introduction

"My Lovely Man" by the Red Hot Chili Peppers. This ode to deceased RHCP guitarist Hillel Slovak often played in the background when I was a ninth-grader drinking forties of malt liquor in my buddy's mom's minivan. I

had a high school friend whose band used to cover this song. That friend died during the writing of this book. When John Frusciante wails (like a mourning Eddie Hazel[*]), I can't help thinking about the many ghosts I called out to during this project.

1. Honor y Patria

"Se va el caimán" by Billo's Caracas Boys. *El muerto sacó la mano y le preguntó la hora.*

2. In the House of Pakal

"Cómo me duele" by Valentín Elizalde. I couldn't escape this song during my first season of fieldwork in Chiapas. It was literally coming out of everyone's cell phone. I am not sure what is more fitting, the lyric "*cómo me duele*," or the fact that Elizalde coincidentally name-drops someone named Chino in the intro.

3. Charismatic and Reckless

"Harlem River Blues" by Justin Townes Earle. Earle died just as I was starting to write this book, and his death struck a chord with me. Maybe it's because I saw him early in his career and thought he had so much potential. Maybe it's because he died alone during a pandemic, when the whole world felt like it was alone. For whatever reason, this song about a young man calmly walking toward his own early death hurts as I sing along.

4. La Reina del Sur

"Caleb Meyer" by Gillian Welch. A song for Jesmyn about a woman who takes no shit from the living or the dead.

5. Foot Soldiers

"Fanática sensual" by Plan B. Santos dances toward a dream.

6. Papo and Alma

"El Hoyo" by Manu Chao. Tepito. Jamaica. Sonora. Manu Chao is singing about poverty in Mexico City on this 2007 track, but he could be talking about La Planeta in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, Buenos Aires in Nogales, Sonora, San Fernando in Buenos Aires, Argentina, or Pakal-Ná. So many *barrios* where young people find themselves born in deep holes that they must claw their way out of if they are to survive.

7. Duke of Earl

"Duke of Earl" by Gene Chandler. *Hey, foo, you like oldies?*

8. Kingston

"Tú no vive así" by Arcángel, Bad Bunny, Mambo Kingz, and DJ Luian. The soundtrack as we try to outrun ourselves.

9. Genesis

"Power" by Young Thug. Kingston works his way up the ladder.

10. Apocalipsis

"El mojado acaudalado" by Los Tigres del Norte. Santos leaves. Chino and Jesmyn stay behind. Los Tigres sing about the irony of the American dream.

11. Dinero, Dinero

"Somos de calle" by Daddy Yankee. If I didn't know better, I would say that Daddy Yankee wrote this song for Flaco.

12. Robin Hood

"Young, Wild & Free" by Snoop Dogg, Wiz Khalifa, and Bruno Mars. It doesn't matter what tomorrow brings, because tonight we are alive.

13. Resurrection

"Ruby and Lou" by Richmond Fontaine.

14. Escape

"The Life You Chose" by Jason Isbell. Isbell has been a core part of my life's soundtrack since I first saw him with the Drive-By Truckers in 2002 at the Darkhorse Tavern in State College, Pennsylvania. This track from his 2015 album *Something More Than Free* was playing on my car stereo when Chino and I drove around Palenque looking for a way out for him.

15. Things Fall Apart

"Bitch, Don't Kill My Vibe" by Kendrick Lamar. A Kingston favorite. "I am a sinner who's probably gonna sin again. Lord, forgive me!"

16. Liberty without Tricks or False Promises

"Everybody Plays the Fool" by the Main Ingredient. A song to help you get through the tough times.

17. Suerte

"King of Pain" by the Police. Santos thinks about a rich man sleeping on a bed of gold while he himself chokes on a crust of bread.

18. Xibalba

"Ratamahatta" by Sepultura. A walk into Xibalba.

19. “We Aren’t Playing”

“It Ain’t Over ’Til It’s Over” by Lenny Kravitz. A breakup song for Kingston and me.

20. Temptation

“Crisis de un MC” by Ana Tijoux. Santos ponders the crossroads.

21. The Future Belongs to Those Who Dream

“Hold on Hope” by Guided by Voices. I laugh when I think about what Flaco’s reaction would be if I tried to get him to listen to this sentimental track by GBV. *Turn this mierda off, bro!* This song plays while a half-drunk, bare-chested, and optimistic Flaco cackles and throws firecrackers out the car window in slow motion.

22. The Soldier Who Would Be King

“1952 Vincent Black Lightning” by Richard Thompson. A song for Chino and Jesmyn.

23. Epilogue

"Paper Planes" by M.I.A. The credits roll and Chino tries to conquer the world.

Bonus Tracks

These songs were important, but I couldn't find a home for them in the list above.

"Soul Shakedown Party" by Bob Marley and the Wailers. A song to dance to on the train tracks during those fleeting moments when no one has to look over their shoulder.

"El panadero" (The Breadman) by Tin Tan. This campy song from a Mexican film starring Tin Tan played a few times on someone's cell phone the summer I met the Breadman in Pakal-Ná. It's a song that bread vendors across Mexico play when they drive around selling their foodstuffs. The song later took on a dark meaning for me. Right before I finished this book, I visited the train tracks after a two-year hiatus. As I walked toward a group of Central American migrants headed north, a bread truck drove by blasting this tune, causing me to look over my shoulder.

"Champion" by Buju Banton. Driving through Garifuna country in the dark while your passengers hang out the windows and scream like champions.

"Play a Train Song" by Todd Snider. The 2004 studio version is perfection, but the intro on Snider's 2022 album *Live: Return of the Storyteller* is a beautiful addendum.

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[*] Honduras has consistently been a leader in homicide globally. Igarape Institute, “Homicide Monitor,” January 29, 2023, https://homicide.igarape.org.br.

* All money is in U.S. dollars unless noted otherwise.

* Over the years, my wife and I have developed a parenting strategy that allows one of us to be absent for extended periods of time. In other moments, we have had to relocate our entire household to a foreign country for months while one of us pursues research, which is what happened during this project. For good or for bad, fieldwork is a family affair.

* I tracked smugglers' progress across Mexico and met them at different stages of the journey, but never physically traveled with them when they had clients in tow.

* Dialogue in this book includes words like “foo” (short for “fool”) and “nigga” that were often used by smugglers who had lived and been incarcerated in the United States.

* I also collected and analyzed copious text messages, voice messages, cell phone videos, and photographs that people sent me.

* Interview excerpts and dialogue come from either transcribed audio or video recordings or notes I made during and after a conversation. Most conversations presented in this book were in Spanish and have been translated to English, with some words left untranslated for effect. Many of the smugglers I worked with spoke some English, and parts of our conversations were often conducted in Spanglish.

* I have taken several steps to protect people's privacy in this book, including using pseudonyms for all smugglers who are still alive, and changing or omitting certain details from backstories to prevent their identification. Consent from research participants was verbal, and there is no paper trail connecting their identity to any of the data.

[*] Although women were often present in migrant safe houses, the majority of guides moving people on the train tracks were men, and those were the people I often had the most access to. To date, little attention has been paid to the important role that women play in the smuggling business, although see Gabriella E. Sanchez, *Women in Migrant Smuggling: A Case-law Analysis* (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019); Howard Campbell, "Female Drug Smugglers on the U.S.-Mexico Border: Gender, Crime, and Empowerment," *Anthropological Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (2008): 233–67; Gabriella Sanchez, "Women's Participation in the Facilitation of Human Smuggling: The Case of the US Southwest," in "Irregular Migration and Brokerage," ed. Cetta Manwaring and Noelle Brigden, special issue, *Geopolitics* 21, no. 2 (2016): 387–406.

[*] You can draw a straight line from the School of the Americas, an elite U.S. government military training center at Fort Benning, Georgia, to events like the 1981 massacre at El Mozote, El Salvador, when U.S.-trained soldiers on a mission to root out left-wing guerillas killed close to a thousand children, women, and men and turned an entire village into a charnel house. See Mark Danner, *The Massacre at El Mozote* (New York: Vintage, 1994); Harsha Walia, *Border & Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021), 45.

* Here I have compiled five interviews into one.

[*] Arresting smugglers and separating them from their clients is a tactic that the U.S. government has used along its southern border, and one that they falsely describe as being a protective measure. This practice actually increases the risks that migrants face; see Jason De León, "The Efficacy and Impact of the Alien Transfer Exit Program: Migrant Perspectives from Nogales, Sonora, Mexico," *International Migration* 51, no. 2 (2013): 10–23.

* Migrant shelters in Mexico are often run by religious organizations or nonprofits that are funded by private donations, churches, and support from international NGOs and the Mexican government. For a discussion of migrant shelters in Mexico, see John Doering-White, “In the Shadow of the Beast: Violence and Dignity along the Central American Migrant Trail” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2019).

* This includes hotel rooms and food, a per-person head tax paid to the local cartel that controls entry across the border, supplies for a desert or river crossing, and payment to the *levantador* (driver) who picks people up on the U.S. side and provides transportation to a safe house.

[*] The difference between a *guía* and a *coyote* is that the former does the physical work involved in migration and often works for or operates at a smaller, mom-and-pop scale than the latter, although the terms may be used interchangeably for simplicity's sake.

[*] Cheng Chui Ping (aka “Sister Ping”) ran a large-scale human smuggling operation between China and the United States for close to two decades and earned upward of $40 million in the process. See Patrick Radden Keefe, *The Snakehead: An Epic Tale of the Chinatown Underworld and the American Dream* (New York: Anchor, 2010).

* Pronounced pa-call-NA.

* “The train tracks” (in Spanish *las vías*) usually refers to the sections of the migrant trail where the train passes.

* Pakal ruled between 615 and 683 CE.

[*] The current president of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, maintains a large ranch and walled compound near Pakal-Ná that has been the subject of recent scrutiny because of the proposed use of federal funds to remodel areas surrounding his property. Staff Writer, "Las fotos de cómo quedará la remodelación de Pakal-Ná, la zona donde está el rancho de AMLO," *Infobae*, January 22, 2021, https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2021/01/22/las-fotos-de-como-quedara-la-remodelacion-de-pakal-na-la-zona-donde-esta-el-rancho-de-amlo/.

* In recent years, companies have hired private security guards to prevent migrants from boarding their trains. For a discussion of the criminal activities of these security guards, see John Doering-White, “In the Shadow of the Beast: Violence and Dignity along the Central American Trail” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2019).

* Elizalde was gunned down in Tamaulipas, Mexico, in 2006, most likely by the Mexican drug cartel Los Zetas.

* Here Marina discusses Chino as if he were one of her siblings; technically he is her nephew.

[*] *La Reina del Sur* was a popular Mexican telenovela about a female drug kingpin.

* In this instance, *paisa* is short for *paisano* (“fellow countryman”) and not a reference to the Paisas, a Latino prison gang.

* The Border Patrol refers to non-Mexican migrants as “OTMs,” or “Other Than Mexicans.”

* Although I am Latino, many migrants and smugglers often called me “gringo” (the American).

[*] The humor is similar to the hypermasculine teasing associated with the working-class Mexican humor called *chingaderas*.

* Crystal meth.

[*] People affiliated with MS-13 tend to avoid using the word "*ocho*" (eight) because of its linguistic connection to the 18th Street gang. So instead of saying "*dos mil ocho*" (2008), they might say "*dos mil hoyo*," whereby a similar-sounding word (in this case "*hoyo*," or hole) replaces the number.

* This is after all fees and expenses have been paid.

* Three days after the fight, Kingston runs into the same Russian at a medical clinic: “That nigga looked at me with two black eyes, but he didn’t say shit.”

* One of the rare popular media moments that exposed the racial complexity of migration was the circulation of a photograph of Border Patrol agents on horseback chasing down Haitian migrants in South Texas in 2021. See Joel Rose, "The Inquiry into Border Agents on Horseback Continues: Critics See a 'Broken' System," *All Things Considered*, NPR, November 6, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/11/06/1052786254/border-patrol-agents-horseback-investigation-haitian-immigrants.

* “Garifuna” typically refers to language, culture, and people, with “Garinagu” the plural form of “Garifuna.” However, the people I worked with tended to use “Garifuna” as a catchall phrase.

* There are also black migrants from other parts of Central America (e.g., Panama) and an increasing number of Haitian and African migrants who fly to Latin America and then make the trek north to the United States.

* This practice was suspended in 1993.

* “Child soldiers are raised in an environment of severe violence . . . and subsequently often commit cruelties and atrocities of the worst kind. This repeated exposure to chronic and traumatic stress during development leaves children with mental and related physical ill-health, notably PTSD and severe personality changes. Such exposure also deprives the child from a normal and healthy development and impairs their integration into society as a fully functioning member.” Elisabeth Schauer and Thomas Elbert, “The Psychological Impact of Child Soldiering,” in *Trauma Rehabilitation after War and Conflict*, ed. Erin Martz (New York: Springer, 2010), 311.

* “Research shows that former child soldiers have difficulties in controlling aggressive impulses and have little skills for handling life without violence. These children show on-going aggressiveness within their families and communities, even after relocation to their home villages.” Schauer and Elbert, “The Psychological Impact of Child Soldiering,” 335.

* There generally are no *cuotas* after Mexico City, although the cartels in the north charge between $100 and $200 per person for the privilege of entering the desert in an attempt to cross the border.

* Here he is referring to Mexican pesos but is talking about Honduras.

* Despite the depths of our many conversations, Kingston rarely talks about the multiple children he has with different women. This is largely a defense mechanism to keep their identities and locations hidden from people looking to take revenge against him.

* It's clear from this list that my musical ether has an Americana/alt-country bent to it, or what Todd Snider calls "unsuccessful country music."

* It is rumored that during the recording of Eddie Hazel's famous guitar solo on the Funkadelic track "Maggot Brain," producer George Clinton told him to play as if his mother had just died.