

Enrique's Journey



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SONIA NAZARIO

Nazario was born in Madison, Wisconsin to a Syrian father and a Polish mother, who both immigrated to Argentina. Nazario herself grew up in Kansas and Argentina. She is a graduate of Williams College and has a master's degree in Latin American Studies from the University of California, Berkeley. She is a reporter for the Los Angeles Times, and has been a journalist writing about social issues for over three decades.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Nazario's account of Enrique's story seeks to humanize and publicize the conditions and factors, social and economic, that contribute to immigration from Central America to the United States in the early 21st century. There is no one contributing historical event that drives these changes, though the events of September 11, 2001 contributed to the increased effort by the United States to protect its border and curtail illegal, undocumented immigration into the country.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

While *Enrique's Journey* is non-fiction, it confronts the problems of immigration using the personal story of one boy's journey as its entry-point. Therefore, the work blends journalistic, non-fiction writing with more narrative styles to construct the journey for us through the eyes of Enrique. Nazario mentions its difference to other literary works, such as *The Odyssey*, namely that the reunion of Enrique and his mother is not as simple as it would be in fiction. Other books that relate to *Enrique's Journey* in terms of style are [The Distance Between Us](#) by Reyna Grande and *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail* by Ruben Martinez. Both investigate the effects of immigration on families, and research the dangers of the journeys themselves. [The Distance Between Us](#) is a memoir and therefore looks at these issues through a single perspective, as Nazario hopes to do with Enrique. *Crossing Over* is written by an author who, like Nazario, reconstructs the path of the migrant through Mexico.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Enrique's Journey: The Story of a Boy's Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite with his Mother*
- **When Written:** 1997-2006
- **Where Written:** Honduras, the United States, Mexico
- **When Published:** 2006

- **Genre:** Non-fiction
- **Setting:** Tegucigalpa, Honduras; Chiapas, Veracruz, Oaxaca, Mexico City, and Nuevo Laredo, Mexico; Los Angeles, North Carolina, and Florida, United States
- **Climax:** The book climaxes when Enrique crosses the Rio Grande, enters the United States, and finally reunites with his mother in North Carolina. Because the book is non-fiction, there is not a specific moment that Nazario constructs which can count as the climax. Rather, it is a fast-paced account of the trials of a seventeen-year-old boy in search of his mother.
- **Point of View:** Nazario

EXTRA CREDIT

The real scoop. *Enrique's Journey* first appeared in the Los Angeles Times as a six-part series in 2002 with photographs by Don Bartletti.

Double Pulitzer. Both the author, Sonia Nazario, and the photographer, Don Bartletti received Pulitzer Prizes for their work on *Enrique's Journey*.



PLOT SUMMARY

At the age of five, Enrique watches his mother, Lourdes, leave their doorstep in Honduras. He does not know that she will not return. Lourdes is heading to the United States in search of work so that she can send money home to her two children, Enrique and Belky. Her experience in America is not easy; she becomes pregnant and works many different jobs. She wires money back home, but feels guilty and sad at the thought that her children are growing up without her. Meanwhile, Enrique struggles through his childhood and wishes for his mother's return. After many false promises, he begins to realize that she may never come home. He becomes lonely and angry, and turns to drugs when he becomes an adolescent. He moves from house to house under the care of different family members. When he is seventeen, he knows that he cannot continue his life in Honduras without the love of his mother. He sets out to find his mother in the United States, determined to make the difficult journey through Guatemala, up Mexico, and across the river. With hardly any money and few belongings, he leaves his hometown of Tegucigalpa and travels north.

Enrique must cross thirteen of Mexico's thirty-one states and traverse over 12,000 miles to reach his mother. He is one of many children who make a similar journey in search of a parent. The journey is extremely dangerous—he must face the depredations of bandits, gangsters, immigration officers, and

corrupt police. Every region is different, and he must learn what to look out for and guard against through multiple trials. He attempts the journey from Honduras seven times. Much of the trip is made atop freight trains, where the chances of getting severely wounded and even dying are high. He survives the trip because of his perseverance, luck, drive, and above all, with the help of others. On his way, he meets fellow migrants with whom he shares stories and common experiences. In spite of the harsh circumstances and the ruthless people who target migrants, Enrique also encounters generous, kind, and compassionate people who offer their help at the risk of their own punishment. Although he makes much of the journey alone, crossing the river is too risky on his own. After getting in touch with his mother, he is able to secure a smuggler, his protector El Tiríndaro, to help him cross the border. Finally, on the eighth journey, after an arduous and long trip, he finds himself in the hands of his mother.

Their reunion, at first, is happy. Lourdes has established a good life in North Carolina with her boyfriend and daughter, Diana. Enrique is glad to be with his mother, but soon the complicated feelings of abandonment and anger come out. He and his mother begin to argue, and their relationship becomes tense. Back home in Honduras, Enrique's girlfriend, Maria Isabel, gives birth to their daughter, Jasmin. Enrique longs to bring his family to the United States, but continues to struggle with drug addiction and emotional problems. He sends money back to Maria Isabel as often as he can, but their relationship becomes strained. Maria Isabel receives criticism from Enrique's family members about how she is raising Jasmin and spending Enrique's money. Maria Isabel grows closer to Jasmin and has trouble deciding what will be best for her child. Finally, she decides to go to the United States to join Enrique. If she leaves now, the chances that her daughter will be able to come to America and grow up with both her parents will be higher. The book ends much in the same way that it begins: with a mother leaving behind her young child, unable to say goodbye.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sonia Nazario – The author of *Enrique's Journey*, she learns (to her shock) that her housekeeper Carmen had left children behind when she came to the United States to work. This leads Nazario, herself a daughter of immigrants, to investigate the phenomenon of single mothers coming to the United States to support their children left behind, the impact this “abandonment” has on them and the families they leave behind, and the children who often come searching for the parents who they feel left them. Nazario’s investigation leads her to Enrique, and the book both tells Enrique and his family’s story and of Nazario’s experience retracing Enrique’s steps as he endures the treacherous journey to try to reach his mother Lourdes in

the United States.

Enrique – Enrique is the protagonist of this non-fiction story. He makes the odyssey from Honduras to find his mother in the United States. Growing up, Enrique is quiet and becomes moody as an adolescent--a result of his feelings of abandonment and loss at the departure of his mother, Lourdes, who leaves Honduras for the United States in order to support her family when he is only five years old. As he grows up, he becomes more and more intent on reuniting with his mother. On his journey, he shows emotional and physical strength that will help him when he arrives in the United States. Rebuilding his relationship with his mother proves difficult, but he persists. Finally, he sends for his girlfriend Maria Isabel, the mother of his young daughter, Jasmin.

Lourdes – Lourdes is Enrique, Belky, and Diana's mother. Leaving her children in Honduras is an extremely difficult decision for her, but she does so in order to support them by sending back money. When she arrives in the U.S., she struggles to have a steady job and find a good partner. Eventually, she settles happily in North Carolina. She is relieved and happy to see Enrique when he arrives safely at her home, though subsequently they do have some difficulties readjusting and rebuilding the bonds that were broken by her leaving Enrique when he was so young.

Maria Isabel – Maria Isabel is Enrique's girlfriend and the mother of their daughter, Jasmin. She loves Enrique and is devastated when he decides to leave in search of his mother. When she gives birth to Jasmin, she works hard to take care of her and develops a strong attachment to her daughter. She struggles to live in Honduras without Enrique, and finally decides to go and join him in the United States, with the hope of soon making enough money to have Jasmin raised in America.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Jasmin – Enrique and Maria Isabel's daughter. For her sake, Maria Isabel decides to leave Honduras and join Enrique in the U.S..

El Tiríndaro – Enrique's protector in Nuevo Laredo and smuggler across the Rio Grande. His network enables Enrique to safely enter the U.S. and find his mother.

Belky – Belky is Enrique's older sister. Left by her mother when she was already an adolescent, she struggles to understand her abandonment. She focuses on school and does not attempt to find her mother alone, as Enrique does.

Luis – Luis, Enrique's father, takes Enrique in after his grandmother kicks him out of the house. Unfortunately, their attachment is short-lived. Luis finds another woman and leaves Enrique to start a new family.

Maria Marcos – Enrique's paternal grandmother, Maria, who raises Enrique. However, she kicks him out when he becomes

an angry and rebellious adolescent.

Marco – Lourdes' brother becomes a sort of father figure to Enrique. Sadly, he is killed by bandits when he is working as a money changer.

Mirian – Lourdes' sister, who leaves her children behind in Honduras and comes to live with Lourdes.

Diana – Diana is Lourdes' youngest daughter, who is born in the United States.

Santos – Lourdes' first boyfriend in the U.S. is Santos. He is the father of her child Diana, but is not around to raise her. He has a severe drinking problem, and eventually abandons Lourdes and returns to Honduras.

Rosa Amalia – Enrique's aunt, from whom he steals a piece of jewelry to pay a debt to his drug dealer.

Ana Lucia – Another of Enrique's aunts, whom he kicks. His bad behavior results in him being kicked off the family property.

Gomez – The field hand who helps Enrique when he is wounded in Oaxaca.

Olga – The leader of the Shelter of Jesus the Good Shepherd in Tapachula.

Eva – Maria Isabel's mother, who cares for Jasmin after Maria leaves Honduras to join Enrique in the United States.

Pedro Leo – A priest and advocate for migrants in Nuevo Laredo.

Jose – Enrique's friend, who joins him on his first, failed attempt to go north.

Carmen – Nazario's housekeeper, Carmen, inspires her to write a story about immigrant mothers and their children.

Minor – Carmen's son, who comes to the U.S., unannounced, to find his mother and learn if she still loves him.

Man from Veracruz – A man whom Nazario interviews about the Mexican government's treatment of migrants from Central America traveling through Mexico.

Maria Enriqueta Reyes Marquez – A woman whom Nazario interviews about the Mexican government's treatment of migrants from Central America traveling through Mexico.

Brick maker – A brick maker in Mexico City who gives Enrique a job, food, clothing, and instructions for the best way to get to the border with the United States while avoiding immigration officials.

Trucker – A trucker who picks up Enrique as he hitchhikes the last part of his journey in Mexico, to Nuevo Laredo. The trucker tells immigration officials that Enrique is his assistant, allowing Enrique to pass through checkpoints.

Agueda – Enrique's maternal grandmother, Lourdes's mother. Enrique lives with her for a while in Honduras but as he becomes addicted to drugs she has him live in a hut behind her house.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



FAMILY AND ABANDONMENT

Enrique's Journey, as its title indicates, is the non-fiction story of a 17-year-old boy's struggle to travel across Mexico to the United States to

reunite with his mother. The events depicted in the book are set in motion by an initial instance of abandonment: Lourdes' difficult decision to leave Enrique and his sister Belky in Honduras, while she seeks work in the United States to send money back to her family. Leaving her children is a painful choice that haunts her throughout her time in the United States. Abandonment, in this case, is harsh but necessary. The layers of family disintegration run deeper than this single decision, though. After Lourdes leaves, Enrique's father, Luis, also walks out on the family, forming a new one with another woman and leaving his son in the care of their grandmother, Maria. When Enrique begins to rebel in response to his complicated feelings of abandonment, his grandmother also rejects him. By an early age, Enrique has felt the pain of being deserted by his family members three times.

Nazario writes throughout the book of the commonness of Enrique's situation, giving statistics on the numbers of single women who leave behind their families in Central America in search of work in the U.S. and listing mothers in situations similar to Lourdes'. Within the story she tells, the reader starts to see patterns, in which abandonment leads to abandonment, and the disintegration of one family has ripple effects that lead to the disintegration of others. These traumatic moments of abandonment come out of necessity and the best of intentions in awful circumstances, but the scars of abandonment remain even after some families manage to reunite.



PERSEVERANCE AND SURVIVAL

Much of Enrique's journey is about overcoming impossible obstacles, confronting extreme danger, and making it out alive. At 17, Enrique succeeds in traveling from Honduras through 13 of Mexico's most violent states and crossing the border into the U.S. in large part due to his determination. Of course, he is lucky too – benefiting from the help of others and gaining knowledge from experienced peers. He gives himself a time limit that shows his perseverance and the gravity of his decision: he will make it to his mother even if it takes a year. Despite the dangerous circumstances jumping trains, facing corrupt policemen, immigration

checkpoints and officers, bandits, and gangsters, Enrique persists.

Even before he sets out on his journey, he shows determination and resolve after a period of drug addiction and emotional confusion. Once on the route, it is not only Enrique, but also many other characters in the book that exhibit strength and perseverance in the face of impossible tasks, including the medics from the Red Cross and the leader of the shelter in Tapachula, Olga. Furthermore, perseverance is not only a quality that Enrique must possess in order to make the physical journey to the United States. After he arrives, survival is no longer a concern in the immediate sense that it was while riding the tops of trains through Chiapas. But now, he must learn to survive with his mother, to persevere in their relationship, and to stick to his goal of sending money back to Maria Isabel and his daughter Jasmin. Just as he persevered through his drug addiction in Honduras, Enrique also must fight addiction to drinking and sniffing paint thinner in the United States. Finally, his ultimate dedication to his family – Lourdes, Maria Isabel, and Jasmin – leads him to overcome addiction and work hard for the good of those who love him. Thus, Enrique learns that perseverance is important for both immediate and long-term consequences, for his literal survival and for the well-being and mental health of himself and his family.



COMPASSION AND FAITH

Nazario begins *Enrique's Journey* by explaining what drew her to find this story. Her own experience talking to her housekeeper inspired her to give voice to the unspoken stories of immigrant families. This is the first moment of compassion in the book. The compassion of others, in addition to Enrique's own determination, makes his journey successful. Chapter 4 in particular outlines the generosity of strangers and the protection that they provide to migrants along the way.

Enrique also finds compassion and companionship in his fellow migrants atop trains, who look out for each other, share their knowledge, and strive for a sense of community. The characters of great compassion in the book, such as Olga and Pedro Leo, are admirable not only for their dedication to helping others but also for their sacrifices of their own safety and security. They are neither wealthy nor powerful; protecting migrants means risking their lives. In many cases, compassion is also deeply tied to another important theme in *Enrique's Journey* – religion – that offers solace to the desperate and faith to those who have every reason to lose it. Religious people are also often the ones who are willing to help migrants, who are selfless in their commitment to doing good. Finally, what unites the family is the characters' ability to be compassionate to one another's situations and to have faith against all odds.



HUMANIZATION AND DEHUMANIZATION

While *Enrique's Journey* features stories of worthy people who express care and compassion for the human needs of migrants, the book also does not shy away from describing the dehumanizing circumstances that Enrique and others must confront. Nazario's interest in finding a single story to illuminate the debate surrounding immigration policy in recent decades shows her commitment to humanizing immigration studies. In the prologue, she discusses her reconstruction of Enrique's journey in order to give a full picture of the trials that he had to face. One way that Nazario portrays the humanity of the characters is by showing them in all their complications. She does not absolutely praise anyone nor does she judge the people she meets for their mistakes. Enrique at times deserves praise for his persistence and at others, criticism for his negligence. Illustrating a full picture of him, Nazario displays his humanity.

As Nazario strives to humanize these characters through her writing, she also points out the constant dehumanizing situations that they encounter. On the route from Honduras to the United States border, migrants confront countless threats, from physical danger to psychological harm. Many of them are caused by other people who have no respect for their humanity and no reservations about degrading others. Women migrants are especially dehumanized, unable to escape the grasp of sexual assailants. The police are also described as treating migrants without humanity, hunting them down like animals. Nazario portrays INS officers as equally bloodthirsty and cruel, following migrants' trail until they capture them. *Enrique's Journey* can be read as an attempt to restore the humanity of illegal immigrants – who have otherwise been stripped of it – in order to show the complications of these immigrants' stories and open up the conversation about how to ameliorate the situation on all sides.



IMMIGRATION

Enrique's story opens up the broader discussion of immigration and immigration reform in the United States and allows for a detailed understanding of the problems that immigrants face. In the prologue, Nazario recounts the conversation she had with her housekeeper Carmen when she first found out that Carmen had left behind children in Guatemala before coming to the United States. This moment spurs Nazario's interest in single immigrant mothers in comparable situations, forced to leave their families and to struggle alone for work in an unfamiliar country. In the book, Nazario details the changing landscape of immigration in recent years, describing the increase of both illegal immigrants and single mothers coming to the U.S. to find work in order to support their families at home. *Enrique's Journey* delves into the complications of immigration and shows both the harm and the

good that it can carry.

The debate about immigration is the backdrop of the book, and Nazario specifically brings it to the fore in the afterword, which outlines particular positions on immigration policy. Since Enrique's journey, the trip has become even more dangerous for migrants, and even more people are trying to make it. For migrants, the financial and material benefits drive their decision to come. But the psychological trauma of family separation that often occurs should not be underestimated – it can create life-long problems for children and parents. For their home countries, the money sent from immigrants back to Central and Latin America brings a significant boost to their economic growth. From the perspective of Americans, immigration is a much-debated topic, but Nazario concludes that the immigration problem can be solved by helping bolster the economies of the countries from which immigrants come. Since the reasons for immigrating are economic, she argues, the solution to keep immigrants at home must be economic.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE BEAST

The Beast is the term that Enrique and other migrants use for the treacherous and terrible state of Chiapas in Mexico. It becomes a symbol for the dangers and threats that the journey as a whole to the United States holds for migrant children who wish to make it to their parents.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *Enrique's Journey* published in 2007.

Prologue Quotes

☞ "I was stuck by the choice mothers face when they leave their children. How do they make such an impossible decision? Among Latinos, where family is all-important, where for women motherhood is valued far above all else, why are droves of mothers leaving their children? What would I do if I were in their shoes?"

Related Characters: Sonia Nazario (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: xii

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sonia Nazario talks about her motivation for writing the book. She was talking to her housekeeper Carmen, and gradually discovered that Carmen had left behind her children in order to come to America and seek fortune there. Nazario was amazed that a kind, talented woman would abandon her children in order to move to a new country; she couldn't help but wonder if she (Nazario) would do the same thing, if her best chance of finding a job was in America.

The passage lays out the basic project of the book: to study Latin-American culture and Latino immigration by focusing on a single family. The last sentence of the passage might be the most important: "What would I do?" Nazario's goal isn't just to describe her subjects' experiences: she wants to create a dialogue between reader and subject, creating empathy and, perhaps, political change.

☞ "Then I began to retrace his steps, doing the journey exactly as he had done it a few weeks before. I wanted to see and experience things as he had with the hope of describing them more fully."

Related Characters: Sonia Nazario (speaker), Enrique

Related Themes: 

Page Number: xix

Explanation and Analysis

Nazario retraces the progress made by Enrique: a young man who tried to enter the United States to see his mother again. Nazario hoped to learn something about the experience of immigration by retracing Enrique's steps. From the beginning, it seems, she conceived of Enrique as a symbol for immigrants in general and from Latin America in particular.

Nazario combines the specificities of Enrique's experience with the breadth of her knowledge as a journalist: in other words, the book we're about to read will be both a look at the life of one immigrant, and the story of the immigration experience as a whole.

“Although I often felt exhausted and miserable, I knew I was experiencing only an iota of what migrant children go through...The journey gave me a glimmer of how hard this is for them.”

Related Characters: Sonia Nazario (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: xxii

Explanation and Analysis

In order to understand Enrique's journey, Nazario literally took the journey herself, walking and traveling through the different parts of Mexico in order to enter America. Nazario isn't trying to say that she underwent as much hardship as Enrique did (that's simply not true), but she does believe that she came to understand his experience a little better by imitating it herself.

Nazario wants to convey the difficulty and the stakes of Enrique's experience to her readers: the novel will give us a snapshot of Enrique's journey not through our own personal experience, but through another's--we'll be able to learn about the hardships he underwent through Nazario's journalism.

1. The Boy Left Behind Quotes

“[Enrique] will remember only one thing that she says to him: 'Don't forget to go to church this afternoon.'”

Related Characters: Sonia Nazario (speaker), Enrique, Lourdes

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nazario describes some of Enrique's last memories of his mother, leading up to the moment when she abandons him and leaves for the United States. Lourdes loves Enrique, but she also needs to find a decent job--thus, she leaves her child and goes to the U.S. Enrique, a little boy at the time, has no idea why his mother is leaving him: from his perspective, she's leaving for no reason. Nazario conveys the senselessness of the abandonment by describing a particularly vivid memory of Enrique's: just before Lourdes left, she told Enrique to go to church. From Lourdes's perspective, the quote is probably insignificant (it's unlikely she remembers it after all these years). But because

Enrique misses his mother so intensely, he remembers her words perfectly. The passage is a sign, then, that Enrique continues to long for his mother, even after she leaves him for America: in a way, Lourdes *is* Enrique's church; the woman who gives his life a purpose and a meaning.

“In their absence, these mothers become larger than life. Although in the United States the women struggle to pay rent and eat, in the imaginations of their children back home they become deliverance itself, the answer to every problem. Finding them becomes the quest for the Holy Grail.”

Related Characters: Sonia Nazario (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Enrique's mother is an incredibly important figure: perhaps even more important as an absence than she'd be if she were present in his life. Enrique knows that he's *supposed* to have a mother; most of his friends do. The fact that he has no mother is such a basic part of his existence--a part that sets him apart from his peers and the rest of his family--that it becomes the source of all his problems (at least in his mind). Whenever everything bad happens to Enrique, he blames it on his lack of a mother. By the same logic, finding his mother becomes the solution to all of Enrique's problems. Because she's not there to take of him, Lourdes becomes a kind of "holy grail," something idealized and longed for, and which Enrique must quest after to achieve.

“This had been his first home, the small stucco house where he and Lourdes lived until Lourdes stepped off the front porch and left. His second home was the wooden shack where he and his father lived with his father's mother, until his father found a new wife and left. His third home was the comfortable house where he lived with his uncle Marco.”

Related Characters: Sonia Nazario (speaker), Enrique, Lourdes, Luis, Maria Marcos

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

In the absence of a mother to take care of him, Enrique finds himself moving from house to house, since his family situation just isn't stable. Although his father is supposed to take care of him, Enrique finds that his father isn't much good at parenting--he seems more interested in remarrying and enjoying himself. As a result, Enrique moves between many different households according to his father's situation: there's no stability in his life. One could say that Enrique is used to traveling and moving around: growing up, he's never able to find "roots" anywhere, which perhaps helps explain why he would choose to journey to the United States.

The passage is tragic because it suggests that Enrique's life is fragmented and twisted because his mother isn't there to take care of him. Enrique knows that a mother is supposed to comfort her children and provide a sense of stability--in the absence of such stability, he gets "thrown around" a lot.

2. Seeking Mercy Quotes

☝ "When Enrique's mother left, he was a child. Six months ago, the first time he set out to find her, he was still a callow kid. Now he is a veteran of a perilous pilgrimage by children, many of whom come looking for their mothers and travel any way they can."

Related Characters: Sonia Nazario (speaker), Enrique, Lourdes

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nazario flashes back to the first time that Enrique tried to meet up with his mother in the United States. Enrique was only a small child, and he didn't get very far; and yet as he's grown older, Enrique has continued to try to journey to America. His love for his mother, and his assuredness that meeting his mother will solve all his problems, is total. One could say that Enrique's coming-of-age is just a steady process of trying to come to America and failing, again and again, until finally he succeeds.

As always Nazario makes it clear that she's not just telling the story of one immigrant, but many: there are thousands of young Enriques trying to come to America to rejoin their beloved families.

☝ "In spite of everything, Enrique has failed again--he will not reach the United States this time, either. He tells himself over and over that he'll just have to try again."

Related Characters: Sonia Nazario (speaker), Enrique

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

Enrique attempts to enter the United States for the seventh time; he catches a ride from an undercover border patrol officer, who just sends Enrique back to his home town. Enrique is discouraged from entering the U.S. again and again, and yet he keeps telling himself that he'll try again the next day. Enrique's courage and commitment to finding his mother is enormous: he refuses to give up, showing us how important the "stakes" of his travels are.

Enrique's journey to America is important because it symbolizes the journeys that millions of other immigrants have attempted, some successfully, some not. Enrique isn't motivated by crime, greed, or any other material motive: he just wants to see his mother again.

3. Facing the Beast Quotes

☝ "Nearly one in six migrant girls detained by authorities in Texas says she has been sexually assaulted during her journey, according to a 1997 University of Houston study."

Related Characters: Sonia Nazario (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

It's difficult for any Latin-American immigrant to enter the United States, but it's particularly difficult for immigrant women to do so. Immigrant women are essentially forced to put their trust in strangers; people whom they hope will treat them with respect on their journey to the U.S. Instead, their "helpers" will often sexually assault them, recognizing that an illegal immigrant can't go the authorities to prosecute a sex criminal.

The passage is a good example of how Nazario situates Enrique's journey within the context of immigration as a whole. Enrique isn't a representative immigrant--because there's no such thing. Thus, Nazario enhances her book by

adding information about some of the overall trends in the immigration experience: how immigration is different for women and men, the old and the young, etc.

“At the rate of nearly one every other day, the Red Cross estimates, U.S.-bound Central American migrants who ride freight trains lose arms, legs, hands, or feet.”

Related Characters: Sonia Nazario (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

One of the most common, and dangerous methods that immigrants use to enter the United States from the south is to ride a freight train. Doing so is extremely risky, because immigrants must ride on the outside of the train, meaning that they're often horribly injured, and can lose arms and legs. It's a testament to the immigrants' desperation that they continue to try to sneak into the country, even to the point where they hurt themselves. Enrique's dedication to entering the United States, in order to see his mother again, is no anomaly among Latino immigrants, as evidenced by the Red Cross's statistics about injuries on the freight trains.

“No one tells me something can't be done. Everything can be cured. Nothing is impossible.”

Related Characters: Olga (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

In Tapachula, a woman named Olga selflessly helps the people who are trying to get into America. Olga isn't a doctor, but she uses spiritual medicines in an attempt to help the immigrants who've become gravely injured during the course of their attempts to enter the U.S. Olga is proof that the immigrant experience brings out the best in some people: although she seems to have no material investment in helping the immigrants, she sacrifices her own time and effort for the sake of strangers on the road to America. Olga doesn't just help the immigrants' bodies; she gives them the optimism they need to succeed on their quest.

“He was five years old when his mother left him. Now he is almost another person. In the window glass, he sees a battered young man, scrawny and disfigured. It angers him, and it steels his determination to push northward.”

Related Characters: Sonia Nazario (speaker), Enrique

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

Enrique continues to be steadfast in his desire to reach the United States and reunite with his mother. He's changed visibly by his experiences attempting to enter America; his body is hurt, and his mind filled with traumatizing experiences. And yet Enrique never gives up. Even when he's confronted by real, material evidence of the way his journey is destroying his life--his battered reflection in the window glass--he continues with his quest. One could even argue that Enrique becomes *more* obsessed with entering America after he sees how he's changed. Enrique has sacrificed his present happiness for the sake of reuniting with his mother in the future: he can't give up now, because he has nothing left to lose.

4. Gifts and Faith Quotes

“It's wrong for our government to send people back to Central America. If we don't want to be stopped from going into the United States, how can we stop Central Americans in our country?”

Related Characters: Man from Veracruz (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

A man from Veracruz offers Nazario his opinion of the immigration process in Mexico. There are many in Mexico who have come illegally from Central America in the hopes of entering the United States one day: Mexico is a transitional region for them, in which they'll live for a short time before journeying north. The man from Veracruz argues that it would be hypocritical for the governments of Mexico to send back illegal immigrants in their country, since so many people from Mexico attempt to enter the United States in much the same way. Mexico is caught in a tough position: it's trying to be a legitimate state, and yet its

economy is to no small degree empowered by immigrants in the U.S. who send money home to their relatives.

The passage also alludes to one of the most common observations about the anti-immigration stance in the U.S.: many of the same Americans who are descended from immigrants are themselves opposed to Mexican immigration--how can they oppose immigration and yet come from immigrant stock?

☞ "We are human. We should treat people in a humane way. It's okay to send people back. But they shouldn't shoot them, beat them this way."

Related Characters: Maria Enriqueta Reyes Marquez (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

Maria Enriqueta Reyes Marquez is a Mexican woman whom Nazario asks about the current immigration policy between the U.S. and Latin America. Maria offers what could be considered the "moderate" position on immigration: there should be *some* attempts to keep out certain immigrants, but governments shouldn't use such violent means (sending people to jail, beating people, etc.).

It's probably true that even the most enthusiastic supporter of American immigration wouldn't argue that there should be *no* attempt to control or monitor immigration; by the same logic, it's true that even the most hardened anti-immigration figure probably wouldn't support the human rights atrocities committed against immigrants trying to get into the U.S. Thus, Maria's position is fundamentally common-sensical: we should be stern but decent to other human beings, even if they don't share a nationality with us.

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

Related Characters: Sonia Nazario (speaker), Enrique, Lourdes

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

The great irony of Enrique's journey is that although he's traveling to reunite with his mother, he can barely remember her: the actual physical evidence he remembers of her is so vague that it could be said to describe all sorts of people. Perhaps it's fair to say that Enrique is as interested in the *idea* of having a mother as he is in his specific mother's life. Enrique's lack of knowledge of his mother's life shouldn't be taken as a criticism of their relationship: rather, Enrique seems absolutely right to want to reunite with his mother--his actions seem like basic human nature (children want to be with their parents, particularly if they haven't seen their parents in a long time). The difference, of course, is that Enrique, unlike most people in the U.S., has to travel thousands of miles and break various laws in order to see his mother; as a result, his memory of his mother begins to fade, tragically.

5. On the Border Quotes

☞ "Outside the church after dinner, many migrants engage in a crude kind of street therapy: Who has endured the worst riding the trains?"

Related Characters: Sonia Nazario (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

Nazario describes some of the ways that immigrants and other downtrodden people survive their lives without falling into despair. Instead of trying to forget their hardships, the immigrants turn their hardships into entertainment: they make a game out of who endured the worst pain on the trains.

The immigrants' "game" is a powerful survival mechanism, designed to help traumatized, lonely people find a sense of community. The music historian Albert Murray said that the point of the blues isn't to cause sadness: it's to *get rid* of sadness by singing about it. Much the same could be said of the games the immigrants play: therapeutically, their games rid the immigrants of some of their pain.

☞ "His mother is a stranger...But he can feel her love."

Related Characters: Sonia Nazario (speaker), Enrique, Lourdes

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

Enrique is still far away from his mother: he's living in Nuevo Laredo, working to ensure that he has enough money to travel into the United States. Enrique gets a tattoo of his mother's name in order to remind him of his devotion to his mother and provide himself with a constant reminder of his quest to enter the United States. Nazario sums up Enrique's relationship with his mother by saying that, although Lourdes is far away, Enrique can feel her love.

The passage is important because it acknowledges the vast distances between Enrique and his mother--both literal and metaphorical. At the same time, it suggests that it *is* possible for Enrique to love his mother, despite having never really known her.

6. A Dark River, Perhaps a New Life Quotes

☝☝ "Children like Enrique dream of finding their mothers and living happily ever after. For weeks, perhaps months, these children and their mothers cling to romanticized notions of how they should feel toward each other. Then reality intrudes."

Related Characters: Sonia Nazario (speaker), Lourdes, Enrique

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

The tragedy of Enrique's journey, as Nazario has already hint, is that his quest isn't really that meaningful in the end. Enrique risks his life and his freedom in order to reunite with his mother, a woman he doesn't know well. Enrique is sure that meeting with his mother will solve all of his problems: over the years, his mother has become a nearly mystical figure, a "holy grail." Inevitably, then, when Enrique reunites with his mother, he'll be somewhat disappointed: the idea of his reunion will always be more satisfying and perfect than the real thing.

Without any need to idealize their parents, immigrants like Enrique can see their mothers for what they really are: kind, loving people who are nonetheless flawed. Ultimately, then, Enrique's journey is tragic because reality intrudes.

7. The Girl Left Behind Quotes

☝☝ "'It's like a miracle,' [Lourdes] says. It is as if all the hurt he felt inside had to come out and now he is ready to move on."

Related Characters: Sonia Nazario (speaker), Lourdes

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis

Enrique continues to resent his mother for abandoning him when he was only a young child--even if he understands the harsh economic realities that led her to do so. And yet when he comes to America to live with his mother, he begins to change his relationship with her. As if in revenge, Enrique separates from his mother for a second time: he moves to North Carolina with his friends, voluntarily. Enrique quickly begins to realize that he really does love his mother: he begins to think more about why she left him to come to America.

As Lourdes puts it, Enrique has gone through two "rounds" of pain: the first when Lourdes left him to come to America; the second when he separated from Lourdes to live in North Carolina. Because of these painful separations, Enrique has come to see the truth about Lourdes: she's a kind, loving, but ultimately imperfect woman who tried to do her best to provide for her family, even if that meant abandoning her family. Enrique, it would seem, is ready to move on with his life, instead of dwelling on his love and resentment for his mother. One could say that Enrique's real journey has been psychological, not literal: he's come to see the light about his family situation.

☝☝ "Maria Isabel does not say goodbye to her daughter. She does not hug her. She gets out of the car and walks briskly into the bus terminal. She does not look back. She never tells her she is going to the United States."

Related Characters: Sonia Nazario (speaker), Jasmin, Maria Isabel

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 240

Explanation and Analysis

Maria Isabel is Enrique's girlfriend, and she plans to leave their daughter, Jasmin, to come to the United States--repeating almost exactly the book's opening events. Maria

Isabel chooses to leave her daughter because she thinks that she'll stand a better chance of getting to live with her daughter in America *later* if she goes there alone now. But as the passage shows, Maria's confidence in her plan doesn't make the pain of saying goodbye any less. Rather, Maria can't force herself to say goodbye to her daughter at all: she suppresses her emotions, afraid that if she sees her child one more time, she won't be able to force herself to leave for America after all.

Of course, this passage also mirrors the scene early in the book in which Enrique's mother left Enrique to come to America. The message is clear: abandonment and a flawed immigration system leads to a vicious cycle, in which one fractured family eventually leads to another one down the line.

Afterword Quotes

☛ "What would it take to keep people from leaving? There would have to be jobs. Jobs that pay okay. That's all."

Related Characters: Eva (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 295

Explanation and Analysis

Eva, Maria Isabel's mother, tells Nazario that she thinks the only way to truly solve the immigration crisis is to strengthen the economies of Central and Latin America. Any other solution to the problem (continuing to deport millions of immigrants, for example) wouldn't really get to the root cause of the issue: it would just apply a superficial solution to a deep, economic problem.

The reason that so many people in Mexico, Honduras etc., come to the U.S., Nazario argues, is that their own economies are reeling from crisis to crisis. (And often, the reason their economies are doing so badly is that they have to compete with American industry--rather ironically, considering the anti-immigration pundits who claim that immigrants steal good American jobs.) The only way to ensure that millions of people don't *want* to immigrate to America illegally is to strengthen their job opportunities back at home.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

Nazario opens the book by describing the moment that inspired her to find Enrique's story. One Friday morning at home in Los Angeles, she gets into a conversation with her housekeeper Carmen on the topic of raising children. She soon discovers that Carmen has four children that she has had to leave behind in Guatemala. Carmen has not seen them for 12 years.

Carmen explains her story to Nazario, telling her that her husband left her for another woman, that she could not provide for her children alone, and that she finally decided to come to the U.S. to better the lives of her children. She also knows that the separation has put an emotional strain on her relationship with her children and that there have been many downsides to her decision to leave Guatemala. She tells Nazario that her situation is common amongst Central American and Mexican mothers facing poverty with few alternative options.

The next year, Carmen's eldest son, Minor, driven by his uncertainty about his mother's love for him, arrives unanticipated in Los Angeles after embarking on a journey to reunite with her. Nazario hears about his trip and, following up, learns about the dangers he faced hitchhiking through Guatemala and Mexico. Interested in the story of Carmen and Minor, Nazario investigates the reasons motivating the difficult choices each has made, and discovers how common their story is: how many other single mothers have left their families to come to work in the United States in order to send financial support back home, eventually to be followed by their own children desperate to reunite with their mothers.

Carmen's story raises the issue of immigration from Central America and shows how it splits up families. Nazario's lack of awareness of Carmen's situation indicates how these problems affect Central American immigrants largely unnoticed by United States citizens. Nazario's goal is to make these stories public and in the process to "humanize" the people who endure them.



Carmen, left to care for her children on her own, shows perseverance in her choice to leave behind her family in search of work in the US. And the perseverance isn't only in the journey to reach the US. She must persevere to pursue employment, send home money, and maintain her familial relationships over long distances. Her dilemmas are shared by single immigrant mothers from all over.



Minor's doubt about his mother's love shows the extent of this family's disintegration. It was in fact Carmen's profound love for her children and her desire to give them a better life that led her to come to the US, but they experienced her departure not as a sacrifice she was making for them but as abandonment. His journey through dangerous areas in Mexico also requires him to persevere through hardship.



Nazario outlines the changes in immigration to the United States in recent years, with about 700,000 immigrants entering illegally per year. Furthermore, the transforming family dynamics in Latin America, most importantly the rise in divorce rates in recent times, has resulted in an increase of single women immigrating to the U.S. to find work. In the 1960s and 70s, the U.S. experienced a similar period of increased immigration, with single mothers from the Caribbean seeking work in New York City, New England, and Florida. Later in the 1980s, the same phenomenon occurred, this time with Central American mothers heading to Washington, D.C., Houston, and Los Angeles. Nazario points out how the growth of immigrants in the U.S. has led to their demonization. She hopes to restore their humanity by taking a close look at one immigrant's story.

These changes highlight the increasing complications of immigration and how it relates to family life. They also show the changing gender dynamics in immigrant populations from Central and Latin America. At the same time, this description of the dynamics at play behind the changes in immigration also illustrate how the various waves of immigration have resulted in people becoming seen as merely statistics. As a journalist, Nazario's interest is to humanize these people's stories, which have been reduced to data points or ideological talking points in political arguments.



Nazario decides to learn as much as she can about the treacherous journey that children like Minor make, and talks to young people who have made the journey and now live in jails and shelters in California and Texas. Many have made their journey atop freight trains through Mexico, which these migrants have come to call The Train of Death. They have had to survive against corrupt cops, bandits, and gangsters looking to mercilessly exploit them.

Even this brief glimpse of what the immigrants have endured to come to the United States is shocking. The perseverance, desire for a better life, desperation, and yearning for family togetherness that drives the immigrants is not a part of the debate in the United States about immigrants.



Nazario's plan is to experience for herself the trip that young migrants make to reunite with their mothers. Before embarking on the journey herself, she decides to retrace the steps of one boy who had already made it to northern Mexico. Looking for a child who would provide the story for the book she wants to write, Nazario finds out about Enrique from a nun at a church in Nuevo Laredo, near the Rio Grande in Mexico. She travels there to talk to him about his experience. From Enrique's description, she begins to reconstruct the journey of the many children who follow the same route. Then, following Enrique's path, Nazario traverses 13 of Mexico's 31 states and travels atop trains for much of the journey. She interviews many of his family members, other migrants, and compassionate people whom Enrique encountered along the way.

Nazario's dedication to capturing Enrique's story, and the story of other similar immigrants, makes her push beyond just listening and interviewing (though she does that too). She feels the need to experience firsthand what Enrique experienced—not just to hear about his trip, but to make that trip for herself. This is a bold move, and one that speaks to Nazario's recognition that true understanding, true compassion, requires opening oneself up to the same experiences, requires walking in someone else's shoes.



Nazario's reconstruction of the journey requires her to face serious danger, witnessing the near death of migrants jumping trains and hearing the testimonies of rape victims. She takes great risks to research and retrace Enrique's path. However, though she was often miserable, exhausted, scared, and in danger along the way, Nazario makes clear that, unlike the migrant children, she always had the option of just stopping, of simply escaping from the hellish journey and going back to her established life in Los Angeles.

The hardships faced by the immigrants only become more gruesome and terrible as more details are revealed. And Nazario experiences all of these hardships as fully as she can. Yet she realizes that she can never be as vulnerable, either physically or psychologically, as the actual immigrants. At the back of her mind Nazario always know that when the journey is done—or if she gets into dire trouble along the way—she can go back to her life (while for immigrants that is only another beginning).



Towards the end of the prologue, Nazario lays out her own background to show the ways that she relates to these stories. Herself the child of immigrants, she understands the desire for new possibilities. Furthermore, her father's death during her adolescence makes her sympathetic to difficult family situations.

Nazario ends by describing her awe at the tenacity of the young people who make this journey and at the difficulty that immigrant single mothers face. And she comments that the greatest loss to these disconnected families is the disintegration of trust that occurs between the child and parent because of their separation, a breach that can never be fully repaired.

Nazario's background shows both her own connections to the immigrants (her own family's immigration and her "abandonment" by her father), and how immigration (now an almost dirty word in the U.S.) is connected to a larger history of immigration.



In the U.S., illegal immigrants are often presented--and treated--as criminals. Nazario flips that logic on its head, expressing true admiration for these immigrants. She makes the point that these are just people, like everyone else, looking for a better life. At the same time, she notes the human costs of this immigration, laying the foundations for her later commentary on how to make this sort of immigration less necessary.



1. THE BOY LEFT BEHIND

Enrique is five years old on January 29, 1989, when his mother, Lourdes, leaves Tegucigalpa in Honduras. He does not know what is going on, and Lourdes cannot bring herself to say goodbye or to tell him where she is going. At the age of twenty-four, with her husband having left her, and her two children (Enrique and his older sister Belky) hungry, Lourdes has decided to leave behind her state of impoverishment in Honduras in the hope of finding something better in the United States. She hopes to make money to send home, and to return in one year to bring her children to the United States. Despite her plans, Lourdes never returns to Honduras.

Enrique's separation from his mother defines his life, and his desire to see and reconnect with his mother drives Enrique to set out to find his mother at the age of 17. As such a migrant, Enrique is one of approximately 48,000 children from Central America and Mexico who immigrate to the U.S. illegally and alone. They come for different reasons—some to find employment, others to escape abuse—but the majority are seeking to reunite with their mothers. The trip is very dangerous; dodging the police, bandits, and gangsters, most are robbed, beaten, or raped. On average, they are teenagers, but some are as young as seven.

For Lourdes, as for the many other mothers like her, leaving her family to come to the US is a decision she makes out of love, in the interest of her children. And yet, she cannot help but feel guilty for abandoning them. Her inability to face Enrique as she leaves demonstrates her complicated feelings of guilt.



Lourdes' decision causes her family to separate and dictates Enrique's actions as a young man. His need to reunite with his mother is common amongst the children of single immigrant mothers, who have been abandoned. The absent parent becomes a kind of ideal, and the overwhelming desire for a family connection that has been lost compels these children to make the treacherous journey to the United States.



Lourdes makes her journey by bus through Mexico with her smuggler—a person who helps illegal immigrants make the trip and cross the border into the United States—during one of the largest immigrant waves in U.S. history. She plans to travel to Miami, but her smuggler abandons her in the Greyhound bus terminal in L.A., and after three days, Lourdes begs for work at a nearby factory where she gets a job sorting tomatoes for \$14 a day. Finally, she is able to obtain a fake Social Security card and a job. She moves to Beverly Hills, where she works as a live-in nanny and makes \$125 a week and is able to send money back to Honduras. But after seven months, she decides to quit. She cannot bear to care for another child when she has left her own so far away.

When Lourdes leaves Honduras on that fateful day, Enrique is left confused and abandoned. His father, Luis, who had been separated from Lourdes for three years, takes Enrique in. Enrique quickly becomes attached to his father, but within two years, his father starts a new life with another woman. Abandoned again, Enrique lives with his paternal grandmother, Maria Marcos, in a small shack, while his sister, Belky lives with her aunt Rosa Amalia in a better part of town, six miles away. Lourdes sends home money for her children, but not enough for Enrique to go to school.

Lourdes life in the U.S. is not what she imagined. She rekindles a relationship with a former boyfriend from Honduras, Santos, who moves to Long Beach to live with her. She unintentionally gets pregnant. When her daughter Diana is born, Santos is not there, but at a bar. When Diana is an infant, both Santos and Lourdes lose their jobs. One night, Santos, an alcoholic, hits her. Later, he decides to take a trip to Honduras under the pretense that he will make investments with their savings. However, he spends the money on alcohol and never calls Lourdes and never returns. She is left alone with Diana, living in a dilapidated garage. With no other options, she takes a job as a *fichera*, where she must chat with lonely men at a bar. In nine months, she finds work as a cleaner during the day, and at a gas station at night. Her jobs allow her to wire money to Honduras.

Lourdes' journey is full of uncertainty, but, as with Carmen (Nazario's housekeeper), her life in the United States proves no less so. Her smuggler's disappearance indicates the touch-and-go nature of immigrant's circumstances, and just what a dependent and vulnerable situation illegal immigrants are in. Lourdes must be prepared to work any job in order to send money home, even if it means triggering the emotional trauma of her separation from her children.



The separation of this family, set off by Lourdes' departure, has further repercussions. Enrique is abandoned for a second time by his father, and is separated from his sister from the time of their mother's leaving. The separation has caused emotional problems for Belky, who has doubts about her own self-worth, and for Enrique, who becomes easily attached to parental figures as a result of his loss.



In spite of her hopes, Lourdes's problems are not solved by living in the United States. On the contrary, she is met with unprecedented difficulties, dealing with another inadequate partner and left to raise another child on her own. She is forced into jobs that humiliate her, but she perseveres nonetheless for the sake of her children. Her best times are the days that she can send home money—that she can make her sacrifice provide tangible benefit for those she left behind.



Despite Lourdes' attempts to care for her children from afar, the money cannot make up for their emotional loss. Her relationships to Belky and Enrique become more strained. In response, Lourdes plans to become a resident of the United States and bring her children as legal immigrants. But after multiple attempts to get her papers to no avail, she realizes that her plan may not work. Instead, she promises to return home for Christmas, a promise that she then has to break every year. When Enrique is twelve, he begins to realize that his mother may never return. Lourdes considers hiring a smuggler to bring her children to the United States, but the risks—abandonment or even death—and the price (\$3,000 to \$6,000 per child, \$10,000 by air) are more than she can possibly pay.

In Honduras, the anger Enrique feels at the separation from his mother causes him to rebel. He is suspended three times and becomes a problem at school. When he is fourteen, he hangs around in a bad neighborhood, Carrizal, and defies his grandmother's orders. He becomes too much for Maria Marcos to handle, and she asks Lourdes to find him another place to live, causing Enrique to believe that no one loves him. Enrique moves in with Marco, Lourdes' eldest brother.

A year later, Lourdes moves to North Carolina, where there are fewer immigrants and she finds the people more friendly. She works as a waitress, rents a room in a trailer, and begins to save her money. She also falls in love with a house painter from Honduras, who also has two children back home. Enrique is doing well living with Marco, who works as a money changer at the border, and they have built a relationship of trust. However, at one exchange, Marco and his brother Victor are killed by thieves. Lourdes sends her savings to help pay for the funerals. With Marco gone, Enrique once again finds himself without a home.

Enrique next moves to his maternal grandmother's, where he grew up with Lourdes. At fifteen, Enrique becomes quiet and sad. His grandmother Agueda begins to scold him when he misbehaves. He also develops an addiction to sniffing glue. His grandmother won't allow him to live in the house and has him stay in the stone hut located behind it.

Even when the family benefits from Lourdes' material gains, the emotional distance between the mother and her children inevitably widens. As the children grow up and their separation becomes more palpable, Lourdes considers alternatives to bring her children over. But none of the options are viable for her.



As a teenager, Enrique reacts to his separation from his mother in more indirect ways, taking his emotions out on those around him. This leads to yet another cycle of abandonment, in which he is kicked out of his grandmother's home. Unfortunately, he falsely rationalizes that it is because no one loves him, and thus augments his feelings of loneliness and abandonment.



Even when circumstances change, and Lourdes lands a steady job in a place she likes, her luck can quickly change. The tragedy of her brothers' deaths causes her to swear off Honduras, and causes Enrique to suffer yet another loss of a parental figure.



Enrique's addiction indicates his profound depression and highlights his inability to express his feelings productively and results in even further rejection and abandonment. The book shows how familial abandonment results in psychological trauma, and these lead in turn to behavior, that produces a cycle of abandonment.



Meanwhile, Enrique meets and falls in love with Maria Isabel, who has also endured a difficult childhood separated from her parents. Enrique wants to have a child with Maria Isabel so that he can start a family and ensure that he won't be abandoned by another person he loves. Unfortunately, his drug addiction becomes more severe and he grows increasingly out of control. He hallucinates at times, sometimes fails to recognize his family, and once tries to hurt himself by throwing himself off a hill. His family's attempts at intervention are unsuccessful, but they decide not to tell Lourdes about Enrique's situation.

When Enrique turns sixteen, he and his friend Jose decide to try to get to the United States. They take buses across Guatemala towards Mexico, and successfully get past the border and make it onto a freight train. On the train they are arrested and robbed by corrupt police, but then released. They eventually make it to the city of Veracruz—though Enrique only barely and luckily avoids injury or death when he fails to make a jump from one moving train car to another. In Veracruz, though, they are caught and deported back to Honduras.

The failed attempt pushes Enrique deeper into his drug addiction. He ends up 6,000 lempiras (\$400) in debt to his dealer. To pay the debt, he steals jewelry from his aunt Rosa Amalia, who tells the police. As a result, Enrique's uncle resolves to take better care of Enrique and show him more love. He also gets Enrique a job at a tire store. However, despite attempts to quit drugs and the pleas from Maria Isabel and his family, Enrique continues to use. The conflict comes to a head when he kicks his aunt Ana Lucia, and is thrown off the property.

Although she is advised to leave Enrique, Maria Isabel persists in their relationship. She also thinks that she may be pregnant with his child. Enrique feels guilty for the way he has treated her and his other family members, and believes that only his mother can help. Though he despairs at leaving Maria Isabel, he decides that he must go to the United States. On March 2, 2000, He says goodbye to his loved ones and leaves with only \$57 and his mother's telephone number written on a bit of paper attached to the inner waistband of his jeans.

Enrique's romance with Maria Isabel makes him realize that he deserves love, but it cannot repair his feelings of familial abandonment—and in fact is partly based on his desire to replace the family that abandoned him. Enrique and Maria Isabel connect to one another based on their mutual understanding. Despite their strong relationship, his growing drug addiction suggests that he still suffers from his complicated emotions relating to his relationship with his mother.



Enrique's first attempt shows not just the difficulty of the journey but its extreme danger—he's not just trying to travel thousands of miles while evading immigration police, he's jumping from train to train! Enrique is willing to face death to try to be with his mother. This first journey also shows how easy it is to get caught by the immigration police.



With every failure to reach his mother, Enrique's despair grows. His struggle to stop using drugs represents the hurdles that he must overcome at home even before he leaves on his journey. In his teenage years, Enrique is still struggling to come to terms with his family in Honduras and to recognize their love for him.



Enrique's resolve to find his mother shows the development of his own self-awareness, as he realizes that his separation from his mother lies at the root of his psychological problems. However, at the same time his idea that once he reaches his mother his problems will be solved indicates an idealization of Lourdes that can't possibly be met by the reality. Lourdes's departure has set off a cycle of immigration within this single family.



2. SEEKING MERCY

In a small town in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, Enrique, severely battered and wearing only his underwear, limps towards a field hand. The man provides Enrique with a pair of pants and directs him to the mayor, who brings him to his home and takes care of him. A mayor from a neighboring town arrives in a truck and takes Enrique to the doctor. The alternative is to let Enrique die, but the cost of burying him would be three times as much as the doctor's fee. Before they leave for the hospital, Enrique sees a judicial office, who robbed him the day before. The robbing, beating, and extorting of migrants by corrupt police is a common occurrence.

After this episode, Nazario turns the story back six months to when Enrique made his first attempt to travel north. The first attempt was described in the previous chapter: he travels by bus through Guatemala with his friend Jose, but is seized atop a train in Veracruz, Mexico. The second time, Enrique traveled alone, but was caught atop the trains and again deported to Guatemala. On the third, police caught him asleep in a house and robbed him. Police caught him asleep again on his fourth trip in Tapachula, Mexico. The fifth time, he was caught in Mexico City. His sixth journey, was the most successful: he had covered 1,564 miles and was at the Rio Grande river, with the United States in view on the other side, when he was seized by immigration agents who sent him back to Guatemala.

Meanwhile, in Honduras, Maria Isabel worries about Enrique and blames herself for his leaving. She wishes that he will be deported back to Honduras. She is unwell and losing weight, and wonders if she is pregnant. Finally, she decides with a friend that they will go to the U.S. together.

Enrique's injuries demonstrate the physical dangers of his journey and the extent of his determination to find his mother. Although the people of this town show compassion and generosity towards Enrique, Nazario also complicates these characters' decisions by inserting the detail about the price of burying migrants—they are helping, but they are also just being practical. This exemplifies Nazario's balanced way of storytelling, which allows her to present the facts without imposing her own judgment on the situation.



This list of attempts emphasizes the many obstacles that migrants encounter on their way. It also shows how the intense efforts of the migrants can be shut down and made pointless in a moment, returning them to where they started. Enrique's multiple attempts reveal his inner strength and resolve that drives his desire to see his mother. From this description, it seems as though he will never give up. Also note that Enrique is not only trying to circumvent a system that is stacked against him. The system itself is corrupt. The police don't just catch him. Some of those police are corrupt, and also rob him. The desperate migrants are exploited and mistreated by many of those who are in power.



Maria Isabel's resolve to find Enrique shows another layer of family disintegration. Just as Enrique must find his mother, so too does Maria Isabel feel the need to find him. Again the book shows how an initial abandonment ripples outward, creates a cycle of abandonment.



At the Guatemalan border where Enrique was deported after being caught for the sixth time, he must quickly find his way back into Mexico to avoid the dangers of the border towns. On his seventh trip, he crosses the river into Mexico at El Carmen and gets onto a freight train. There, he is robbed and badly beaten by six men. To escape from the men, he jumps from the train, which is moving at almost 40 miles per hour. At this point, the story joins up with the first episode in the chapter—Enrique finds the field hand, Gomez, and the mayor, and he is brought to a clinic. The doctor tells him that he is lucky; many others whom he treats after a day, ready to continue his journey. As he limps down the road, a few people give him a little money out of people. Soon he flags down a car for a ride. Unfortunately, the driver is an off-duty immigration officer, who sends him on a bus back to Guatemala. Despite failing for a seventh time, Enrique tells himself that he must persist.

This section conveys the wide range of characters that migrants meet on their journeys, from the bandits to the doctors to the migras. Nazario's description of the beating shows the cruelty inflicted on migrants, who are determined to survive to make it to their loved ones. Then, Enrique's trip to the doctor reveals the conditions of other patients who are at even more risk. Finally, his ultimate failure—which comes about because of a pure stroke of ridiculously bad luck—does not deter him from his goal, and he resolves to keep trying.



3. FACING THE BEAST

This chapter recounts Enrique's eighth attempt to reach the United States, after having been deported to Guatemala after the seventh. He begins on the border of Guatemala and Mexico, about to enter the southernmost state, Chiapas, known by Enrique and other young migrants as the **beast**. His experiences in Chiapas have yielded knowledge: avoid buses, never ride freight trains alone, do not trust authorities. Enrique decides to spend the night in a cemetery near Tapachula, but not at the train station, where he has been caught in the past. A gangster of the Mara Salvatrucha gang, Big Daddy, sleeps next to him and rouses Enrique when he hears municipal police approaching. They are caught by the police and brought to the Tapachula jail. With the help of other migrants, Enrique escapes from the jail and runs back to the cemetery. At dawn, he hears the rumbling of an approaching train and runs towards the tracks. He grabs a hold of a ladder on the train car and, with the help of fellow migrants, hoists himself up.

The description of Chiapas typifies the type of dangers that migrants are forced to endure. Having persevered through many previous attempts, Enrique has the advantage of prior knowledge that leads him to make wiser decisions on his eighth try. But still, there are factors that he cannot control. Enrique's imprisonment and subsequent escape highlights his tenacity. Nazario's vivid depiction of the scene of migrants mounting the freight train emphasizes the fast-paced and perilous nature of the journey, while at the same time conveying the sense of camaraderie amongst the migrants. Her knowledge is also testament to her willingness to retrace Enrique's steps herself: had she not rode these train tops herself, she might never have been able to tell this story as accurately or vividly as she does. In some ways, every detail of the book is a testament to Nazario's compassion and determination to humanize and make public to story of Enrique and other migrants.



On the trains, Enrique encounters many other children like him, some as young as nine, most fifteen or younger. Finding a place to hide on the trains is risky—many spots are dangerous, and others are the frequent targets of *migras* (immigration police). Enrique decides to steady himself atop a hopper car, and holds on as the train lurches on and rounds bends. The train slows as it approached La Arrocera, an immigration checkpoint well-known for its strict agents. Once the migrants spot agents, they begin to jump between cars to avoid being noticed. When Enrique is noticed, he decides to jump off the train and hide in the brush.

Though the train journey is full of risks, there are many migrants making the same journey as Enrique—some of them even younger and less experienced. That a nine year old would attempt such a journey communicates the true desperation of what life must be like for that child at home. Despite dangers of all types, Enrique makes quick decisions that allow him to make it out of life-threatening situations.



In the brush, Enrique's main concern are *madrinas*, civilians who help the authorities. Carrying machetes, they often comb the areas around checkpoints and are known to commit horrible crimes. Enrique runs, trying to stay out of site, and worrying about bandits who are so powerful in the area that they are practically exempt from the law. He passes an abandoned house, a notorious spot where women are regularly raped by bandits. Sexual assault is one of the main threats that female migrants often encounter and are forced to endure. Nazario cites evidence that one in six female migrants are subject to sexual assault. Finally, Enrique makes it to the Cuil bridge, which is his only way across the river that will allow him to get back on the train past La Arrocera. The bridge is notorious as a spot where bandits ambush migrants, but Enrique makes it across unharmed.

In Chiapas, Enrique knows that people are not likely to help migrants. They hold prejudices against Central Americans, fearing that migrants spread disease, prostitution, and crime. Some even turn them in. But Enrique is desperate for water, and needs help. He approaches a house and is fortunate to be greeted by a kind woman who gives him bread, beans, and water. Soon he hears the sound of a train coming, and he rushes to the tracks, and boards.

In Honduras, Maria Isabel is convinced by her family members not to go and try to find Enrique. They are shocked that she would consider making such a dangerous journey, especially if she is pregnant.

Back on the train, Enrique stands holding on to a hopper as he suffers in the heat, which is over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. He cannot let himself fall asleep—he might slip and fall, or become a victim of the Mara Salvatrucha gang. The Mara Salvatrucha gang controls the tops of freight trains in this area, looking for sleeping migrants to rob. They have also been known to beat anyone who defies them or fights back, to throw people from trains, among other brutalities. In earlier runs through Chiapas, Enrique had befriended a Mara Salvatrucha member named El Brujo, and thus was protected from their attacks. However, recently he refused to help Mara Salvatrucha take revenge against a rival gang, and thus lost his protection and has faced several beatings. Vulnerable, he keeps himself awake by jumping from car to car. Other migrants take amphetamines, exercise, or use other methods to stay awake. Finally, Enrique and the train pass out of Chiapas and Enrique is proud to have made it through the **beast**.

Nazario interweaves details of Enrique's specific journey with information about La Arrocera that she has gleaned from her research. In such a dangerous area, Enrique's concerns are many—he must be on guard against migras, madrinas, and bandits, against those with official power and those who have taken power for themselves. As a migrant, he is at the mercy of everybody. Furthermore, Nazario uses the location that Enrique passes as a way to address the devastating cases of sexual assault of female migrants, who experience severe physical and psychological debasement and trauma.



The hesitation of people in Chiapas to help migrants shows how immigration problems extend through many territories and effect places that are involved merely by their location. Despite the usual lack of hospitality in Chiapas, the woman who helps Enrique demonstrates that there are generous and compassionate people everywhere.



The reaction to Maria Isabel's plan only underlines the dangers of the journey, and causes her to fear for Enrique's safety.



Enrique's chance relationship with El Brujo shows the role that good fortune plays in the migrant's ability to make his journey. And, just as easily as Enrique happens upon this lucky friendship, it ends. In this case, it ends because Enrique shows some moral courage, which in his position only makes him vulnerable. To make the journey, migrants must have the determination, knowledge and common sense that Enrique possesses, but they also must have luck. That does not diminish Enrique's drive, determination, or quick thinking, but it does communicate just how desperate the journey is.



Some migrants who set out with Enrique for Chiapas have been caught and deported, while others have been severely injured or even died. In the town of Arriaga, dedicated paramedics from the Red Cross treat migrants who have been injured on (or by) the trains. In Tapachula, Olga Sanchez Martinez, the head of the Shelter of Jesus the Good Shepherd, helps heal the wounded. Determined to do the impossible, she stops at nothing to try to save migrants' lives. Having suffered in her own life (including a bout with cancer), she turned to religion to help her and to allow her to help others. Her hard work she does for free, and she runs the operation on a shoestring with the help of donations from other generous people.

Nazario also points out another group of people who do not make it out of Chiapas: victims of rape. Nazario cites an example of a woman from Honduras named Wendy, who is gang raped as her husband waits at a checkpoint.

Finally, Enrique makes it to the state of Oaxaca, 285 miles into Mexico. He gets off the train hoping to rest and find some food and water. Off the train, he must disguise himself so that he doesn't stick out as a Central American. He gets his hair cut, for instance, because his curly hair differs from Mexicans' straight dark hair, and pays attention to the way that he speaks so that he does not come across as Honduran. He glances at himself in the reflection of a window and sees that he has changed, how the trials of the journeys are visible in his body. This only augments his desire to find his mother.

4. GIFTS AND FAITH

In April 2000, Enrique approaches Veracruz, about a third of the way up Mexico in the state of Oaxaca. Many migrants around him thank God for making it this far, and pray for help and protection as the train passes a statue of Jesus. Even though the migrants must keep their possessions to a minimum, many carry Bibles as one of their few belongings. In them, they record the names, phone numbers, and addresses of their loved family members. But Enrique does not ask for help from God, believing that he has committed too many sins to be heard.

The people like Olga and the doctors at the Red Cross are compassionate and selfless in their concern for the health and safety of others. Olga turned to religion to bring her out of hard times, and to have the determination to pursue the difficult job that she does today. These characters recognize the humanity of the migrants and treat them as they would treat anyone else in need.



Rape and sexual assault are just some of many forms of dehumanization that Central American migrants must confront as they make their journey across Mexico.



Enrique's awareness of the differences between Central Americans and Mexicans reveals how the journey not only requires physical strength, bravery, and determination, but also careful attention to detail and sensitivity to the people who inhabit the territory that migrants must traverse. His hardening into a man at such a young age again attests to the difficulties of the journey, but also makes him only more desperate to reunite with his mother.



Religion plays an important role both in the lives of migrants and those who help them. It keeps hope alive for those who have every reason to become despondent. For people in Oaxaca and Veracruz, whose generosity is shocking to migrants, religion becomes a reason to help others. Furthermore, churches become safe hiding places for migrants from the police--a risky endeavor for the priests, who could be accused of smuggling. At the same time, that the generous and compassionate people in this book all seem to be working to help the migrants and against official policy at least suggests that official policy may not be working.



In Oaxaca and Veracruz, Enrique does not need to ask for help—unlike most of the people of Chiapas, most of the people of Veracruz believe in helping the migrants. They run alongside the trains passing up bundles of food. They give migrants refuge in churches. Some residents provide protection from the police, hiding migrants in their backyards and gardens at the risk of arrest themselves. At times, even whole communities resist the threats of police in solidarity with the migrants. Nazario recounts an incident in 2000, when drunk police officers shot at migrants and even beat a pregnant migrant, and 500 townspeople demanded the release of any of the migrants who had been arrested.

Enrique leaves Veracruz headed northward and makes friends with two other boys, one thirteen, and the other seventeen. They offer advice to one another and are generous with their belongings. He knows that their friendship will be short-lived, but relishes it nonetheless. They arrive in Mexico City, and the local people suddenly become less friendly. They fear the arrival of migrants and believe they are criminals. Enrique finds a hiding spot until he can get on a 10:30pm train to the Texas border. When the train comes, Enrique and his friends settle in a boxcar and fall to sleep, only to be wakened by police who have found them. The police take the boys to their *jefe* – or chief – and check them for drugs. Finding none, the *jefe* gives them food and toothpaste, and then warns them to make sure to get off the train before the next security guard station, which is notorious for being strict.

For the first time on his journey, Enrique decides to stop moving for a while. He wants to earn some money, so as not to enter the United States without any money. In Mexico City, he asks for food from a brick maker, who replies by offering a job, including food and a place to stay. The brick maker also advises Enrique about the best way to make his way to the border, telling him to take a *combi* (a minibus) through the first checkpoint, because those are not checked by the *migra*. The bricklayer further advises that Enrique then take a bus to Matehuala, where he might be able to hitchhike a ride up to the Rio Grande.

These compassionate people are remarkable especially because of the great risks that they take in their good deeds. Despite the possibility of their own punishment, they stand up for people who they believe deserve better treatment and the opportunity to complete their journeys. They regard the migrants simply as other human beings who are worthy of help, not as illegals to be deported, or vulnerable people to be exploited, or even as numbers to be cited and argued over.



Again, Enrique meets people who are full of kindness and compassion. Despite the harshness of people in Mexico City, his fellow companions look out for each other and the police on the train are surprisingly lenient. As regards the police, the suggestion is that they are less concerned with weeding out migrants than with catching drug smugglers.



The brick maker shows Enrique the utmost compassion, offering him work and advice even when he does not ask for it.



After working and earning 80 pesos along with enough to buy clothing and shoes, Enrique follows the brick maker's travel advice, and ends up in Matehuala asking truckers for a ride. Many turn him down, but one, finally, accepts. He asks Enrique about his situation and is prepared to help. At a checkpoint, the trucker lies and says that Enrique is his assistant, and the officials ask no further questions. The driver drops Enrique off in the city of Nuevo Laredo, and Enrique then uses some of the money he earned to take a bus into the center of the city. There he meets a man from Honduras who takes him to an encampment near the Rio Grande, where he can see the United States. Enrique thinks of his mother, of how close he now is to her but also of the emotional distance that remains between them.

.Similarly, the trucker who picks up the hitchhiking Enrique takes risks and lies on behalf of Enrique. Those who recognize the difficulty of Enrique's position show willingness and generosity in the face of Enrique's strength, desire, and love. Encounters like these ones make Enrique's journey possible for a seventeen year old boy to complete.



5. ON THE BORDER

Enrique has been on the banks of the Rio Grande in Nuevo Laredo for days. He is unsure whether his mother is still in North Carolina and he has lost her phone number. He remembers just one phone number in Honduras. He decides that he will call there, ask for one of his family members, and find out his mother's phone number. To make these two calls he will need two phone cards will together cost 100 pesos, which is more than he has. To earn the money, he decides to get a job washing cars.

On the train, pure survival dominated Enrique's thoughts and needs. As he gets closer to the border of the US, though, money becomes increasingly important. While Enrique's determination to work once again emphasizes his persistence and desire to reunite with his mother, the importance of money also comes to show how illegal immigration has become a business, for the simple reason that whenever there are desperate people there is money to be made. On the trains, gangs made money by outright theft. Near the border, the immigration "economy" becomes more formal—it is less obviously based on theft, but still involves the more powerful extracting money from the less powerful.



In Nuevo Laredo, Enrique lives in an encampment among migrants, coyotes, junkies, and criminals. Though the camp is dirty and noisy, it is safer than other places—reeds conceal it from the view of U.S. immigration officers. Every night, he goes to a nearby taco stand to wash cars and sometimes get a couple of tacos after hours. If he can't get tacos, he relies on parish churches who give out meal cards. There, he meets child migrants with stories similar to his and learns about the experiences of others. The children find solace in sharing stories.

Having endured so much atop the trains, living in the encampment is something of a break for Enrique. That the dirty, noisy camp is like a haven for Enrique again testifies to the awfulness of the journey on the trains. Now he must plot his next, most difficult move. But before then, he finds comfort in meeting others like him. They understand each other because they have been forced into the same difficult positions.



The encampment is led by El Tiríndaro, a *patero*—a type of “coyote” who smuggles people into the U.S. on inner tubes on the river. El Tiríndaro is addicted to heroin and pays for his addiction by smuggling, tattooing, and stealing. He hopes that Enrique will be one of his customers, so he treats him well. Enrique is protected by other people living at the encampment, especially because he is the youngest. But outside of the camp, he does not do as well; he is not earning enough washing cars and he is not getting enough to eat. El Tiríndaro helps him earn money by selling clothes left behind on the banks of the river by other migrants. For El Tiríndaro, this help is an investment of sorts: if Enrique can earn enough to get the phone cards and call his mother, he will be more likely to pay El Tiríndaro to help him cross the river as well to then get smuggled further into the United States. The cost for El Tiríndaro’s services is \$1,200.

By May 14, 2000, Mother's Day, Enrique has made enough to pay for two phone card. The next day, in celebration, he has El Tiríndaro give him a tattoo: "EnriqueLourdes" written on his chest. He knows his mother won't be happy about the tattoo. However, he is so hungry on the following day that he trades one of his phone cards for food. He has also begun to sniff glue again—the one way he finds that he can alleviate his fear, loneliness, and hunger. Then, he discovers that someone has stolen his bucket. In need of money, he goes to town to beg to make money for another phone card.

Enrique thinks about crossing the river alone, but he is warned not to, especially as he can't swim. Trying to take a train into Texas also won't work: they are checked thoroughly, even by body-heat infrared sensors. Walking across Texas is also not possible alone. Many migrants who have tried it have been killed by dehydration in the intense heat, or have gotten shot by ranchers. Nazario further details what border security is like. The number of border agents has skyrocketed since 1993. Border patrol agents trace migrants' tracks as if they were hunting down animals. The agents are given bonuses for catching migrants. For some migrants who make the attempt to cross the border on their own, the journey is so difficult that they actually feel grateful—at least initially—when they are caught by agents.

El Tiríndaro's care for Enrique is complicated; while he is generous and kind to him, he is also thinking about his own interests when helping him. He is motivated by the possibility of more business if he is able to put Enrique in contact with his mother. Nonetheless, without El Tiríndaro's help, Enrique would be at a loss. At the very least, one can say that El Tiríndaro is at least honest. He never tries to charge Enrique more than his quoted price, and he never betrays his charges.



The closer Enrique becomes to reaching his mother, the more his desire to see her and be near her grows. Other mothers find relief in commiserating about their experiences. At the same time, Enrique has material needs that occupy his mind and affect his decision-making. Is he wrong for trading a phone card he has worked hard to buy for food, when he is famished by hunger? The impact of poverty and scarcity on a person's decision-making can be tremendous.



Thinking about his plan to cross the border, Enrique must take into account every option. But all seem dangerous and nearly impossible to pull off alone. Nazario doesn't get into the reasons for the policy shift that increased border security. But she does capture the way that these policy shifts end up affecting the least powerful people, the migrants. That the border agents are given bonuses for catching migrants emphasizes again the sense that everyone is making money from this illegal immigration except the illegal immigrants, and the way that not just the corrupt but even official policies reduce the migrants to something less than human, in this case to mere monetary value.



Enrique decides that his only option is to use a smuggler. He chooses El Tiríndaro because he knows that he is trustworthy and has a good success rate. Yet before he can call his mother to tell her to hire El Tiríndaro, Enrique discovers that his right shoe has been stolen in the night. Shoes are vital, nearly as important as food. On his trip, he has already had his shoes stolen—he's gone through many pairs—and now desperately searches for another. He finds one by the riverbank, but it is a left shoe. He will have to make do wearing two left shoes.

In spite of his strong will, Enrique knows that he will need help. His decision to use El Tiríndaro shows that they have built a relationship that he can rely on in difficult times. Put another way, El Tiríndaro's investment in good customer service has paid off: he's landed the client. The incident with his shoe is just one of many setbacks that Enrique endures and overcomes, but also shows just how tenuous the life of an impoverished migrant is: survival can depend on something as minor as a pair of shoes.



On May 19th, Enrique goes to Pedro Leo, a kind local priest, because he knows he allows migrants to use the phone in the church. Pedro Leo is an unconventional, poor-looking priest, who is dedicated to helping migrants. He uses the Bible rarely during Mass and instead structures his sermons around jokes or popular songs or movies. His most important job is tending to the needs of migrants, whom he feeds and clothes. At the church, Enrique makes the call back to his old boss in Honduras, who connects him to his relatives who then give him his mother's phone number in North Carolina. He runs to a pay phone to be alone, and calls his mother. They find it difficult to talk, but work out the details of Enrique's next step: she agrees to gather the money and hire El Tiríndaro to smuggle Enrique into the United States.

Pedro Leo understands faith in terms of how he may use it to help those in need. Compassion is the greatest lesson that the priest learns from religion. When Enrique finally reaches his mother on the phone, their exchange is charged with many emotions, which they are unable to express. The long separation has made their relationship hard to rebuild. Meanwhile, the business of illegal immigration kicks in to gear.



6. A DARK RIVER, PERHAPS A NEW LIFE

On May 21, 2000, Enrique waits with two other migrants, a Mexican brother and sister, at the beginning of the journey across the river with El Tiríndaro. On the other side of the river, a U.S. Border Patrol tower aims its cameras out over the water, and patrol vehicles move across the far riverbank in the night. The three migrants all strip down to their underwear and pack their clothes into plastic bags to keep them dry. El Tiríndaro loads the two Mexicans into a tube and brings them to a small island in the middle of the river. He then comes back for Enrique. The Rio Grande, called the Rio Bravo at this location, is dangerous. The current is strong and there are whirlpools. Nazario notes that fifty-four migrants have died this year alone trying to cross the Rio Bravo at this spot. Enrique cannot swim and, terrified, grips onto the tube. As they cross the river, an SUV flashing red and blue lights is visible. Finally they arrive at the island safely. From the SUV, agents shine spotlights on the island. Everyone huddles on the ground and waits.

Finally, so close to the United States, the journey is more treacherous than ever. The dangers of the river combined with the increase in security makes for a perilous trip across the river. El Tiríndaro protects and leads Enrique well, but it is notable just how absolutely dependent Enrique is on El Tiríndaro at this point: unable to swim in the middle of a river, the money having already been wired—it would be easy for someone less trustworthy than El Tiríndaro to just betray Enrique and take his money.



Nazario reports that if caught, authorities can deport migrants back to their home countries. First, though, they usually send them, in shackles to a Texas jail, where the conditions are extremely poor, few of the guards speak Spanish, and the migrant children are held for an indeterminate amount of time. Many become desperate and even suicidal. As Enrique waits, his mind fills with dread about what could happen. But after half an hour, the agents depart, and El Tirindaro takes the migrants across the rest of the river. Enrique is standing on U.S. soil, but El Tirindaro quickly leads them to a freezing, sewage-filled, tributary of the river so that they won't be seen by Border Patrol. They dress quickly in the dry clothes from their plastic bags, and El Tirindaro gives them a bit of food. Then he leads them, running over a steep embankment until they reach a residential street.

As they reach the street, a Chevy Blazer that has been waiting for them flashes its lights. They jump in, and are greeted by a man and woman who are contacts of El Tirindaro's in his network of smugglers. The vehicle has pillows in the back, and Enrique soon falls asleep. He is woken when they are approaching a checkpoint. The migrants have to get out of the car, walk around the checkpoint, and get back in the car on the other side. Once back in the car, Enrique again falls asleep. When he wakes up, El Tirindaro has left. The driver takes him to a house where he changes into American clothing and calls his mother.

In North Carolina, Lourdes, worried sick about Enrique, waits to hear from her son. She has not been able to sleep and has spent the night praying for his safety. She receives a call from the female smuggler asking for \$500 more than the original price. Skeptical, Lourdes asks to speak to Enrique. When she has confirmation that he is there, she wires the money. The smugglers take Enrique to Orlando, where Lourdes' boyfriend picks him up. On the morning of May 28th, having traveled over 12,000 miles over 122 days, Enrique rushes into his mother's trailer, where she is in bed, and embraces her.

Nazario reflects on Enrique's journey and points out that his story is real, not fictional. Though stories typically end with reunions that lead to peace and joy, and many children in his situation dream of reuniting with their mothers, the reality of the reunion is not always as they imagine. Children often feel resentment for being abandoned as well as resentment toward the new families their mothers have formed, while their mother often want recognition for the sacrifice they made in leaving in the first place. The children, after an initial period, sometimes end up turning to drugs, early marriages, or join gangs.

The book has captured Enrique and his reasons for immigrating, illegally, to the United States: love, and perhaps a desire for a better life. On his trip, Enrique has not stolen, has not harmed anyone. In fact, he has been stolen from and physically harmed. That the child migrants who are captured are brought to jails in shackles, though, makes clear that the child migrants, once caught in the US, are treated as criminals. And in many ways they are in even a worse position than criminals, as they can't communicate because of the language barrier, have no family to help them, and they have no idea how long they will be kept. Such conditions, as Nazario shows, lead to despair, as the children themselves only want to be reunited with their mothers or parents.



El Tirindaro's network is organized and prepared—they operate as a well-oiled machine, a slick business. It is hard to believe that Enrique passes the final checkpoint, after such a long journey. He cannot process anything right now; all he can do is sleep. The trip has been stressful, frightening, and draining. But it is not over. He will not be satisfied until he sees his mother.



Even as the smuggling of Enrique into the country is successful, the family is still at the mercy of the smugglers, who extract every ounce of value they can from those who are dependent on them. Yet Lourdes is able and willing to pay that price in order to see her son (which, of course, is why the smugglers demand it).



Nazario's interjection here helps to bring this larger than life story back down to earth. Her direct voice enforces her point about the frequent difficulties of families reuniting. As Nazario here explains, the pain and resentments of abandonment are not magically "healed" by getting re-united. Reuniting leads to a kind of honeymoon period, but the pain of abandonment, and its consequences, takes more time and effort to overcome.



Enrique and Lourdes fit this pattern. The first day is joyful, just as they expected. They talk about family and watch television. Enrique gets a job as a house painter, and buys gifts for his half-sister Diana. Soon, however, he and Lourdes begin to argue. She pushes him to learn English, while he doesn't want her telling him what to do. Another day, one of Lourdes's roommates rejects a collect call from Maria Isabel. Enrique, furious, packs to leave. A tremendous fight with Lourdes ensues, and he ends up spending the night in a cemetery. It doesn't take long for them to make up, but the tensions persist.

Though Enrique and Lourdes are thrilled to be together, the tension between them rises pretty quickly. Enrique, in making his journey to his mother, has had to be resourceful and independent. Now suddenly his mother (who he still feels abandoned him) is telling him what to do. Further, the relatively impoverished life situation of recent immigrants only exacerbates tensions. Enrique had once thought that all of his problems would be solved once he found his idealized mother. But, of course, that isn't true. That they reconcile shows their love for each other, but they will need a different kind of persistence to rebuild their relationship.



Not long after, on a phone call back home, Enrique learns that Maria Isabel is pregnant. On November 2, 2000, she gives birth to their daughter, Katerin Jasmin. Maria Isabel and Enrique decide that when they can afford it she should come to the United States and leave the baby in the care of her aunt, so that she can help send money home to support Jasmin.

Abandonment leads to abandonment leads to abandonment. Again, the book shows how abandonment is not an event, it is a cycle, driven by external forces that make these impossible choices necessary to make.



7. THE GIRL LEFT BEHIND

Enrique and Lourdes continue to argue. He blames his mother for leaving him and his sister Belky (and for leaving Belky with relatives who gave him a more stable life than what he experienced), while Lourdes believes that she did what was best for her children. Enrique tells her that his true mother is his grandmother Maria Marcos, who raised him in Honduras. Lourdes is devastated that he does not acknowledge the sacrifices she made, and blames him for spending the money she sent him in Honduras on drugs.

Enrique and Lourdes's relationship is full of complex and contradictory emotions that they have repressed for years of separation. Here those long-simmering feelings burst to the surface as both finally express themselves.



As Enrique and Lourdes become more estranged, Enrique turns to alcohol to ease the tension and starts to smoke marijuana. He spends his money on women and drink, instead of sending it home to support Maria Isabel and Jasmin. He speaks to Maria Isabel once a week. She lives with Enrique's family, and tells him that she faces constant criticism from his grandmother, sister, and aunts about how she is raising Jasmin and for spending some of the money he sends her to buy medicine for her own mother. Having lived in poverty her whole life, Maria thinks she should be able to provide some support for her mother and to occasionally buy something for herself. Tensions between Maria Isabel and Enrique's family continues to rise.

Enrique does not know how to deal with his problems with Lourdes and instead shies away from them. His relationship with Maria Isabel too is strained, because he cannot control what is happening back at home. Here the reader sees the long-term and immediate results of the separation of families.



Enrique sinks deeper into addiction and begins to huff paint thinner. He gets a speeding ticket, and ends up having to pay more than a thousand dollars in court fines. He stops saving much money and calls Maria Isabel less frequently, even though he still tells her that he wants her to join him. Lourdes begins to notice that Enrique is high often and catches him with the paint thinner. She threatens to throw him out. Enrique decides to stop huffing paint thinner, though he believes he does so more because of the headaches it gives him than because he wants to listen to his mother.

In Honduras, Maria Isabel decides to move from her house where she lives with Enrique's family and back into her mother's home. They live in a rundown hut in a poor part of an area called Los Tubos. Maria Isabel gets a job at a mall downtown, and she is able to make money to provide for her daughter. Jasmin gains weight and seems healthier under the care of her grandmother. On her second birthday, Jasmin speaks with Enrique for the first time over the phone.

Enrique has been in the U.S. for two and a half years. Arguments with his mother continue. He wants to stop drinking and wasting his money, so that he does not have to live apart from his daughter and she does not have to live in poverty and feeling abandoned by a parent. He wants to bring his family together. He starts to take better care of himself, and starts to work seven days a week. He hopes to earn enough to bring Maria Isabel to the country next year, and then for the two of them to quickly save enough to bring Jasmin afterward.

Mirian, Lourdes' sister, is out of work and cannot afford to raise her children in Honduras. She decides to come to the United States—leaving her children behind—to live with Lourdes. As Mirian says goodbye to her children, Belky watches and understands the hard decision that her own mother had to make. When Mirian moves in, Enrique is frustrated by how crowded it is in his mother's apartment and decides to move into his own trailer to have more space. This means he has to pay rent in addition to paying for car insurance, food, cell phone, etc. He has less money to send to Honduras, and becomes distant, calling Maria Isabel less often.

Meanwhile, in Honduras, Jasmin grows more and more attached to her mother and cries even when she goes off to work. Though her relatives think she should go to the United States to find work, and a recent hurricane has harmed the economy and worsened unemployment, Maria Isabel now cannot imagine going to the United States. She knows that joining Enrique would mean that Jasmin would have a better chance of growing up with both of her parents, but she is reluctant to leave her daughter as a young girl.

Enrique's drug addiction is the way that he escapes his problems. Of course, it is obvious to the reader that such addictions don't solve anything. But for the addicted, driven to drugs by pain and poverty, escaping addiction is no easy task. Although he is angry with his mother, her words still carry weight to him, as he listens to her and heeds her advice to quit drugs (even if he tells himself he is doing it for other reasons).



Despite their impoverished living conditions, Maria Isabel is able to improve her family's lives by finding a good job. With the help of her mother, she is able to work and raise her child at the same time. Though her father is absent, her daughter has a relatively comfortable and happy life.



Although Enrique has built a life in the United States, he realizes it is not without flaws. To attain his goal of having a family in the U.S., he must be disciplined and focused. He will not be able to bring them here without saving money, and he transforms his behavior in order to do so.



Mirian's move is yet another layer of this splitting of this large family. Her decision, like Lourdes', is driven by financial circumstances and the realization that only by leaving can she support her family. Meanwhile, Maria Isabel's growing distance from Enrique is an indication of what can happen to a broken family.



While Enrique yearns to have his family with him, Maria Isabel develops a special bond with Jasmin that makes her situation even more complicated. As she grows closer to her child, their separation from Enrique grows wider, but Jasmin and Maria Isabel's love grows deeper. It becomes harder to decide what move would be best for her family.



Lourdes and the family move to Florida in search of better work. There, the men get painting jobs and the women work as maids. Lourdes begins to enjoy her life, spending time with her boyfriend and her daughter Diana. However, Enrique doesn't like this new situation and soon moves back to North Carolina to work with his friends there. When he is away from Lourdes, though, he begins to miss her and to understand the difficulties she has faced and the choices she made. Though his resentment is not entirely gone, he tells her that he loves her, and decides to return to Florida to be with her.

A second separation leads Enrique to understand and empathize with his mother more than he did when they were together. He also realizes how much he needs her. He had to let out his feelings of sadness and anger before being able to fully express his love for her. There is no entirely happy ending here – the hurt of abandonment retains – but it seems like Enrique is finally ready to move past that pain and look into the future. Enrique's journey was not just the physical journey from Honduras to the US, but also this journey to face, accept, and move on from the pain of abandonment.



By the spring of 2004, Enrique has been away from Honduras for four years and he has not been able to speak to Maria Isabel in four months. However, he has been saving money assiduously, and finally saves enough to afford a smuggler. He calls Maria Isabel and asks her to make a decision about coming to the United States. After hesitating for some time to make a choice, Maria Isabel decides that leaving will be the best for Jasmin in the long term. Enrique sets up a smuggler for her. The day she leaves, like Lourdes, she says goodbye to her daughter but cannot bring herself to tell her daughter where she is going and that she won't be coming home.

Now, three mothers have had to leave their children within one family. The pain of separation is equally hard in every case. Though the decision is made for the best, it is nonetheless impossible to say goodbye. The way that Maria Isabel's departure from Jasmin mirrors Lourdes's departure from Enrique reinforces that abandonment is a cycle, that one abandonment leads to another, and that the same economic forces that forced Lourdes's decision force Maria Isabel's too.



EPILOGUE

Smugglers bring Maria Isabel through Mexico by bus, bribing immigration and other officials as necessary. She arrives in Florida within a few weeks of leaving Honduras. Jasmin lives with Enrique's sister Belky, who lives with her common-law husband, and who explains to Jasmin that her parents have both gone to the United States and are not returning but hope to one day bring her to the United States. Maria Isabel and Enrique call Jasmin at least once a week. However, Jasmin thinks of Belky's husband as her father. Belky gives birth to her own baby, a son, on July 31, 2006.

The "business" of illegal immigration, and the corruption of the system built up to control immigration, is again on display in the way that having some money allows Maria Isabel to make a journey that took Enrique 120 days and nearly cost his life in a relatively easy few weeks. At the same time, Maria Isabel and Enrique clearly have not been able to bring Jasmin to the US as quickly as they had hoped, and Enrique's emotional connection to his daughter—at least as far as his daughter sees it—is slight.



Not long after Nazario publishes the articles on Enrique's journey that come to make up this book, the TV show *Don Francisco Presenta* airs an episode about Enrique, Lourdes, and Nazario. Don Francisco surprises his guests by also flying Belky to the show on a temporary visa. This is the first time that Lourdes has seen Belky in eighteen years, and also the first time that all three of Lourdes children have met. A week or so later, Belky flies back to Honduras and her son.

The reunion at the television show is a feel-good story. Which, of course, is why the television show did it (business again). But there is something sobering in the way that the television show is able to just whisk Belky from Honduras to the US when Lourdes, Enrique, and even Maria Isabel had to struggle. And yet there is also something hopeful in Belky's return back to Honduras to her son, whom she never had to abandon.



AFTERWORD: WOMEN, CHILDREN, AND THE IMMIGRATION DEBATE

Nazario ends the book by presenting some more details and data about immigration to the United States from Central America, and to describe her own thoughts about immigration and the immigration debate. There are approximately 1.7 million illegal children living in the U.S., and most are from Mexico and Central America. Many are like Enrique and have been separated from a parent. In schools, one in four children is an immigrant or child of one. The journey for children like Enrique is now becoming more and more difficult. The gangsters in Mexican states have only grown more numerous, powerful, and lawless, while the police agencies targeting migrants have grown (and not become any less corrupt). In Nuevo Laredo, the drug cartels wage war for control of the border. El Tirindaro, among fifty-seven others, was killed there in 2002.

Even though it is becoming increasingly dangerous, more and more people are trying to make the journey to the United States. From 2001 to 2004, the number of Central Americans deported by Mexico doubled. In Latin America, the divorce rates are rising, which means more and more single mothers like Lourdes will be compelled by poverty to leave their children. The growing number of women and children entering the country demands us to consider the consequences on all sides.

For migrants, the financial and material benefits drive their decision to come to the United States. But the psychological trauma of family separation that often occurs should not be underestimated—it can create life-long problems for children and parents. At the Newcomer School in Los Angeles, Nazario learns about the difficulties that immigrant students face, such as feelings of resentment, abandonment, and rejection.

The money sent from immigrants back to their native countries in Latin America brings a significant boost to their economies. Those who return to their homelands after spending time in the United States also bring back technological and other skills. They even bring back ideological differences, and sometimes push for more democratic systems. But family disintegration means more juvenile delinquency, crime, and anger.

As the numbers of immigrants in the U.S. increase, the dangers of making the journey across the border do too. For Enrique, it already took great determination and much luck. Now the situation is even worse.



Nazario investigates the reasons behind these increased numbers, and also wants to look forward at the potential results of the changing landscape of the American population. Her balanced view is helpful when trying to understand such a complex and multi-faceted problem.



Nazario's journalism is effective because she does not take sides. She tries to see the situation from all perspectives and wishes to show the benefits and downsides of each choice. This is a deeply humanizing way of looking at the problem of immigration.



Nazario zooms out and looks at the consequences of immigration and familial separation on the countries from which migrants come. Again, her description looks at each side of the argument.



From the perspective of American citizens, immigration is a much-debated topic—some believe that immigrants ought to have the opportunities of Americans. Others believe that they take jobs away from U.S. citizens and rely too heavily on government assistance. Still others believe that immigrants help to make the nation more creative and open-minded. The impact of immigration on public services, such as schools, hospitals, and jails has been considerable.

While the United States purports to be locking down on immigration policies and tightening the Border Patrol, many still argue that immigration law enforcement is weak. In the U.S., large labor-intensive companies want cheap immigrant labor, and the government is therefore incentivized to allow such “resources” to be available. Today, more illegal immigrants use smugglers to get past the security measures (and incredible dangers) of the journey into the United States. In conclusion, Nazario cites experts who believe that the immigration problem can only be solved by helping bolster the economies of the countries from which immigrants come. Since the reasons for immigrating are economic, she says, the solution to keep immigrants at home must be economic.

Nazario investigates the topic of immigration without shying away from all the differences of opinion. She takes into consideration many factors, and resists from offering her own view until her conclusion.



Nazario ends by focusing on the economics behind immigration. The story that has produced this book, Enrique's Journey, is one that humanizes the individuals involved. But in doing so it also shows how their choices were ultimately shaped by economic factors and incentives for people to come to the US. And as any believer in market economies will tell you, it is very difficult if not impossible to build policies that try to work against natural incentives. Therefore, Nazario's solution to the “problem” of illegal immigration is not a policy solution that directly focuses on immigration, but rather a statement that the only solution can be economic. None of the migrants in the story wanted to come to the US. They felt they had to for economic reasons. So, Nazario concludes, only by bolstering the economies of Central American nations can the forces driving such immigration be shifted.





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