



The Journey North: Take One

One day, when I was six years old, my grandma told me my mom would be calling soon and it was very important for me to talk to her. I didn't know it then, but my mom was about to give me news that would change the entire course of my life in ways I couldn't begin to imagine. All I knew was that my mom, this mysterious voice on the telephone who I hadn't seen in years, was telling me that she had moved to some place called Minnesota in the United States, and she wanted me to join her there. My world was so small back then - the farthest I had ever travelled was my grandma's small village in the countryside. I had never seen a map. I didn't even know that the part of Mexico I was living in was almost as far from the border with the U.S. as you could get. I was going off on an adventure; that much I understood. And I was going to be with my mom, although that part was a little less clear.

It all happened really fast. I packed a bag with the light-colored clothes - khakis and yellows - that I would need to blend in on the desert crossing, and prepared to say my goodbyes. I promised myself that I would come back and see my grandma again - that this wasn't our final goodbye - not knowing then that was a promise I would not be able to keep. As I gave my grandma a hug I saw tears on her face. I think that was one of the only times I ever saw her cry. It had to have broken her heart. I was her youngest child's only child, and she had raised me as her own. Now she was sending me off on a dangerous journey with an uncertain outcome.

My cousin Alex, who had been like a brother to me, was playing in a corner of the concrete slab we called the living room. I tried to talk to him but he just ignored me. I could tell he was mad, that he felt like I was abandoning him. And then, finally, he gave a forced little laugh, and we agreed to put the guilt of my abandoning him on my mom, and that was it. I had no idea when or even if I would ever see him again.

The next thing I remember I was being put in a shared van with an "aunt," who wasn't a real aunt but a family friend who was going to escort me on the first leg of my journey north. We drove for four or five hours to the coastal resort city of Acapulco. I had never seen anywhere so beautiful before. We could see the pale sandy beaches and towering palm trees from the road, like a perfect picture advertisement for Mexico. There were beaches in Oaxaca but not like these. It looked like paradise.

My aunt steered us to a payphone where she called the number she had been given to coordinate the next leg of our trip north. It rang and rang and rang, but no one picked up. She tried again. Still no answer. By that point, I was starting to have second thoughts, and I vividly remember telling her that if no one picked up on the third try, we had to give up and get back in the van and go home. In a sudden bout of superstitiousness I decided that a third failed attempt surely had to be a sign that this was a journey we weren't meant to undertake. But then, on that last try, the person on the other end answered. Soon after, a stranger appeared and told me that she was the one my mom had paid to take me across the border. I had never seen her before; I didn't even know her name. Even so, I had no choice but to put all my trust in her and hope that she would get me safely to where I was trying to go...wherever that was.

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Early the next morning the stranger and I got on a plane bound for Sonora, a Mexican state which shares a border with Arizona and New Mexico. Once we landed we were whisked away from the airport and taken to a little village on the outskirts of the city, maybe a few miles from the actual border. It was a humble place. Most of the buildings were made of mud and clay. Anyone who had any money lived up in the hills, and that's where we headed.

For a kid who had rarely been away from home and who had never slept in his own bed, being in that house felt like I was really living. Not only did I have my own bed; I even had my own room! And even better, other kids who had stayed there before me had left their toys behind, which is kind of creepy thinking back on it now but at the time, I thought I had won the lottery. For the three days that we were there, I had an endless supply of new toys to keep me occupied, and to keep me from worrying about what challenges might lie ahead.

I didn't understand it then, but the reason we were waiting there was for the coyote my mom had paid to take us across the border to assemble a big enough group to make it worth his while. Border crossings are risky, but they are also lucrative. A good coyote can charge \$8,000 to \$12,000 per person for a crossing, with no money back guarantee if the trip ends in failure. The coyote will take a group across, then return and lay low for a while until he is ready to risk the journey again. Finally, it was our turn to try our luck.

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We got together some supplies - food and lots of water - and set off in our group, which consisted of several individuals and a few families. No one told me where we were going, or for how long. I wasn't even sure who the leader was. We had never met one another before and we didn't talk much. But we knew if one of us failed, we all would. We started walking.

We walked all day that first day, much of the time backwards, a common ploy to trick the border patrol. When you got to a place where the path was soft enough to leave footprints, you had to walk backwards to make it look like you were leaving the U.S. instead of coming. There were times when we walked that way for two or three hours at a stretch.

That night, someone built a campfire and we huddled around it, both to keep out the desert chill and to ward off any wildlife that might be tempted by the food we had with us. Before going to sleep that night, one of the adults encircled our group with a thick rope, explaining that the rope would serve a barrier to keep snakes from slithering into our encampment. I wasn't sure that plan was foolproof, but after my encounter with the snake in that rain-soaked street back in Oaxaca, I was grateful for any precautions.

We were up and walking again first thing the next morning. I wish I could remember it in better detail. Did we see animals? Was it hot? Was I exhausted? Scared? Did I complain? All of that is lost to me now. All I do know is that sometime that afternoon, I saw something strange. There, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, was a sofa. Just a random sofa sitting out there in this scrubby, desolate landscape, all on its own. I couldn't make any sense of it. When we got closer, I could see that not too far off in the distance was a main road, and we were instructed to hide behind this oddly placed piece of furniture so that we wouldn't be seen by anyone - especially immigration - until a driver came through the nearby woods to pick us up and transport us to a safe location.

When the road was quiet, we were able to relax and stretch out our aching bodies. But anytime we heard a car coming, we had to get down and hide. We had been doing that for over an hour when we heard another car approaching. This time, for reasons I will never understand, the kid next to me didn't drop down like he was supposed to. The rest of us ducked but he kept standing, right there out in the open. He might as well have been waving a flag. The car that we heard must have been immigration, because the next thing I remember was the coyote yelling at us to run. Run! No one had a clue where they were going. In our frenzied panic, we followed anyone who seemed like they might have found a path. Eventually we made our way to a dry riverbank, hoping it might lead us to some sort of safety.

I was running as fast as I could when I noticed that my backpack had come undone and the cup of the *Sonrics* candy I had been saving had fallen out. I should have left it all there of course, but I was just a little kid and that souvenir cup of candy was one of my few prized possessions, so I stopped running to pick up the pieces scattered widely all over the ground. There was a family running behind me and, even in all that chaos, they stopped and helped me pick up my things so that I wouldn't fall too far behind. It has always touched me so much that they showed me that kindness when they were literally running for their lives.

It didn't take long for my gratitude to turn to terror. All of a sudden, a helicopter was up above us, its rotor blades flapping a low, menacing drumbeat. And then, in an instant, we were surrounded. Border Patrol officers appeared all around us, walkie talkie static joining the terrifying thrum of the helicopter overhead. We were caught. Our journey north was over.

Detention



The border patrol put us all in a van and drove us to an immigration detention center. I felt like a common criminal being taken to jail. I was a six-year-old kid, surrounded by guys in uniforms with guns and badges, and I was terrified I was never going to see my mom or my grandma ever again.

The group we had been trying to cross with came from all over - some from various parts of Mexico, some from Guatemala, some from even further south. But no one admitted to that. No one had any papers with them so there was no way to prove anything, and no one - no matter where they were from - wanted to have to go all the way back to where they started. Everyone claimed to be from Mexico City, knowing that is where we would be sent back to and that, from there, we could figure out if our families could scrape together the funds necessary to make a second attempt.

They held us in a concrete room with fluorescent bulbs and steel bars, our entire group piled into a single room. There was no privacy, a fact that was made entirely too real to us by the single toilet in the cell. There were no barriers to provide the person using it from being on full display. Lacking other options, the men in the group created their own system to minimize the humiliation. They would stand with their backs to the toilet, holding out their jackets to create a makeshift screen, allowing the person relieving him or herself to at least retain some small level of dignity.

We were fed enough to survive on, but with peanut butter crackers the mainstay of our diet, that left a lot to be desired. We were tormented by the salivating smells wafting through the bars as the guard who sat outside unpacked his lunchtime burger and fries from McDonalds, mocking us with every wrapper crinkle and greasy mouthful. Back at home in Oaxaca grandma had never let us waste money on fast food, but I decided right then and there that if I ever got out of this place, and if I could ever afford it, one of those burgers was going to be mine.

We must have been in there for several days; it was hard to keep track of time. Eventually they took our whole group and put us on a plane to Mexico City. In a surreal moment, before each of us disembarked, the border patrol agents, or maybe it was a reporter, quizzed us about how our stay in detention had been. Were we treated well? Was the food okay? What were the living conditions like? It was almost like: How many stars would you give your experience at the northern Mexican immigration facility and how likely are you to recommend it to a friend? And just like that, they set us loose in Mexico City, free to try the journey again if we had the nerve and the money, or to begin the slow, agonizing trek back to where we came from if we didn't.