

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

"A triumph... One of those de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* with Umberto Eco's *Motorcycle Diaries*."
The New York Times Book Review

TRANSLATION
NATION

DEFINING A NEW
AMERICAN IDENTITY IN THE
SPANISH-SPEAKING
UNITED STATES

PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING JOURNALIST

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Chapter Two

THE BARRIER FENCE

No es imposible

San Ysidro, California · Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico

The barrier rises and falls over gentle slopes and steep canyons until it finally reaches the ocean, dipping down along the sand and extending forty yards into the surf. It is a straight, man-made line imposing itself on the curves of the natural topography; seeing it for the first time, I was reminded of Christo's *Running Fence*, only this "sculpture" was rendered not in white fabric but in gray-black steel. Rising above the waterline, it cuts into the oncoming waves like a blunt, rusty knife.

Hardly anybody tries to jump over the fence during the day. Although it's past noon and the sun is out the first time I set eyes on the border, the beach is empty on both sides. The only living things are the seagulls perched along the top of the fence in a neat row, their beaks pointing south toward Baja, their backs turned to Alta California and the San Diego skyline far in the distance. The Border Patrol agents positioned in the park overlooking the beach spend eight-hour shifts sitting alone in their Ford Broncos, fighting the boredom and fatigue, passing uneventful hours looking out into the ocean for migrating dolphins or scanning the sky for the red-tailed

hawks that circle overhead. They park between the stone picnic benches of Border Field State Park, a relic from the era when San Diego families on weekend outings could picnic here, before it became a battleground between competing national identities.

Farther inland, where the fence reaches a flat plain just north of downtown Tijuana, a handful of border crossers wait for nightfall on the Mexican side, defiant in the face of the innumerable obstacles before them—the new fence and the new Broncos and the new agents, who seem to have an uncanny knack for catching people, even in the dark. “I think that the border will disappear before we lose the desire to cross,” a man will tell me later, in Spanish, on the other side. “Even if they catch us one hundred times, we’re going to get in one day.” There is little evidence here of the border these men expected to find, the one that still exists in the collective memory of a generation of immigrants. More than a million people stepped over that other border, across the estuary of the Tijuana River, the shortest route from Mexico into the gilded paradise that was Southern California. They were the arithmetic of the great demographic shift that transformed entire communities of Los Angeles and Orange counties into Latino barrios, who made Spanish the language of choice in suburbs like North Hollywood, Huntington Park, and Santa Ana. In the old days, the fence was a flimsy chain-link sieve, and the agents who guarded it were more than overmatched. At one popular crossing spot, the fence had been flattened, allowing crowds of immigrants to wander back and forth across the international frontier at will.

When I walked along the empty U.S. side of the border, I could still find footprints in the mud of the Tijuana estuary, pointing north toward the first suburban tract homes of San Ysidro, and bits of clothes and shoes scattered among the clumps of coastal sagebrush. But generally speaking, the open land north of this five-mile stretch

of frontier had returned to a bucolic state. There were only the sounds of the ocean breeze rustling through the trees, blowing loose soil. A bean field grew without much difficulty just a few paces from the border, on a plateau where people walking north would have once trampled the seedlings underfoot. Standing on a hill on the U.S. side, looking down into Mexico, you no longer saw the crowds that used to gather along *la línea*. Instead, there was only the squat skyline of downtown Tijuana, the vacation homes of the Tijuana elite, the passing traffic along Calle Internacional, an urban organism pressing up against the fence, an unnaturally straight line laid out by surveyors fourteen decades earlier. The truncated cityscape before me gave no hint of people sleeping along the bottom of the fence on the other side, exhausted after waiting all night, in vain, for a chance to cross. It was possible to look into Mexico and not know that thousands of immigrants from places like Guerrero and Michoacán, Honduras and Guatemala, were milling about the city center, unable to cross after spending most of their savings just to get this far. It was possible to look into Mexico and not know that more than a few had given up and turned back, or were contemplating a death-defying trek into the white wilderness of the Arizona desert. It was possible to stand in the open, empty terrain of the United States and revel in the natural beauty of the Tijuana River estuary without knowing the dimensions of the drama unfolding just over there, on the other side of the fence.

The border had been transformed thanks to the cultural war taking place to the north, in California, for much of the twentieth century the preferred destination of the Mexican immigrant. Two years after I had witnessed that great Latino class uprising on the streets of Los Angeles, the voters of English-speaking California had taken their revenge by approving—by an overwhelming majority—an initiative called Proposition 187. It happened during a campaign

season of xenophobia that also saw Pete Wilson get reelected governor of California by promising to stop the tide of brown-skinned people surging over the border. English-speaking California had demanded a last stand against the Mexicanization of the Southwest, that their leaders put an end to the mad dash for America taking place here, and the Border Patrol responded with Operation Gatekeeper. Intended as a series of temporary measures, Operation Gatekeeper became a permanent attempt to seal off the border to illegal crossings. The government had built the new fence, added about five hundred Border Patrol agents, and brought in the army for "logistical support." The Border Patrol was outfitted with new Ford Broncos and a lot of fancy equipment, much of it Pentagon hand-me-downs like motion detectors and thermal-imaging technology.

By all accounts, the strategy had been a resounding success, as was proved by the usual American barometer of bureaucratic achievement, a cascade of statistics. When I arrived, apprehension rates were up by 40 percent from the pre-Gatekeeper era: in the San Diego sector, from the ocean to the Imperial County line in the desert fifty miles away, the Border Patrol claimed to be rounding up 1,800 people every day; in a week they detained enough *mexicanos* and other immigrants to fill a smallish California town. In the suburban communities north of the border, residents complained less and less about people running through their property. "We can now sleep at night without being awakened by illegals congregating in our backyard," one grateful Imperial Beach resident said in a letter that the Border Patrol displayed in its San Ysidro field headquarters. The frontier had an orderly, official look to it, and as a visual reminder of how much they had achieved, the agents in the headquarters placed a collage of pictures of the old border in one of their offices. The pictures showed crowds of people, mostly men in jeans, standing around the spot where a fence sits now, but then only an

open field of brown dirt with no barrier at all. The would-be immigrants looked like people milling around waiting for a modern-day Woodstock to get started.

Tijuana residents and human rights activists I talked to agreed that the five-mile stretch of border between San Ysidro and the Pacific Ocean had become more difficult to cross than ever before. Tijuana was full of stories of immigrants who had tried to cross into California over the traditional routes, only to be caught by the Border Patrol and sent back, again and again, in a hellish treadmill of detentions and deportations. The next-best place to cross farther east was over the Otay Mesa, north of the Baja California city of Tecate, but that route took thirty-five hours or longer to reach a safe spot in the north, something you could accomplish in as little as half an hour back at *el bordo*, the mile-long stretch of frontier just a few blocks from downtown Tijuana, or at the beach called Playas de Tijuana.

For Victor Clark Alfaro, a lifelong Tijuana resident and founder of the Binational Center for Human Rights, it was the end of an era. I met him in his office, the usual activist's hovel of stacked pamphlets and denunciatory reports of rapes, robberies, and assorted acts of official corruption. His life had been threatened by Tijuana's notoriously violent and murderous drug cartels, but there was only a single, bored guard posted outside his office. In the long running list of offenses against humanity he kept in his head, the plight of the border crosser was the most repeated entry. "*El bordo* is no longer the traditional place to cross," he told me. "*El bordo* has passed to history. Playas de Tijuana belongs to the past." The consequences of this new reality, he said, were felt most strongly by the poorest immigrants, those who couldn't afford to pay the \$300 to \$700 a smuggler might charge them to make the crossing safely and without difficulty. "Imagine a group of people who arrived at the border without money

in their pockets, or with money that is indispensable, with the minimum necessary to cross into the United States. And they find that there is this obstacle. They cross and they're deported. They cross, and they're deported again. And pretty soon their money runs out. Now we have people who've been deported eight, ten, fifteen times."

When I stood on the Mexican side of *el bordo* and talked to the people preparing to cross, there was one phrase I heard repeated again and again. "*No es imposible.*" It is not impossible. Every migrant I met held on to this hope. Yes, there were more agents, and yes, there was this new fence and rumors of other obstacles in the seemingly open territory beyond, but *no es imposible*. Some do make it. To hear people tell it, getting to the other side was becoming a lottery. The woman who sold candies and cookies and juices at a post on *el bordo* said that out of a hundred or so who tried, only two or three made it, though I suspected there was a touch of melodrama in that figure, because after all, how could she really know how many disappeared into California forever? But she said she watched people try every night, heading out past the lean-tos of scrap wood and tarpaulin that embraced the Mexican side of the fence. They set off sprinting northward in large groups, toward the massed Border Patrol agents, and got thrown back like cannon-fodder soldiers in a hopeless infantry charge. She was a witness to a nightly Gettysburg, and as in that famous battle the brave Southerners didn't have much of a chance against the well-outfitted Yankees. When her compatriots tried to cross in the rain, they would come back soaking wet, and she would give them a blanket to dry off and keep warm.

At first glance, it didn't seem that getting across could be that

complicated. For all the talk of the "militarization of the border," the fence itself didn't present much of an obstacle. Although made of sturdy steel—"landing mats" used as temporary runways for military aircraft during the first Iraq war—it was still only ten feet high and did not have any barbed wire on top. There were wide grooves in the steel that were like the steps on a ladder. Getting back into your apartment after you've lost your keys would present a greater challenge. The phrase "Tortilla Curtain" captured the apparently makeshift nature of this new border, especially when compared with its much older and now-vanquished cousin, the Iron Curtain. This is no Berlin Wall. There are no guard towers, no machine-gun nests, no moats or attack dogs.

There are even a few narrow spots in Tijuana where, thanks to small accidents of topography, there is no fence at all. Standing in the rain one night on the dirt shoulder of Calle Internacional, I interviewed two men at one such spot, a twenty-yard-wide fenceless stretch. Here, U.S. territory drops off the edge of a ridge, while the Mexican side stays up, rising over the imaginary line of the frontier, over the top of where the fence would be. For Ignacio Ayala and Raúl Rodríguez, crossing the border would be as simple as taking one step and dropping four or five feet down an embankment. One step, and they would plop down out of Mexico.

They sat waiting, soaking wet in the cold rain. It was still early in the evening, and their vigil had only begun. At the moment, crossing was impossible thanks to the Ford Bronco parked about fifty yards away, its windshield wipers going and engine running. Under the tall lampposts, rain fell in white sheets against the black sky. Their great hope was that the large group of border crossers in the canyon about a half-mile to the west would make a run for it and draw the Bronco in their direction, thus opening a path for the two of them. "It's harder than last year, but *no es imposible.*" Rodríguez

told me. "The thing is to jump, and the rest is easy. Once you get to San Ysidro, it's a piece of cake. But you have to get past them," he said, gesturing toward the Bronco. "You cross, and they see you hidden someplace, but you can't tell they see you. You can hear them calling out. 'How many do you have? I've got this many!'" Rodríguez was able to rattle off a list of what he was up against: agents in Broncos, agents in helicopters, agents on bicycles. They also have "*cámaras infrarrojas*," he said, and this was clearly unsettling, to know that the heat of his body might give him away. "You can't see the cameras. We don't know where they are. We jump and think no one saw us, but then, before we know it, there's the Immigration."

At the new border, the obstacles are in what you can't see. The heat-sensing equipment, the agents hiding in the dark. This is the Border Patrol's great accomplishment: to have constructed a barrier as innocuous-looking as the fence around a high school, yet nearly as effective as anything Erich Honecker built.

... the average immigrant at Tijuana those days was feeling a bit defrauded. *I left the bosom of my family for this? I should be in Long Beach by now, but instead I am here, in this nowhere, limbo place.* Or maybe he thought he waited too long, that he had missed his chance to walk through the open door his more punctual countrymen had stepped through without much difficulty or trauma. People in the town of Tlalchapa, in the southern Mexican state of Guerrero, would have heard crossing tales such as the one told by Flocelo Aguirre, a onetime *bracero* (a seasonal worker granted temporary permission to work in the fields of American farmers) and *fútbol* fanatic who lived with his family in an expansive adobe home with a sturdy tile roof. Flocelo made his permanent and first illegal crossing into the United States in 1968, the year of the Olympics in Mexico

City. He arrived at the border by bus, with a wad of cash and a fake credential as a schoolteacher given to him by a friend at Mexico's Secretariat of Public Education. With the money, the document, and the courage to tell a necessary lie, he gave the American immigration official at the Calexico, California, border crossing his cover story: *I am a Mexican professional, a teacher on vacation, who is going to see this place called Disneyland that everyone is talking about.* These days, such a transparent deception would probably earn you a howl of laughter and a finger pointing firmly southward. But back then, Flocelo's brief, pleasant border interview resulted in the agent handing over a 100-day tourist visa. Flocelo stepped onto a northbound Greyhound and headed to Los Angeles for the next quarter-century or so, and then later to Dalton, Georgia, where he would become the unstoppable organizing force behind the largest Latino organization in that part of the Deep South, the Dalton International Soccer League. The most uncomfortable thing about his 1968 journey was that he had to hold his bladder a few hours from the border all the way to the town of Indio, California, where he finally had a chance to go to the bathroom.

Leopoldo Avalos, whose daughter Carmen would one day help rescue democracy in the working-class Los Angeles suburb called South Gate, had a slightly more difficult time of it, heading out on foot across the mountains at dusk, entering the United States under a starry sky and then stepping toward the earthly constellation of lights of an American city, ready to begin a life of hard work and reinvention. Like most immigrants of his generation, after he had settled down in California he sent back word for his family to come join him. His two-year-old daughter Carmen crossed in the arms of a relative, dressed to look like a boy because her fake document was a boy cousin's birth certificate. That's the way it was when no one in the English-speaking United States imagined that the hundreds of

people coming to see Disneyland, or the baby boys who weren't boys, were in fact packages of culture who would one day change their country forever. The immigrants had all passed through Tijuana, Mexicali, Laredo, and other border towns without much incident, leaving behind villages in the Mexican heartland that became a little emptier with each passing year, like those one-stoplight towns in the Great Plains where so many young people have left that there aren't enough beefy kids to put together a football team anymore.

Agent Scott Marvin was a member of what he calls "the new Border Patrol." The old Border Patrol wasn't adequately funded, and it suffered from public-relations nightmares, including a few agents who reportedly beat and raped the immigrants who came into their custody. The new Border Patrol, he told me, is better trained and better educated. Marvin himself had been to graduate school, and as he guided me on the standard press tour of the new border, he seemed to be dictating phrases to me, including the occasional attempt at a poetic turn. "At night the lights of Tijuana shine like jewels, and the lights of San Diego are equally radiant." He was a tall, fit, mustachioed man, and as we drove about the border in the mount of his Bronco, along the American side of the fence, across mudflats and up and down canyons, with me playing the skeptic as he made triumphant pronouncements, I felt like a shortish Sancho Panza to his Don Quixote. Morale was up, Agent Marvin told me, the battle against the disorder and anarchy was being won. Agent Marvin was a knight in a brand new Border Patrol army whose troops beamed with the can-do spirit Americans get when their budgets are increased, when they've been outfitted with the latest technologies.

"This is the human element," Marvin told me as we looked at yet

another agent inside yet another Ford Bronco. "And then there's the sensors in the ground." Seismic sensors, he explained, about 450 of them buried in the soil of his "sector," pick up the tiny earthquakes caused by a migrant's footsteps. Raúl Rodríguez did not know that not only the heat of his body but even his footsteps and the weight of his body would give him away. "With the helicopters and the people up on high points with the nightscopes, you've got it all in one package. The sensor is triggered, dispatch tells you the sensor went off. The scope operator looks over to see—was it possibly an animal that set it off? They say, 'No, someone's jumped the fence, there's four people that are headed along the creek bed.' The scope operator watches this in pitch-black. You'll go to the north end of the creek bed, and [someone else] will wait for them. And maybe your partner in another vehicle can come around to the south and sandwich them, and you'll have an effortless and painless apprehension."

High on a mesa, not far from the bean field, we parked near the fence and took a walk around. Agent Marvin found a hole underneath the fence, just big enough for a person to crawl under. I couldn't help but make the observation that "it looks like they found a way through Agent Marvin." The hole was next to a spot where concrete had been poured under the fence to patch up yet another hole. "It doesn't matter how deep you go down," Agent Marvin conceded, "they'll dig under it." To all my questions about the new technology, Agent Marvin gave quick, precise responses. What about the infrared binoculars? No, he said, what they use is called "thermal-imaging equipment." It's a large lens on a telescoping tower, operated by an agent in the vehicle below, who moves it around with a joystick: "It's almost like playing a computer game." The helicopter, called Foxtrot, is a Vietnam War survivor with metal patches over the holes caused by the Viet Cong's AK rounds. There's new fingerprinting equipment (the IDENT system, an acronym no one

was able to decipher for me), which allows each illegal immigrant caught to be entered into a computerized database. The Army helped build the fence and, even more important, helped build and improve the all-weather access roads that allow the Border Patrol agents to drive right up to the edge of the border, acting as a visual deterrent to potential crossers.

"The vehicles are newer and in good condition. There's more agents in the field, the fence is there. It's a clear line," Marvin says. In the California I knew, the lines were blurry. But here the Border Patrol and its allies in the Army had taken the equivalent of a giant black Magic Marker and made sure everyone could still see that that line was still there, that it hadn't dissolved into the desert sand. The message to everyone on both sides was clear: "We're here and you're there and you need to stay there. And we're going to help you stay there. And if you don't stay there, we're going to help you back across, after we've taken your fingerprints, taken your picture, and taken your biographical data. If you come back again, no matter what name you use, we'll know you crossed."

We proceeded to the communications center. Four men sat at computer consoles, wearing headsets and microphones, watching the computer track "hits" on the motion sensors planted out in the field. Place names flash on the computer screen: SPRING CANYON . . . NORTH AMBUSH ALLEY . . . GOAT CANYON. One of the technicians clicked a mouse, making graphs of seismic tremors appear. At his feet, there was a copy of *Wired* magazine.

One night, not far from the bank of the Tijuana River, I interviewed a man I could not see. I was standing on the American side of the frontier, on a bare patch of mud illuminated by a single, powerful sodium lamp; my interviewee was inside Mexico,

a pair of lips puckering through a seam between the metal plates of the border fence. I had stopped here after spotting two Ford Broncos parked nearby, keeping watch over an especially popular crossing point. I placed my palm against the steel, and then listened to dozens of Spanish speaking voices, an unseen chorus of anxious and angry people trapped on the other side. The man I was talking to was a coyote nicknamed "El Cochi Crazy," and he was one of the men in charge of the people waiting to dash into the United States.

El Cochi Crazy said he was going to cross five of his *pollos*, "chickens." He wouldn't let the photographer I was with, a roly-poly Serb named Slobodan, take his picture through the fence, because he'd already been in two U.S. jails and he didn't need any more hassles. He served six months for one smuggling sentence, he said, and a year for the second. El Cochi Crazy wanted to know if I would do him a favor. Would I go over to the Border Patrol agents and ask them to move back, just a little? If the agents moved back, he would send his *pollos* over the fence and Slobodan and I would be treated to the show we'd come to see: actual humans sprinting under the lights in an all-or-nothing dash for the safety of the darkness that began a hundred or so yards into the United States. The desperation in his voice suggested this was not intended as a joke. I looked back at the Broncos, imagined the gruff American agents inside, and already knew what the answer would be: and besides, did I really want to be responsible for setting off such a sickening spectacle? So I declined the request, and for the moment the stalemate persisted.

The smuggler said he charges his *pollos* \$350. For this, he'd get them to the airport in Los Angeles, a gateway to the continent beyond, the jobs busing tables in Las Vegas, picking apples in Washington State, construction in Phoenix. Although he didn't say so, it

soon became clear El Cochi Crazy was part of a larger smuggling outfit, the kind that had been described to me by people on both sides of the border: a mini-corporation with an elaborate division of labor that includes recruiters at the Tijuana airport and bus stations, guides at the border, drivers waiting in San Ysidro, and safe houses beyond.

"Ten of us jump, and the *migra* only catches two," El Cochi Crazy's lips yelled through the fence. The longer he talked, the more macho the inflection of his voice. "There's only one *migra*. There's hundreds of us, but the *migra* has just one brain."

"Do you jump with them?" I asked in Spanish.

"We go just a little. They don't catch us, they just catch the people. If they catch me, I'll go back to jail."

"When will your *pollos* cross?"

"When these agents leave, that's when we jump. We just run. We can't fly, so we run." His bravado started to infect the would-be immigrants with him, people I could not see, voices behind the fence. "The more *migra* they put in," one man yelled, "the more we'll massacre them."

"We hit them with rocks," another said. "If they hit one of us, we throw rocks."

I felt I had stumbled upon a tiny riot in a bottle. I felt the tension of certain overcrowded and underpaid neighborhoods of Los Angeles standing there. Tijuana was a Los Angeles without good-paying jobs or enforceable laws. Both places were filled with the desperately poor of Mesoamerica and white English-speakers being served by those poor people. The men behind the fence wanted to fight, they wanted to let loose with violence against the Ford Broncos and the agents frustrating their ambitions and plans. For months after the L.A. riots, I had a nightmare in which a mob of young men

pulled people from their cars and beat them, and at moments like this the old demons of my subconscious stir to life again; I wanted to leave and drive back through the dirt roads across the estuary to my relatively comfortable hotel in San Ysidro. Or maybe I would walk over to Tijuana and have a margarita to relax and forget this craziness: for me, crossing back and forth across the border presented no difficulty whatsoever, even though I looked as "Mexican" as the men hanging on to the top of this fence. I didn't even need a passport to cross back and forth: the perfect English with which I answered the immigration agent's curt questions was enough to establish my citizenship. My voice was the document my parents had bequeathed to me by ensuring I was born in the United States, and if any of the men on the fence before me made it across, they would surely bequeath it to their children too.

Agent Marvin told me that Border Patrol agents call this stretch of fence Memo Lane, because when they drive their Broncos here they get rocks through their windshields, thus requiring a memo to their supervisor. That's the way it is on the border: one man's odyssey is another man's bureaucracy, one man's life-defining drama is another's routine. One of the *pollos* climbed the fence. Straddling the top, he leaned over and spat into the United States. Then, suddenly, a man in blue sweatpants plopped over onto the U.S. side, but he was just taunting the agents. He quickly rescaled the fence and jumped back into Mexico even before Slobodan could snap his picture.

"Is it harder to cross?" I asked the smuggler.

"No, it's the same," he said.

"But I've talked to people who keep on trying and can't make it."

"It's because they don't want to pay!"

Then in English, he yelled, "Don't pay, no crossing!"

f course, not even the East Germans could create a hermetic seal around their country, despite motion detectors, dogs, barbed wire, and guards with shoot-to-kill orders. The larger, inevitable truth at the U.S.-Mexican border was that all the technology in the world would not hold back the tens of thousands of men, women, and children who headed northward because they believed their lives would be better there. In Latin America, you were born to a station in life. Class mobility was something that existed only in the *telenovela* soap operas, with their deus ex machina endings in which the maid becomes a millionaire. The only sure way to give your life a *telenovela* ending was to head northward.

José Antonio Gutiérrez, a future United States Marine who was among the first troops to enter Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 2003, was born into the lowest rungs of Guatemala's social ladder. He was an "untouchable" whose toddler years were spent on the streets and in the hovels of the city of Escuintla, an existence dominated by the turbid waters of the stream that ran through his *colonia* and the vultures who fed there. His baby sister drowned in a puddle of water on the street, his mother died of tuberculosis and his father's liver was destroyed by cirrhosis, and much of his boyhood was spent in orphanages and detention centers, until he graduated from all that to become a migrant, crossing the border at about the same time I visited there. He traveled overland from Guatemala across Mexico, was detained twice by the Mexican authorities, but had still made it over the final obstacle, the U.S. border itself, by hiding "underneath a freight train," or by stowing away inside the train, according to the various accounts he later provided to foster parents, juvenile court judges, and immigration officials. Like an earlier generation of immigrants, he had resorted to a quick-witted deception, telling the

social workers who finally caught up with him in California that he was sixteen years old (he was in fact twenty-two), because he knew that undocumented immigrants who were "unaccompanied minors" were often declared wards of the court and would be allowed stay in the United States. Thus he became a poet and a high-school soccer star—in short, he achieved a fuller expression of his humanity—and lived to see himself crowned with the white dress hat and gold shield of the Marine Corps.

It was precisely this kind of miraculous reinvention that inspired people in the modern-day cities and towns of Latin America to take their chances against Operation Gatekeeper. They gathered their meager resources and assembled in groups for what could be called Operation Sahara, a desperate detour around the new obstacles put up by Agent Marvin and his colleagues, a trek across the desert that in the early years of the twenty-first century became a human drama of Cecil B. DeMille proportions (a drama that remains mostly invisible to Americans because it unfolds far from cities and television cameras). Some 2,000 people died trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border between 1998 and 2003, and every summer the stories of their deaths peppered American newspapers. They walked in circles under the sun and died face-down on the Arizona soil, seeking the nonexistent shade of the mesquite brush; they died with empty milk jugs at their side or after dropping unused diapers and phone books with telephone numbers in North Carolina. They died cooked inside railroad cars, or suffocated inside the stainless-steel containers of tractor-trailers. They died trying to cross the Barry Goldwater Bombing Range and within sight of the runway at the Bisbee, Arizona, airport.

Two daughters of Marisol Romero (not her real name) crossed this desert on their way from Chiapas, Mexico, to Ashland, Alabama, in the company of a coyote smuggler. They were the last of

Marisol's ten children to cross, all hoping for work in the chicken plants and furniture factories in that orderly landscape of Baptist churches and fenced-off pastures in the foothills of the Cumberland Mountains, a landscape green in the winter and green in the humid summer. Ashland was a verdant Eden to keep in mind as they walked across the brown Arizona desert, wondering if they would make it to the van waiting for them on the highway the smuggler told them was just a few miles up ahead, even though they saw nothing in front of them but wilderness. Marisol's daughters were stopped not far from the border by a band of robbers, men who pointed guns and knives at them. But "*gracias a Dios, nada más eso,*" her mother tells me, "thanks be to God, they did only that": in other words, her daughters were not raped. They were simply relieved of all their cash, and the coyote leading them was ordered to strip naked: the thieves punished the coyote because he had denied being a smuggler and tried to blend in with his "chickens," which was an insult to the intelligence of the thieves, who knew a fellow delinquent when they saw one. Marisol's daughters survived and arrived in Ashland to begin to look for work and to plant roots in a place where their father already worked for a utility company, a dream job for a man from the hills of Chiapas. Probably they will spend the rest of their lives in the Deep American South, long enough to tell their grandchildren the story of the naked smuggler.

Perhaps in the distant future the travails of the desert crossers will become the institutionalized and mythologized narrative that the Underground Railroad is today, a story told to schoolchildren in history textbooks illustrated with idealized drawings like those of Harriet Tubman leading escaped slaves toward a bright North Star. Or maybe their story will enter the canon of American literature, like the tale of the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath*, who cross the California desert after playing a small deception on the officials manning

the Inspection Station at the Arizona-California line, Ma Joad explaining, in her Oklahoma accent, "The fambly hadda get acrost." The long arc of American history can perform startling feats of transformation: it can make the lawbreakers and despised Okies of one epoch into the heroic icons of another.

Every week, the Border Patrol in San Ysidro was tossing hundreds of lawbreakers back across the border. The most unfortunate of these crossers would end up at La Casa del Migrante, a motel-like complex of 220 bunk beds where daily meals were served. I stopped by there one afternoon and found a courtyard crowded with a sad cross section of men from every corner of Mexico and Central America, men with baseball caps and the mud of the Tijuana estuary on their pants. Many looked pale and exhausted, as if they had walked here from Mexico City and been tossed over the fence and back a hundred times, and could not carry the plastic bags and backpacks that contained their possessions a day longer.

Sitting on a bench in the courtyard was a man who looked especially forlorn. Ramón Gonzales García stood out because of the cast on his leg and the crutches at his side. Nine days earlier, he had tried to jump the border's steel fence for the first time. He was a dignified *campesino* with coffee-colored skin and a droopy mustache who bore a strong resemblance, except for his baseball cap, to the late revolutionary Emiliano Zapata. Gonzales had arrived in Tijuana after a two-day bus trip from his hometown of Morelia, Michoacán, expecting to cross when night fell, only to find the situation was "hotter" (*más caliente*) than he expected. When he finally saw a gap in the Border Patrol's line, a moment when no Ford Broncos patrolled the other side, he made a run for it, hoping to get past the

row of sodium lamps on the U.S. side. He was about fifty yards into California when an agent stepped out of the darkness and yelled, "Hey you! *Prieto!* [dark-skinned man] Go back!" So he did. But when the agent turned his attention to another group of border crossers, Gonzales hid in the bushes. "I thought that as soon as he left, I'd be able to slip by." Gonzales lay there, flat on his stomach on the sandy soil, until this same Border Patrol agent surprised him from behind. In a moment, the agent pulled his arms behind his back and handcuffed him. Then the agent lifted him up, the way a rodeo cowboy lifts up a calf, and stomped down on his leg.

"Ay!" Gonzales said faintly as he recounted this part of the story. Reaching down his pants leg toward the broken limb, now in a cast, he gritted his teeth, pantomiming the pain. He tried to tell the Border Patrol man he was hurt, but all the agent did was yell at him in Spanish, "We told you, *cabrón!* We told you to go back! Why didn't you go back?" Gonzales asked for a doctor or an ambulance, but instead the agent led him, limping, back toward the fence. The pain was blinding, and before he knew it Gonzales was sitting in an office. Only when a Mexican policeman entered the room did he know he was back in Tijuana.

All this had happened nine days earlier, but Gonzales still looked shaken. He'd been caught breaking the law and had been treated like a criminal and the idea of this was like being forced to wear a set of clothes that belonged to another man. He did not think of himself as a criminal, of course. He thought what he was doing was an act of nobility and self-sacrifice: he had risked arrest and injury to bring his family a better life. Now the handcuffs had caused his wrists to swell and he had been thoroughly humiliated, but the worst part of it was that the agent was a Latino, one of "our people." He spoke perfect Spanish, without even the trace of an accent.

I asked him how long his leg would be in a cast.

The doctor said four weeks. Maybe longer. The way his luck had been going lately, longer seemed more likely.

"I'm going to go back to my *tierra*. It doesn't make any sense anymore to cross. You start to think about a lot of things. I'm going through one of the most difficult moments of my life. I didn't expect this. I had a plan, but it didn't work." We talked a little more and he struck a reflective note. "I lived better back home," he said, taking a look at the shelter around him, at its concrete floors and spare rooms. In his hometown he'd been a shoemaker, a waiter, and a gardener. He'd just turned thirty-four and thought he deserved something better. If Michoacán was a place where everything and everyone seemed to be stuck in the same place, California represented the possibility of "reaching a goal." Now that he'd broken his leg, Gonzales seemed to think he should be more humble, accept his station in life. "Sometimes ambition, your dreams, the desire to live better puts you in a bad spot. You fall to this level." It was as if he believed his broken leg and empty wallet were a kind of divine punishment for having overreached in his ambition.

Statistically speaking, Gonzales and the other men inside that refuge were an anomaly: every year the Border Patrol detained about one million people crossing the border, but the most conservative estimate placed the number of successful illegal crossers at three times that figure. Three million people entered the country each year, because not even the United States was wealthy enough to put motion detectors and Ford Broncos along a border that was two thousand miles long. Instead, those millions who did make it across would carry the memory of their passages through the border purgatory, a region staffed by English- and Spanish-speaking agents of retribution, some uniformed, others not, men who assembled to inflict modern humiliations and archaic torments on those who passed through their desert gauntlet. To the south of the line there

were the venal Mexican police officers who mined the busloads of migrants of the wads of cash they carried, tossing the moneyless into concrete holding cells. To the north there were the Americans, the Border Patrol and their computers waiting to catalogue the detained before shipping them southward, and the vigilantes—ranchers and storekeepers armed with shotguns and a sense of violated entitlement—itching to round up the trespassing hordes.

Tocqueville said that the traumatic circumstances of the seventeenth-century pilgrims' crossing of the Atlantic and arrival in Massachusetts—"a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wilde beasts, and wilde men"—defined "the whole term of their being" as Americans. Their austere Puritan faith and egalitarian beliefs saw them through, leaving a mark on the Anglo-American republic that endures to this day. Eventually, the migrants of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries will become de facto Americans, too, settling permanently in the United States, sending their children to public schools and paying a variety of taxes to keep the roads paved and the hospitals in good working order. But their crossing story is often one of violence and powerlessness. More than likely, on this journey the migrant has encountered, or entrusted his fate to, professional criminals like *El Cochi Crazy*. The migrant who succeeds in entering the United States under these circumstances does so with a degraded sense of self.

There is another group of people in U.S. history who endured a similarly violent and troubled path into Americanness. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. DuBois explores how African-American identity was shaped by Reconstruction, the beginning of the long purgatory between slavery and the flowering of freedom that came in the second half of the twentieth century. The post-Civil War South was "an armed camp for intimidating black people," he wrote, with its roving bands of Klansmen, racist judges, and police stripping South-

ern black people of the notion of themselves as citizens, in the broadest sense of the word. *The Souls of Black Folk*, written in 1903, was a spiritual and moral snapshot of a people not yet free, and as I read its pages a hundred years later I can't help but see parallels to the Spanish-speaking people I've met who have undertaken a crossing, a birth into a new country. The black man strives to be "a coworker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius," DuBois writes. But he discovers that "to be a poor race is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships."

I wandered from the administrator's office back to the shelter's courtyard. Gonzales had risen with his crutches and joined the line of men waiting to step into the dining room for their dinner: a plate of beans, beef, and vegetables. When the meal was served, they sat down at long tables, dozens of men bowing their heads to say the Our Father, the room and its concrete walls filling with a chorus of whispers. To be undocumented—or illegal, if you don't like euphemisms—is to live continuously in a mental state similar to the one I saw among those men in Tijuana, the state of not quite being at your destination, of not quite having arrived. Because even after you get past the border, when you are sitting in the relative safety of your apartment in Los Angeles, or a trailer in Kentucky, you know you can step outside and fall into the arms of the authorities, who will have every right to deport you forthwith. I have a Guatemalan relative, a computer technician, currently living in the greater Los Angeles area who lives in precisely this set of circumstances, the possibility of detention and expulsion from his new home hovering over the routine of his daily existence. He knows that one day he could step out from his San Fernando Valley apartment and never return, the food in the refrigerator left to grow stale and rot. The people at his job who rely on him to keep their computers working

will wonder what happened to him, and probably have an inkling of what did. They will not be surprised when he finally makes it to a Mexican telephone and calls to deliver the news: No, I will not be there tomorrow to help clean the latest worm from the boss's hard drive. Probably he has thought through precisely this scenario, he has imagined himself erased from the picture of his California life as cleanly and thoroughly as if he were a digital image on the office computer screen, wiped out with a few clicks of a mouse.

The officers of El Operativo Beta are the "untouchables" of Mexican law enforcement. Recruited from local, state, and federal agencies, their mission is to patrol the border area and protect the immigrants not only from smugglers and the *bajapollos* (loose translation: chicken hawks) but also from the corrupt police officials who, for decades, have made ripping off migrants a lucrative business. While the U.S. Border Patrol is outfitted with new Ford Broncos, their Mexican counterparts in Beta make do with a variety of battered jalopies. The black LTD Crown Victoria driven by Officer Cuauhtemoc Montesinos could have been a refugee from a demolition derby or a relic from the *Adam 12* era of police work; its passenger-side door opened barely enough for me to squeeze inside.

Officer Montesinos wore a California Angels baseball cap, which turned out to be quite appropriate, as he spent most of his patrol shift acting like a guardian angel to the migrants who sleep and live along *el bordo*. He told them where they could go for a hot meal and which number to call if any smuggler or police officer tried to shake them down for cash. In El Cañon del Muerto ("Dead Man's Canyon"), known as Smuggler's Canyon on the U.S. side, Montesinos talked to a group of wiry men who live in tents hidden in a cluster of bushes. They said they preferred to live amid the scrub of the canyon, be-

cause when they would go downtown, *cholos* harassed them and tried to steal their belongings. Montesinos noticed that one of the men carried an inhaler for asthma medicine and gave him the number for the Red Cross.

Still, there were not many migrants for Montesinos to talk to on this shift, not as many as there were, say, a year earlier. "This was a place where a lot of people used to come," Montesinos said as we drove along the bank of the Tijuana River at the point where its concrete spillway runs diagonally across the border. Just a half-dozen or so men were standing around, waiting for nightfall. "There used to be a lot of people here," he said a few minutes later, about a place where the border fence cut across a ravine in the working-class neighborhood of Colonia Libertad. "It's very slow here today," he said as we stopped by the beach. At each spot, we looked over the fence and saw the ubiquitous Ford Broncos of the U.S. Border Patrol. At some places, there were almost as many agents waiting on the other side as there were migrants on this side.

Tijuana is a maze of twisting streets and diagonals and traffic circles that occupies nearly every square foot of terrain right up to the edge of the fence. Where the border runs past Colonia Libertad, the lonely Border Patrol agents parked high on a rocky ridge in the United States could look down into a crowded Mexican neighborhood and watch boys and girls in navy uniforms walking home from school, women hanging their laundry, and street vendors pushing their carts up and down the steep streets. The agents in the Broncos on the U.S. side of the fence watched as Officer Montesinos and I interviewed a group of men gathered near *el bordo* about a mile from the ocean. Enrique López, a thirty-year-old warehouse worker from Mazatlán, told us he had left his hometown three days after his wife gave birth to their daughter—he'd been in Tijuana for twenty-two days, about twenty-one longer than he'd expected. He left Mazatlán

because he and his wife were having a hard time making ends meet, and it wasn't going to get any easier with the new baby. With what he made at the warehouse, sometimes he had only \$14 a week to give his wife for groceries. Deported after his first two failed crossings, he found a construction job in Tijuana for a few weeks, hoping to save enough for another attempt. But he soon discovered that "everything here in Tijuana is too expensive" and that saving was impossible. "Any little meal you get, a breakfast, a lunch, is going to cost you fifteen, twenty pesos. So you end up paying forty-five, fifty pesos a day to eat. And then there's clothes. You buy some pants, and that costs ten, fifteen pesos. And you don't have anything left." He's developed a new appreciation, he says, for how his wife took the little money he gave her and made it last a whole week. "I don't know how she does it. She just takes that hundred pesos," he says, using his hands to mimic pulling a rubber band, "and stretches it and stretches it."

My tour ended in a cotton field on the edge of town. "This is as far as we go," Montesinos announced.

"What's up there?" I asked, pointing toward a series of hills rising in the east. "Don't people try to cross over there?"

"Yes, but we don't go there. It's too dangerous." The coyotes and the drug cartels who operated in those parts were heavily armed. They would probably kill a policeman if he was stupid enough to wander around there alone. This is something I had never experienced before: a place where police authority meant nothing. It was a first hint of the larger institutional breakdown that reached in patches across the length and breadth of Latin America. The drug cartels and the smugglers were a secret, parallel power in Tijuana, and beyond the immigrant purgatory of Tijuana they were centaurs inflicting tortures on the shades in the first and second circles of hell,

a landscape of spindly yucca and prickly pears where not even a policeman with an Angels cap could protect you, where you were at the mercy of the sun and men with automatic weaponry.

Ergio Medina and Victor Ley had walked through this inferno and had the sunburns to show for it. In Tijuana, where it had been rainy for several days, they stood out with their red faces. I met them at La Casa del Migrante. They told me they had tried crossing the border about 350 miles to the east, walking for days under the winter sun in the Sonora Desert north of Nogales. They hoped to make it first to Tucson and then to Phoenix—where Medina once lived for three years—but ran up against a thick line of tall Border Patrol agents in olive-colored uniforms, who Medina calls "the green chiles."

"The green chiles chased us," Medina said. There was something of the jester in him, and he embellished his storytelling with lavish gestures. "Some real tall green chiles on bicycles, in shorts. You try to run, but they're really fast and big. Nobody gets past them." He pumped his arms to imitate the agents' muscular pedaling, showing how their dirt bikes sped over the desert brush. "One of them stepped on me with his shoes. Really big shoes, size twelve."

Medina spent a couple of days detained in Arizona. They kept him in a bus, and he had a lot of time to think. Clearly, it had been a mistake to leave the United States in the first place. A lot of other people living north of the border would come to a similar realization. Over the long run, Operation Gatekeeper and all the other military-style crackdowns would have an unexpected long-term consequence for the people who lived north of the border. They would start giving up on the practice of slipping back over the border once a year

to see their relatives, lest they get stuck like all these people I was meeting in Tijuana. In trying to close down the border, the American government had made the Mexicans living in the United States a more sedentary, less nomadic people. When he lived in Phoenix, he had worked two jobs—as a helper on a horse ranch and as a cook—and had a “*gringa*” girlfriend. “I was going to get married with this *gringuita*. But she wanted to have me locked up in the house like I was a little doll. She didn’t like me spending time with my friends.” Now that he was stuck in Tijuana, he realized how good he had had it. “If I find another *gringuita*, I’m going to stay with her,” he said with a sardonic smile. “I’m going to say, ‘Let’s go for it!’”

Medina said he and his friend Ley would stay in Tijuana for a while. They had already found one job—at a car wash just a few blocks from the shelter. Soon they would try to find better jobs (as cooks, perhaps) and rent an apartment. “We’re going to wait for the green chiles to leave. I don’t think they’ll be there for long. In about six months they’ll leave, and then we’ll try again.” But of course the green chiles never did go away, nor were there any plans to mothball all those new Ford Broncos and motion detectors and dirt bikes.

Just before leaving Tijuana, I agreed to help a couple of the stranded migrants at La Casa del Migrante. Rosalino Montero, a thirty-nine-year-old owner of a small business in Mexico City, asked me if I could write a postcard to his wife. He told me he left home “to forget.” What, I asked. Family problems, he said, giving me a maudlin expression that suggested either tragedy or betrayal or both. He had been deported once already and had been stuck in Tijuana for five days.

In the postcard, I wrote in Spanish:

Your husband wanted you to know he arrived safely in Tijuana. He was

a little sick with the flu when I saw him, but it wasn’t anything serious. He was in good spirits [a lie, I know, but only a small one] and promised to write as soon as he gets across. He asked that you take good care of the store.

I gave Montero my number and told him to call when he made it to the United States. I never heard from him.

But I would speak again to another migrant I met that day, a tall, skinny man with Moorish eyes who told me his name was Miguel Ángel Gonzales. He said he had been living in Los Angeles when the INS showed up at the bar where he was having a few drinks. The agents plucked him out of his daily routine and deposited him in Baja California, and now he was desperate to get back to his new wife and son on “the other side.” On a piece of paper, he scribbled the name and address of said wife and a friend in Los Angeles, a man who could help him escape Tijuana and La Casa del Migrante. Could I visit this person, he asked, and pass on a message? Of course, I said, *con mucho gusto*, it would be my pleasure.

A few days later, I was standing in a doorway of a home in Watts, a neighborhood that was surrendering its claim as the heart of black Los Angeles and becoming a Mexican neighborhood. I had reached the address on the slip of paper I carried from Tijuana. Over the next few hours, the man I met there would unravel the lies Miguel Ángel Gonzales had told me.