

The Long Way Home

There were seven in the beginning. Hiding in the tall grass beyond the barbwire, they waited. The cry of the whistle, the moan of the tracks. Those sounds told them it was time. The train started to move, but still they waited. The station had guards, men without remorse, men whose only safeguard from the catching the train themselves was their infliction of violence on captured stowaways. No, without tickets, there was only one way to board. As the engine passed beyond the border of the fence, someone yelled out. It was time to catch the train.

Jose broke cover from his spot in the weeds and began to sprint. His sneakers were two sizes too big and were covered in holes. As the soles of his ratty Nikes slapped the gravel-lined tracks, he tried to ignore the pain he felt against his blistered skin. He had to run if he was going to make it. If he missed, it could cost him his life.

Hector went first. He was twenty, eight years older than Jose, and he sprinted clear of the crowd in only ten strides. Hector claimed he played futbol until he got expelled from school, but Jose did not believe him. Someone who had gone to school would have never needed to catch La Bestia. Even if he lied, Hector made the jump like a real athlete, catching the top rail cleanly. He was halfway up the car before anyone else even made it to the tracks.

Jose watched as two men he did not know reached the rail car and leapt. Both caught hold of the railing, but neither with as much confidence as Hector. The train was picking up speed, and as Jose ran in labored strides, he knew his time was

shrinking. He pushed past two older men and his friend Jesus. To catch the train, he could only think of himself.

Right alongside the tracks, as rocks kicked loose and the ground shook from the weight of the tremendous freight cars, the handholds seemed impossibly high. The Coyote had assured them that children as young as eight had made the jump, but for a moment Jose saw himself being thrown underneath the severing wheels of the train. He would not have been the first.

But he had to try. There was nothing behind him, nothing but rail guards chasing down stragglers. Years on the street. Foraging from dumpsters. The death of a young gangbanger. Bitter endings to an untold story. La Bestia was a cruel mistress, but she was the only hope he had.

Jose got even with the railing and said a prayer to Saint Mary before jumping. As he flew through the air he closed his eyes and reached out with all his hope. His body slapped against the side of the car, nothing but bone and sinew, but his hand caught hold of the railing. Jose opened his eyes and pulled himself to safety as the train lumbered on.

When he reached the roof of the car he looked back for Jesus. The two older men he had sprinted past had abandoned their efforts, veering from the track for the cover of the jungle. Jesus had also missed his opportunity, but he was not running. As the railway guards descended upon him he looked up at Jose and smiled. Their clubs rained down upon Jesus's brown hair before Jose could scream. After that, there were only four.

After three days the rooftop of La Bestia had grown into a miniature city. Every village passed, every bend in the track where the train slowed enough to give someone the chance to risk everything, their numbers had multiplied. When Jose first made it up to the roof of the cars, he had been able to walk from one side of the train to the other. Now, overcrowded and full, he held onto his spot with Hector and the rest of their small gang. If the train took on any more passengers, he would need people to stand for him.

The bright sun shone down on Jose and his fellow riders, a blessing from above. It had been frigid the night before. Jose had clasped his hands tightly against his brown skin, shaking in the wash of cool night air. The sun was such a relief that he felt himself grinning from ear to ear. He was on La Bestia. His life could only go forward from there.

Looking through his plastic rucksack, Jose did a quick inventory of his dwindling supplies. In Vera Cruz he would have the chance to resupply, but that was still one more day of travel. If he carried any more with him he knew he could have Hector trade for food, but as it was, he would part with nothing he held.

A half-liter of water. Some plantain chips. Spoiled rice that a dog would not eat. Necessities for life that Jose could not forgo. Besides those things, his bag held very little.

Jose ran his hand along his mother's rosary beads, the only physical proof he had left from the woman who had brought him into the world. They were worn smooth, wooden totems that carried the worries of the world. They never made

things better for Jose, but when he held them and looked up at the stars, he could pretend that his mother still thought of him.

Besides the rosary beads, Jose carried one more item in his bag. It was his most cherished possession, one he knew he could trade for better food whenever he wanted, but the one thing he kept as his own. It was a baseball cap, but not just any cap. It was a New York Yankees cap!

Even a gutter rat knew about the Yankees. Jose had gotten it nine months before from an aide worker stationed in his village. An American, some gringo with blue eyes and teeth so white they sparkled, not silver or rotted like most men his age. He had seen Jose sifting through the garbage behind a food co-op, and instead of throwing rocks at him or turning him over to the police, he had stopped and spoken to him like he was a real person. He knew Spanish, but he spoke in such a clean way that Jose had to concentrate to understand.

The gringo did not have much to say, but when he asked Jose if he had any family, he unintentionally entered a world so far removed from his own that the truth of life pierced his heart. Jose had noticed his ball cap right away, but when the gringo reached up and removed it, Jose was so shocked he lost all words.

“Take it. It doesn’t really fit me. Besides, someone who smiles so big for the Yankees deserves this hat more than me.”

Thinking about the gringo, Jose ran his hand over the clean seams and the grey and white lettering. The gringo was back in America, a land so rich that you could give away a hat without blinking an eye. La Bestia was taking him there, and

Jose dreamed that soon he too would have enough hats to share with all the street rats in the world.

--

The next day, as the train rolled into Vera Cruz, La Bestia became a hive of excitement. Las Patronas, the female saints, would be waiting for the passing migrants. The exodus of La Bestia had started as all great movements do, slow and unnoticed, but as the northward migration of desperate way seekers blanketed the roofs of rail cars, some people were forced to do more than look away. Those early rides had lost so many pilgrims to starvation and dehydration. Since then, Las Patronas had done what they could.

Hector had convinced Jose to let him hold him out over the edge of the train car to get a better vantage. Shacks and roofless concrete building marked the edge of town, and Jose wondered how the saints of Vera Cruz could afford to help people like him. Vera Cruz looked exactly like the place he had left behind, but Hector promised they would come.

Leaning out as Hector held onto his shirt, Jose peered ahead. La Bestia was almost half a mile long, and although their car was near the middle, he could see nothing further than the overgrown embankments and potholed streets. A cry from the front of the train was the first signal that something had changed, and as Hector shook Jose's shirt for information, Jose shrieked for fear of being let go.

When Hector jerked him back onto the car, Jose was shaking so bad he had lost his excitement over Las Patronas. The screams of anticipation from the riders grew louder and louder, but Jose did not move. Only when Hector punched him in

the arm did he realize that if he wanted to resupply his meager food bank he needed to spring into action. Turning back towards the city, Jose saw crowds of women.

The saints of Las Patronas were dressed in white, matching red scarves adorning their heads. Some had small children tucked besides their flowing dresses while others stood alone, their children long gone into the cold and lonely world.

The train slowed as it passed through town, and as it did, the women of Vera Cruz took out their sacks of mercy. Bags of rice and beans, bottles of water, and other instruments of compassion were thrown without requirement. Each bag that flew through the air elicited a cry of joy from the riders. Jose felt his fellow passengers push and jostle for position, reaching out for the bags of food and water.

Jose stood at the edge of the crowd, but his position on the brink of the rooftop gave him little comfort. Pushing with his backside as hard as he could, he dug his heels in and looked out at the crowd. Although he was tall for his age, most of the riders surrounding him were full-grown men. The other children, the ones who rode with families or the ones like Jose who rode alone, relented and prayed that their fellow passengers would be merciful and share their bounty. Hector had told Jose that it was three more days to the border, and Jose had learned enough from life to understand that relying on the mercy of others was not only foolish, it was dangerous. He had to catch one of the bags of food.

The cries from the front of the train were dying off, and as Jose looked out, he saw that the giving crowd was thinning. In desperation, each bag that was thrown, each sack of rice that sailed through the air, was fought over with increasing severity. Jose saw Hector elbow an old man in the face, breaking his nose as he

captured his third bag. He did not know if he could be that ruthless, but he knew he needed to act.

Letting the crowd push him to the very edge of the car, Jose tried to lock eyes with one of the women. Between the edge of the train and where he stood was a fraction of an inch, but Jose knew that his only chance was to catch a bag thrown lower, one thrown to a spot where only someone as young as him could catch the life saving gift. He looked twenty yards ahead of his car and saw a lone woman standing clear of the crowd. She held only one bag of supplies, but as she looked up at the pilgrims, Jose saw tears in her eyes. No children stood beside her, and although he could not be certain, Jose doubted any child ever had. The woman caught eyes with Jose, and as he nodded his head and pleaded for mercy, she held her bag aloft. With his right arm, Jose reached back and grabbed onto a stranger. Using the man as an anchor, he leaned out over the edge. She waited until his car was right beside her before throwing her bag.

Jose felt the crowd behind him heave and buck, but the woman threw her bag with purpose. His hand clasped down on the mesh sack, and he pulled himself back from the edge. Jose had just enough time to look back before being swallowed into the crowd, but when he did, the woman who had saved him was gone.

--

Two days later, tragedy struck. North of Vera Cruz, one day shy of the border, the train crossed into the great desert. The Sonoran furnace blazed down upon the shelterless riders. Jose and most of the other young men had taken off their shirts and tied them around their heads, but that provided little comfort.

People became disoriented, and the metal roof got so hot it drew blisters. Elderly riders collapsed, and a still fell over the riders of the train. It was only a matter of time until something happened.

Jose was trying to close his eyes, his head pounding from the heat, when he heard the scream. Two cars down, a young couple down began shouting in frantic tones. Exhausted from the heat, no one stirred to investigate, but everyone did look up. As the screams became clearer, it was obvious what had happened.

A child. How old, Jose would never discover. Hector had gambled with members of their posse about when someone would fall, when an elderly rider would collapse to never rise again, but no one had counted on the first death aboard La Bestia to be a child. Later, Jose learned that it had been a little girl, the couple's one and only. They had boarded shortly after Vera Cruz, and despite being well supplied, the desert had been an unmerciful host. While her parents had rested, covering their heads and praying for respite, a mirage on the horizon had caught the little girl's eye. America was the mirage they all sought, but lost in the delusion of heat, she grew tired of waiting. She stepped between two railcars without a peep, never quite reaching what it was she sought. By the time her parents realized she was gone, there was nothing left to do.

There was a second cry as the last car passed over the girl's remains. It was a disturbing image, but with Hector laughing and describing what he imagined, Jose struggled to clear his mind. He prayed that it had been fast. Mercy only goes so far, but a quick death was not too much to ask.

Riders began abandoning the train the day La Bestia was due to reach the border. At the final station, guards would once more examine the train and all its contents. La Bestia had done her job in getting them there. Now, it was time for them to do the rest.

Jose and his gang did not want to exit the train too early, stranding themselves unnecessarily before attempting a crossing. Instead, they waited until they could see Juarez city limits. As he had done one week before, Hector led by example, climbing down the railings and leaping to the graveled embankment. He hit the ground running, but even in the height of youth, the train's speed was too great. He tucked and rolled three times before slowing. Everyone looked back to see if he was hurt, but as Hector rose, white dirt shedding from his shoulders, Jose realized that it was going to take much more than that to touch Hector.

Jose decided to go second, not wanting to lose courage. Following Hector's example, he lowered himself to the last railing and pushed away with all his might. Jose's feet never touched the ground, but as he hit the ground, he knew that he had cleared the tracks. By the time he was back on his feet Hector had caught up with him, laughing at his fall.

They continued along the tracks, catching up with one rider after another as they walked. Eventually the train got so far ahead of their small group that Jose could no longer see it. It had carried him across a continent, and had left him without a thought. He was about to ask Hector what his plan was for crossing when they saw a lone figure lying besides the track.

Jose could hear the man's screams long before reaching him. When they were closer, he saw that it was a stranger, a man he had never before seen. The man was writhing in pain, and as Jose jostled for position, he saw the man's leg. Something had gone wrong in his jump, and Jose saw the man's bone piercing through his shin. The wound was slick, his pants stained crimson red, and between the man's cries and the smell of the blood, Jose wanted to wretch.

The man begged for help, but as the minutes slipped by, Jose started to realize the truth. With no one else coming behind them, there was nothing they could do. Jose asked if they should leave water, but Hector scolded him, saying if he wanted to leave his own supplies behind he could be the fool. As the man started to realize his sentence, he lashed out, cursing those who would leave him.

And one by one they did. The group marched on, but Jose lagged behind, hoping for some way to save the day. When he was the only one left, the injured man cursed him as well, telling him to leave him to die. Jose did not want to abandon him, but with so few chances, he knew he had none to spare. Jose ran to catch up with his gang, never turning back. There was nothing behind him. There had to be.

--

Skirting Juarez city limits, the small gang discussed what they planned on doing in America. Every one was older than Jose, and many of the young men had family and jobs waiting for them. They talked about places called Denver, Garden City, Tucson. Those names were just blank spaces on the map for Jose. For him, America was a singular idea, a place so much better than where he came from that it

did not matter where he ended up. His hopes and dreams had centered on reaching America. They never went further than there.

As the last rays of the setting sun abandoned them to the dust and the sagebrush, everyone began talking about how they would cross. None of the young men had enough money for a Coyote, but they did have plans about where they would enter. Hector had an uncle who had written him with instructions, and so he took the lead in planning. The crossing was fifteen miles north of the city, a forgotten point of the world where only desperate souls would venture. The hike was seventy-five miles through barren desert, and as Hector described the journey, the group fell silent as they weighed whether or not they had enough supplies to survive the passage.

One by one the young men made their decisions. They had not come so far to turn back, and if they had survived La Bestia, then another seventy-five miles would be nothing. Jose was thrilled that he would be making the crossing with his new brothers, but as he got ready to follow the group, Hector told him he needed to wait.

Jose was confused by Hector's direction, but when he stopped, the rest of their friends backed off to give them space. Jose asked why they were delaying, but Hector could only shake his head.

"This is where your journey ends little brother. We need as much water as we can carry, and you are only going to slow us down."

Too late, Jose realized what the others had known for days. Hector had protected him, made him feel like he had a friend, but he had only done those things

so that Jose would carry goods for him. A mule. Less than a mule. His purpose served, it was time to be discarded.

Jose felt hot tears brim in his eyes, but he could not give up hope. He begged for Hector to take him, saying he wouldn't even notice he was there, but Hector had made up his mind. He told Jose to give him his rucksack, but as he reached for the bag, Jose jerked it from his hands.

Hector did not like Jose's show of defiance, especially in front of his new gang. He asked only once more before punching Jose in the stomach, knocking him to the ground. Jose held onto his bag as tightly as he could, but eventually Hector's strength was too great. He lost hold of his bag, crying in the dust as he did.

Hector rifled through Jose's meager possessions, not wanting to dally before abandoning him. He threw him his mother's rosary beads and a bag of rice. When Jose saw Hector pull out the Yankee cap, his heart broke in two.

"Turn yourself in. This is a bad place for a kid. They will find you a job or ship you back, but at least you will be alive. I'm sorry. It had to be done."

Hector turned his back as he jogged to catch up to his friends. In the evening twilight, Jose could make out the white lettering of the Yankee cap. The hat highlighted Hector's silhouette as he departed, abandoning Jose for the land of hope and dreams. Jose was crushed, everything he had and everything he wanted gone in an instant. Looking after Hector, he watched as he drifted into the night. After a minute, it all faded to dark.

By his second day in Juarez, Jose wished for nothing more than a swift end to his miserable life. He wandered in circles, but the further he traveled, the more lost he became. So close to where his dreams ended, Jose knew he might as well have been on the moon.

Hector had told him to turn himself in, but as Jose wandered the dirty, mangled streets, he saw children as young as him and younger, wandering the same helpless tracts. Juarez was full of children like him. There was nowhere to go, no one to take him in. Jose had traded one slum for another, one shortened life for the same.

As he tried to decide what to do next, Jose could not help but notice the pulse of traffic flowing through the city. Like magnetism, cars and people were pulled north. Jose knew the border was close, closer than it had ever been, but he had no money, and he had no plan. If he was to go to the border, he knew he had only one course of action.

Jose was not special. He was not the first brave child to cross the wilderness. La Bestia was an artery, a main vein for refugees flowing unchecked into the Promised Land. He had seen fifteen boys before him attempt the journey, and had seen half as many returned after turning themselves in. Crossing the footbridge and begging for mercy from border guards was a method that had become as popular as any other. Jose knew it would result in food and a place to stay, but for how long he did not know. Half of the young men who had taken that gamble had been returned home. But that was only half.

It took two days to cross the city. Jose ran out of food, drank water from alleyway spigots, and was chased by a gang of boys half his age. But he never faltered, because the closer he got, the more hope he felt that he might be one of the lucky ones. It was late afternoon when he finally made his way to the crossing, the setting sun reflecting off of the Rio Grande in waves of yellow and orange. Jose could see America, but he was still a world away.

A line of cars snaked back for nearly a mile as Jose walked along the crowded sidewalks. Beggars, shades of human beings, clung to vehicles whenever anyone opened up their window to try and help just one person. Jose saw a man with no legs being drug behind a minivan, clinging to the bumper and crying as he screamed for food. Centered in humanities weigh station, even though he was alone and only twelve years old, no one batted an eye.

As he made his way to the footbridge, signs in English and Spanish marked with ominous red lettering covered nearly every patch of earth. Jose could not read, but as the numbers of hopeful souls around him dwindled, he felt confident of the message.

A pair of drunken Americans stumbled before him, passports in their tainted hands. One of them looked back at Jose, but when he spoke in slurred words, Jose gave no reply. The American shrugged his shoulders before turning back to his friend.

Jose waited until the American's had crossed before taking his turn. The sun had dipped below the horizon, and the evening lights of the El Paso skyline began to kick on in waves of yellow and white. Jose fixed his gaze upon the tallest building he

had ever seen as he began to walk. He did not look in front of him, only up at the unending sky. Closer and closer to the guards at the end of the footbridge, Jose ignored their calls. He focused only on the sound of his feet on the metal bridge and on the lights shining out, showing him the way. When he made it to the soldiers in their thick, bulletproof vests, Jose fell to his knees and begged for mercy.

--

Two days in, Jose tried to temper his hope. The guards on the bridge had known little Spanish, but Jose had been able to tell them enough to get them to take him into custody. A translator at the detention center had taken his name and his age. When he finished the questionnaire, he was given a change of clothing and the best meal he had even eaten.

The center was full of children. Although all of the occupants spoke Spanish, there was little dialogue between the hopeful prisoners. People banded together, keeping their circles tight. Since not everyone was going to get in, it was best to increase your odds.

Jose tried to start conversations with other boys, but besides their similar backgrounds, there was little to talk about. The only thing anyone wanted to discuss was what happened next. That was a difficult topic, because anytime guards came and escorted out a waiting soul, they never returned.

One week later, after the cycle of life had begun to bear on itself, guards finally called upon Jose. Every morning he had showered, combed his hair, and brushed his teeth as clean as he could, believing that good impressions and wanting something bad enough would convince whoever he needed to let him stay in

America. When the guard came to get him, Jose was ready to plea his case and enter his new home. He walked past the other immigrants, beaming as he pictured his new home.

The room Jose was taken to resembled the same one he had been questioned in upon arrival. Jose waited until he was asked to take a seat, but sat down gladly as he prepared for what came next.

After fifteen minutes, an older woman Jose had not seen before came in with a slim folder. She dismissed the guard, and then greeted him in perfect Spanish. Her accent was so slight that Jose asked her if she was from outside the country, but the woman told him that she was not. She then looked at Jose with a glance he had seen before.

“Jose, I am here to inform you that your deportation papers have been processed and approved by a local judge. After our meeting, you will be placed on a bus, taken to the border, and turned over to Mexican authorities. Since you do not have a passport you will be processed and returned to your country of origin. I regret to inform you of this, but unfortunately, there is nothing we can offer you at this time.”

Crushed, the deathblow set in slowly for Jose. The slow cut digs deepest, and as Jose sat back in chair, he was too broken to cry. The woman in front of him only looked at him for a moment before closing her folder. When she did, she motioned for the guard to reenter the room.

Jose was too defeated to act. He could have run, but where would he have gone. He had traveled across a continent, had risked everything to come to America, and was being dismissed without regard.

The woman stood and made her way to the door, but as the guard came and placed his hand upon Jose's shoulder, she stopped. Years of denial, eons of ending dreams. Whatever it was that broke through her shell, something caused the woman to turn. She looked back at Jose for a moment, considering what had led him to her.

"When you go home, what will you do? Will you stay with your family? You must know there is nothing better here."

Jose had given in, but as he listened to the woman's words, he considered her question. It only took him a moment to answer. It was the answer he had held his entire life.

"I have no family. I have no home. There is not one person in the entire world that loves me. Where I come from, I am less than an animal. You ask what I will do? What would you?"

"What would you?"

The End

