First Crossing

revolution Boulevard in downtown Tijuana swarmed with gawking tourists who had walked over the big cement bridge from the United States to Mexico. Shop owners stood in front of their stalls calling out, "I make you good deal. Come in. I make you good price." Even though it was January, children walked the streets barefooted and accosted shoppers, determined to sell gum or small souvenirs with their persistent pleas: "Come on, lady, you like gum? Chiclets? Everybody like gum." Vendor's carried gargantuan bouquets of paper flowers, hurrying up to cars on the street and trying to make sales through open windows. It appeared that no one ever accepted the first offer from tourists. The Mexicans simply bagered them until they pulled out their wallets. With its shady, border-town reputation, Tijuana maintained an undeniable sense of mystery, as if something illegal was about to transpire.

Marco added up the hours he'd been riding on buses from his home in Jocotepec, Jalisco, in order to reach Tijuana. Eighteen hours? Twenty-three hours? It was all a blur of sleeping and sitting in stations and huddling as close to his father as possible so he wouldn't have to smell the sweat of strangers. Now, even though they were finally in the border town, their journey still wasn't over. Papá pointed to a bench in front of a liquor store, and Marco gratefully dropped onto it. Even though it wasn't dark yet, a neon sign flashed TEQUILA and KAHÍLÁ in the liquor store window. Marco felt conscious of himself, as if everyone who passed by knew why he was there. For some reason he felt guilty, even though he hadn't yet done anything wrong.

"No te apures. Don't worry," said Papá, reaching into a brown bag for a peanut. He calmly cracked it and peeled it, letting the shells drop onto the sidewalk.

Marco looked at him. Papá had an eagle’s profile: a brown bald head with a bird-of-prey nose. Once, when he was a little boy, Marco had seen a majestic carved wooden Indian in front of a cigar store in Guadalajara and had said, "Papá, that’s you!" Papá had laughed but had to agree that the statue looked familiar. Marco looked just like Papá but with 10 times the hair. They had the same walnut-colored skin and hooked noses, but Papá's body was muscular and firm while Marco’s was skinny and angular, all knees and elbows.

"How do we find the coyote?" asked Marco.

"Do not worry," said Papá. "The coyote will find us. Like a real animal stalking its next meal, the coyote will find us."

Marco took off his baseball cap and ran his fingers through his thick, straight hair. He repositioned the hat and took a deep breath. "Papá, what happens if we get caught?"

"We have been over this," said Papá, still cracking peanuts. "We will have to spend a few hours at the border office. We stand in line. They ask us questions. We give them the names we discussed. They take our fingerprints. Then we come back here to Tijuana. The coyote will try to move us across again, tomorrow or the next day or even the next. It could take two attempts or a dozen. Eventually, we make it. It's all part of the fee."

"How much?" asked Marco.

"Too much," said Papá. "It is how it is. They are greedy, but we need them."

Stories of Danger

Marco had heard stories about coyotes, the men who moved Mexicans across the border. Sometimes they took the money from poor peasants, disappeared, and left them stranded in Nogales or Tecate with no way home. Coyotes had been known to lead groups into the desert in the summer, where they would later be found almost dead and riddled with cactus thorns. And then there were the stories about scorpion stings and rattlesnake bites after following a coyote into a dry riverbed. Just last week, Marco overheard a friend of Papá's tell about a group of people who hid in a truck under a camper shell, bodies piled upon bodies. The border patrol tried to stop the truck, but the coyote was drunk and tried to speed away. The truck overturned, and 17 Mexicans were killed. Since then, Marco's thoughts had
been filled with his worst imaginings.

Papá saw the wrinkle in Marco's forehead and said, "I have always made it across, and I wouldn't keep doing this if it wasn't worth it."

Marco nodded. Papá was right. Everything had been better for the family since he'd started crossing. His father had not always worked in the United States. For many years, before Marco was 10, Papá had gone to work at a large construction site in Guadalajara, 30 miles away from their village of Jocotepec. Six days a week, Papá had carried 50-pound bags of rock and dirt from the bottom of a crater to the top of the hill. All day long, up and down the hill.

Marco had asked him once, "Do you count the times you go up and down the hill?"

Papá had said, "I don't count. I don't think. I just do it."

Papá's frustration had grown as the years went by. He was nothing more than a burro. When the hole in the ground was dug and the big building finished, he had been sent to excavate another hole. And for what? A pitiful $5 for his nine hours? The day that one of los jefes spat on his father as if he was an animal, Papá set the 50-pound bag down and began to walk away.

The bosses laughed at him. "Where are you going? You need work? You better stay!"

Papá turned around and picked up the heavy bag. He stayed for the rest of the day so that he could collect his pay and get a ride home, but he never went back.

He told Mamá, "My future and the children's future are marked in stone here. Why not go to the other side? There, I will make $10, $20, $30 a day, maybe more."

For the past four years, Marco had seen Papá only twice a year. He and his mother and younger sisters had moved into another rhythm of existence. He woke with the roosters, went to school in the mornings, and helped Mamá with Maria, Lilia, and Irma in the afternoon. During harvest, he worked in the corn or chayote fields and counted the days until Papá would come home.

The money orders always preceded him. They made Mamá happy and made Papá seem godlike in her eyes. They still did not own a house, but now they were able to pay the rent on time and had plenty left over for things like a television and the clothes and games Marco's sisters always wanted. They had money for the market and food, especially for the occasions when Papá came home and Mamá cooked meat and sweets every day. The first few nights were always the same. Mamá made birria, goat stew, and capirotada, bread pudding. Then Papá went out with his compadres to drink and to tell of his work in Los Estados, the States. The family would have his company for a month, and then he would go back to that unknown place, disappearing somewhere beyond the vision of the departing bus.

"What is it like, Papá?" Marco always asked.

"I live in an apartment above a garage with eight messy men. We get up early, when it's still dark, to start our work in the flower fields. In the afternoon, we go back to the apartment. We take turns going to the store to buy tortillas, a little meat, some fruit. There is a television, so we watch the Spanish stations. We talk about sports and Mexico and our families. There is room on the floor to sleep. On weekends we sometimes play fútbol at the school and drink a few cervezas. Sometimes we have regular work, but other times we go and stand on the corner in front of the gas station with the hope we will be picked up by the contractors who need someone to dig a ditch or do some other job a gringo won't do. It goes on like this until it's time to come back to Mexico."

For several years, Marco had begged to go with Papá. His parents finally decided that now that he was 14, he was old enough to help support the family. With both Marco and Papá working, the family could buy a house next year. Mamá had cried for three days before they left.

When it was time to board the bus to Guadalajara, Marco had hugged his mother tight.

"Mamá, I will be back."

"It will never be the same," she'd said. "Besides, some come back and some do not."

Marco knew he would return. He already looked forward to his first homecoming, when he would be celebrated like Papá. As the bus pulled away from Jocotepec, Marco had waved out the small window to the women, and for the first time in his life, had felt like a man.

Marco leaned back on the hard bench on the Tijuana street and closed his eyes. He already missed Jocotepec and his sisters playing in the corn fields behind the house. He even missed the annoying neighbor's dog barking and Mamá's voice waking him too early for mass on Sunday morning when he wanted to sleep.

Papá nudged him. "Stay close to me," he said, grabbing Marco's shirtsleeve.
Marco sat up and looked around. There was nothing unusual happening on the street. What had Papá seen?

**The Coyote**

A squat, full woman wrapped in a red shawl came down the sidewalk with a determined walk. Marco thought her shape resembled a small Volkswagen. Her blue-black hair was pulled back into a tight doughnut on the top of her head, not one strand out of place. Heavy makeup hid her face like a painted mask, and her red mouth was set in a straight line. As she passed, she glanced at Papá and gave a quick nod.

"Let's go," he said.

"That's the coyote?" said Marco. "But it is a woman."

"Shhh," said Papá. "Follow me."

Papá weaved between the tourists on the street, keeping the marching woman in his sight. She pulled out a beeping cell phone and talked into it, then turned off the main avenue and headed deeper into the town's neighborhood. Others seemed to fall in with Papá and Marco from doorways and bus stops until they were a group of eight: five men and three women. Up ahead, the coyote woman waited at a wooden gate built into the middle of a block of apartments. She walked in and the little parade followed her. They continued through a dirty callejón between two buildings, picking their way around garbage cans until they reached a door in the alley wall.

"In there," she ordered.

Marco followed Papá inside. It seemed to be a small basement with plaster walls and a cement floor. Narrow wooden stairs led up one wall to someplace above. A light bulb with a dangling chain hung in the middle of the room, and in a corner was a combination television and video player with stacks of children's videotapes on the floor. The woman came inside, shut the door, and bolted it. The men and women turned to face her.

"Twelve hundred for each, American dollars," she said.

Marco almost choked. He looked around at the others, who appeared to be peasants like him and Papá. Where would they have gotten that kind of money? And how could Papá pay $2,400 for the two of them to cross the border?

The transients reached into their pockets for wallets, rolled up pant legs to get to small leather bags strapped around their legs, unzipped inside pouches of jackets, and were soon counting out the bills. Stacks of money
appeared. The coyote walked to each person, wrote his or her name in a notebook, and collected the fees. Papá counted out 120 bills, all 20s, into her chubby palm.

In his entire life, Marco had never seen so much money in one room.

"Escucha. Listen. Since Sept. 11, I have had trouble trying to get people across with false documents," she said, "so we will cross in the desert. I have vans and drivers to help. We'll leave in the middle of the night. If you need to relieve yourself, use the alley. The television does not work, only the video." Her cell phone beeped again. She put it to her ear and listened as she walked up the stairs, which groaned and creaked under her weight. Marco heard a door close and a bolt latch.

It was almost dark. Marco and Papá found a spot on the concrete floor near the video player. Marco put his backpack behind him and leaned against it, protecting himself from the soiled wall, where probably hundreds of backs had rested.

One of the women, who was about Mamá's age, smiled at Marco. The others, tired from their travels, settled on the floor and tried to maneuver their bags for support. No one said much. There was murmuring between people sitting close to each other, but despite the obligatory polite nods, anxiety prevented too much interaction.

A man next to Papá spoke quietly to him. His name was Javier, and he'd been crossing for 12 years. He had two lives, he said: one in the United States and one in his village in Mexico. The first few years of working in the States, he dreamed of the days he would go home to Mexico and his family, but now he admitted that he sometimes dreaded his trips back. He wanted to bring his wife and children with him to work and live in the U.S., but they wouldn't come. Now he went home only once a year. What worried him was that he was starting to prefer his life on the other side to his life in Mexico.

Papá nodded as if he understood Javier.

Marco said nothing because he knew that Papá was just being polite. He would never prefer the United States to Mexico.

Marco was too nervous to sleep. He reached over and took several videotapes from the pile. They were all cartoon musicals, luckily in Spanish. He put one in the machine, *The Lion King*, and turned the volume down low. Trancelike, he watched the lion, Simba, lose his father.

"Hakuna matata," sang the characters on the video. "No worries."

A series of thoughts paraded through Marco's mind. The desert. Snakes. The possibility of being separated from Papá. Drinking beer with the men in Jocotepec after eating goat stew. A woman coyote. Scorpions. He closed his eyes, and the music in the video became the soundtrack of his piecemeal nightmare.


Marco, jarred from sleep, let Papá pull him up. He rubbed his eyes and tried to focus on the others, who headed out the door.

**Crammed Together**

A man with a flashlight waited until they all gathered in a huddle. He wore all black, including his cap, the brim pulled down so far that all that was apparent was his black mustache and a small, narrow chin.

They picked their way through the alley again, following the direction of the man's light. At the street, a paneled van waited, the motor running. The door slid open, and Marco could see that the seats had been removed to create a cavern. It was already filled with
people, all standing up. Men and women held small suitcases and had plastic garbage bags next to them filled with their belongings.

There didn’t seem to be an inch of additional space until the flashlight man yelled, ¿Mueva!¿ Move!

The people in the van crammed closer together as each of the group of eight climbed inside.

¿Más!¿ said Flashlight Man. The people tried to squash together. Papá jumped inside and grabbed Marco’s hand, pulling him in, too, but Marco was still half out. The man shoved Marco as if he were packing an already stuffed suitcase. The others groaned and complained. The doors slid shut behind Marco.

When the van surged forward, no one fell because there was no room to fall. Their bodies nestled together, faces pressed against faces, like tightly bundled stalks of celery. Marco turned his head to avoid his neighbor’s breath and found his nose pressed against another’s ear.

The van headed cast for a half hour. Then it stopped suddenly, the door slid open, and Flashlight Man directed them into the night. His cell phone rang to the tune of “Take Me Out to the Ballgame,” and he quickly answered it.

“One hour. We will be there,” he said into the phone. Then he turned to the small army of people and said, “Let your eyes adjust to the night. Then follow me.”

Marco and Papá held back. They were the last in the group forming the line of obedient lambs walking over a hill and down into an arroyo. There was no water at the bottom — just rocks, dirt, and dry grasses. Visions of reptiles crowded Marco’s mind. He was relieved when they climbed back up and continued to walk over the mostly barren ground. They crossed through a chain-link fence where an opening had been cut.

“Are we in the United States?” asked Marco.

“Yes,” said Papá. “Keep walking.”

They walked along a dirt road for another half hour, and in the distance, headlights blinked. Flashlight Man punched a number into his cell phone. The headlights came on again.

“That’s it,” said Flashlight Man, and they all hurried toward the van, where they were again sandwiched together inside.

That wasn’t so bad, thought Marco, as the van sped down a dirt road. A tiny bud of relief began to flower in his mind. No worries.

Within five minutes, the van slowed to a crawl and then stopped. Marco heard someone outside barking orders at the driver. Suddenly, the van door slid open and Marco met la migra.

Four Border Patrol officers with guns drawn ordered them out and herded them into two waiting vans with long bench seats. A small consolation, thought Marco. They rode back to the Border Patrol station in silence. Inside, it was exactly as Papá had said. They stood in line, gave false names during a short interview, were fingerprinted, and released.

“Now what?” asked Marco, as they stood in front of the Border Patrol building on the Mexico side.

“We walk back to la casa del coyote,” said Papá.

It was seven in the morning as they walked down the narrow streets. Most shops weren’t open yet, and bars and fences enclosed the vendors’ stalls, which were filled with piñatas, leather goods, ceramics, and sombreros. Papá bought premade burritos and Cokes inside a corner tienda before they turned down the street that led to Coyote Lady’s house.

Many of their group had already found their way back to the basement room off the alley. Papá and Marco found a spot against the wall and fell asleep. They woke late in the afternoon, went to the taco vendor on the corner for food, and came back and watched the video The Little Mermaid.

Marco listened to the fish maiden’s song. She wanted to be free to go to another world. Like me, he thought. It seemed everyone wanted to get to the other side.

In the middle of the night, they were roused and put in a van for another attempt to cross over. Again, the Border Patrol sat in wait and ambushed them, as if they had known they were coming. Each night the van took them a little farther east into the desert, but after five attempts, they were no farther into the United States than they’d been the first night.

Early Sunday morning, Coyote Lady came down the stairs into the basement room. She wore a dress like the ones Marco’s mother wore for church, a floral print with a white collar, although it was much bigger than any dress his mother owned. Her face was scrubbed clean of makeup, and she looked like someone’s aunt or a neighborhood woman who might go to mass every day.

“Today is a big football game, professional, in San Diego. La migra will be eager to get people into the U.S.
in time for the game. We start moving you in one hour, one at a time. The wait will not be bad at the border this morning. But later today, closer to game time, it will be horrible."

Marco looked at Papá. He did not want to be separated from him.

Papá said, "How?"

"In a car," said Coyote Lady. "We hide you. If I take only one across at a time, the car doesn't ride low in the back and does not look suspicious. I drive in a different lane each time. As you can see, we are having trouble with the usual ways, so we try this. It has worked before, especially on a busy day."

Marco didn't like the idea of being away from Papá. What would happen if Papá got across and he didn't? Or what if he couldn't find Papá on the other side? Then what would he do? He didn't like this part of the journey. Suddenly, he wished he'd stayed home for another year in Jocotepec.

As if reading his mind, Papá said, "I will go before you, Marco. And I will wait for you. I will not leave until you arrive. And if you don't arrive, I will come back to Tijuana."

Marco nodded.

Coyote Lady gave orders and told a woman to get ready to go. Every hour she stuck her head inside the room and called out another person.

Papá and Marco were the last of the group to go. They walked outside.

In the alley, the trash cans had been pushed aside to make room for an old car, a sedan. Flashlight Man waited beside the car, but he wasn't wearing his usual black uniform. Instead, he had on jeans, a blue-and-white football jersey, and a Chargers cap. He lifted the hood.

Inside, a small rectangular coffee table had been placed next to the motor, forming a narrow ledge. Two of the wooden legs disappeared into the bowels of the car and two of the legs had been cut short and now provided the braces against the radiator and motor.

"Okay," he said. "You lie down in here. It only takes a half hour. There is a van waiting for you in Chula Vista that will take you to your destinations."

**Papá's Turn**

Papá climbed up. Flashlight Man positioned his feet and legs so they would not touch the motor. Papá put his head and upper body on the tiny tabletop, curling his body to make it smaller. For an instant before the hood was closed, Papá's eyes caught Marco's.

Suddenly, Marco wished he'd stayed home for another year in Jocotepec.

Marco turned away so he wouldn't have to see his father humbled in this manner.

"Vámanos," said Coyote Lady, and she wedged into the driver's seat. Flashlight Man sat on the passenger side. A Chargers football banner and blue pom-poms sat on the dashboard as further proof of their deception. The car backed out of the alley and left. Marco closed the gate behind them.

He paced up and down the alley. They had said it would take an hour roundtrip. The minutes crawled by. Why did Papá agree to do this? Why did he resign himself to these people? "It is the way it is," Papá had said. Marco went back into the basement room and walked in circles.

After one hour, he put in a tape, Aladdin, and tried to pay attention as the characters sang about a whole new world. It was so easy in the video to get on a flying carpet to reach a magical place. *Where is this new world? Where is Papá? Did be get through?* Marco had never once heard a story of someone crossing over under the hood of a car. He tried to imagine being inside, next to the engine. His stomach churned. *Where is my magic carpet?*

The door opened suddenly. Flashlight Man was back. "Let's go," he said.

The car was already positioned in the alley with the hood up. Coyote Lady took Marco's backpack and threw it in the trunk. Marco climbed up on the bumper and swung his legs over the motor, then sat on the make-shift ledge. Flashlight Man arranged Marco's legs as if he were in a running position, one leg up, knee bent. One leg straighter, but slightly bent. Marco slowly lowered himself onto his side and put his head on the tabletop. Then he crossed his arms around his chest and watched the sunlight disappear to a tiny crack as the hood was closed.

"Don't move in there," said Flashlight Man.

*Don't worry, thought Marco. My fear will not permit me to move."

The motor started. The noise hurt his ears, and within minutes it was hot. The smell of motor oil and gasoline accosted his nostrils. He breathed through his mouth, straining his lips toward the slit where the light crept through from fresh air. The car moved along for about 10 minutes until they reached the lanes of traffic that led to the border crossing. Then it was stop and go. Stop and go. Marco's legs began to cramp, but he knew not to move one inch. He tried not to imagine what would happen if he rolled onto the inner workings of the car.

The car lurched and stopped, over and over. Marco
wanted to close his eyes, but he was afraid that he would get dizzy or disoriented. He watched the small crack between the car and hood as if it were his lifeline. A flash of color obliterated his line of sunlight as a flower vendor stopped in front of the car, trying to make one last sale to those in the car next to them. “Flores, flores! You buy cheap.”

The line of cars started to move again, but the flower vendor continued to walk in front of their car. Coyote Lady pressed on the horn. Marco’s body trembled as the sound reverberated through his body. He inched his hands up to cover his ears. The vendor stepped out of the way, and the car began to move faster.

Marco never knew when they actually crossed the line. He only knew when the car began to speed up on the freeway. His body pulsed with the vibrations of the car. Afraid to close his eyes, he watched beads of moisture move across the radiator, as if they had the ability to dance. Marco could not feel his right foot. It had fallen asleep. Panic crept into his chest and seized his muscles. He slowly pressed his hand back and forth across his chest to relieve the tightness. “No worries,” he whispered. “No worries.”

The car stopped and shook with a door being slammed. Marco heard someone fiddling with the hood latch. Light streamed into his eyes, and he squinted. Flashlight Man pulled him from the car and handed over his backpack. Marco stumbled from his dead foot, and his body still rocked with the feeling of the moving car. He looked around. He was in a parking lot behind an auto shop. Papá was waiting.

“We made it,” said Papá, clapping Marco on the back. “We’re in Chula Vista.”

Marco said nothing. He couldn’t hear what Papá had said because of the noise in his ears, as if they were filled with cotton and bees. He felt as if he’d been molested, his body misappropriated. He pulled away from Papá’s arm and climbed into the waiting van, this one with seats and windows. The door slid shut. Marco turned his face to the window and saw Coyote Lady and Flashlight Man driving away.

The others in the van smiled and talked as if they’d all just come from a party. The relief of a successful crossing seemed to have unleashed their tongues. Marco listened as they talked of their jobs in towns he’d never heard of before: Escondido, Solana Beach, Poway, Oceanside. Papá told them that he and his son were going to Encinitas to work in the flower fields and that it was his son’s first time crossing over. Faces turned toward Marco.

Marco cringed, his discomfort showing. Why did he have to mention me? One of the men laughed out loud. “At least you were not rolled in a mattress like I was on my first time!”

“Or like me,” said a young woman, grinning. “They dressed me as an abuelita, a grandmother, with a wig and old clothes and had me walk across with another woman’s identification. I was shaking the entire time.”

Marco could only force a smile, but everyone else laughed.

Stories spilled from their lips about their first times or their friends’ or family members’ hiding inside hollowed-out bales of hay, cramped inside a hide-a-bed sofa from which the bed frame had been removed, buried in the middle of a truckload of crates filled with cackling chickens. Marco found himself chuckling and nodding in co-misery. An almost giddy air seemed to prevail as they all revealed in one another’s bizarre stories and sometimes life-threatening circumstances.

He found himself eager to hear of each exploit and began feeling oddly proud and somehow connected to this unrelated group. A strange camaraderie seemed to permeate the air, and when one man told how he was hidden in a door panel of a truck, smashed in a fetal position for one hour, and thought he might suffocate, Marco laughed the hardest.

As the people were dropped off in towns along the way north, they shook hands with Marco and Papá and left them with the words “Buena suerte.” Good luck. When Papá and Marco were the only ones left in the van and the driver finally headed up Freeway 5 toward Encinitas, Papá grinned at him. “OK now?”

Marco nodded. “OK.” He looked out the window at the people in the cars on the freeway. They were all headed somewhere in the United States of America. Marco wondered how many were headed to a whole new world.

Pan Muñoz Ryan’s maternal grandparents immigrated to the United States from Aguascalientes, Mexico, during the Great Depression. Her grandmother’s life was the inspiration for Ryan’s book Esperanza Rising. Ryan’s other books include the historical Riding Freedom, the biography When Marian Sang, and several picture books, among them Amelia and Eleanor Go for a Ride, Mud Is A Cake, and Hello, Ocean.