

110 Degrees

by Esperanza Caminante

While from our earliest school years we study and celebrate the stories of children who endured great hardship and showed great bravery as they crossed over to a new land or blazed new frontiers, with current attitudes to border crossings we do not listen enough to the voices of the immigrant children of today who were asked to rise to heroic acts beyond their young years. From the moment Esperanza was given the tools she would need to craft a compelling "Page one Moment," she held her writing group spellbound as she added scene upon scene every week. Because we never ask the women in our writing groups what brought them to jail, we have no idea what transpired between the end of this story and the time of Esperanza's arrest, nor what sentence snatched her from the jail where she was starting to open up as the details you will read here came back to her. We can only admire the fortitude and spirit of this young girl, as we ask our readers to think more deeply about what it means to create such fences, barriers, and obstacles that children, separated from their families, never choosing the journeys they are sent on, must struggle to surmount.



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It's around 110 degrees; it is so hot, so humid, I'm sweating, the air is dry and it's hard to breathe. I know I'm not in the desert, but it almost feels like it. I can't stand the heat and the sun.

This is Mexico D.F. (Mexico City) and I'm waiting on the streets.

I really don't know who is coming for us. I know my destination, but I have no idea what's going to happen from this point on. In a way I'm excited. I get to see new places. It's a new adventure and I feel free like an adult.

I hear a car and the noisy sound of the brakes against the rotor.

I can smell the burning brakes in the air. I notice a black SUV with tinted windows. The street is empty. The doors open, the driver remains inside, and every other man gets out—around five men. They are all wearing black T-shirts, black cargo pants, black boots, and their faces are covered with a black bandana all the way from their noses to their chins. I notice how two of them have golden chains with crosses around their necks.

A man is screaming. As soon as he steps out of the SUV, he gives us the order to get inside, "Get in. Hurry up—NOW!"

I've never seen them before in my life. I don't know any of them. What is going on?

As soon as I step inside the SUV, I feel the air conditioning hit my skin. It feels cold and nice inside the SUV. I am able to smell a mix of antifreeze, cologne and cigarettes.

Everything has turned dark. I cannot see anything. My hearing becomes twice as acute. As I'm touching and feeling the texture of the fabric covering my face, the voice of a man is saying, "Don't try to take it off. It is for your own protection."

They put hoods on our heads to avoid our seeing where we are or where we are going. I brush my arm against somebody else by my side. I know this person very well. I know the way she smells. I know every single thing about her. A relief invades my body. My heartbeat gets back to normal. I'm okay now, my sister still by my side. She is still with me.

I don't know what time it is. I can't tell where we are. The only thing I know is I'm still inside the SUV and its engine keeps on going.



I fell asleep. I guess I was tired. My sister—I recognize her voice—she is talking to me, trying to wake me up. My hood is off.

As the doors open, I clearly see the blue sky, the white fluffy clouds, and the nice sunny day. Outside men are waiting for us. They quickly say to us to hurry up and get inside the house.

I'm very good at observing my surroundings. It does not look like a nice neighborhood, a lot of movement going on in the streets, lots of people. It's loud and hot. The house looks like a cute little and colorful cottage, Mexican style. It's painted with white and green paint.

I'm entering the house and I see an old wooden table, an electric stove, a microwave, and a big old white refrigerator. It's not cute looking. It looks deserted.

At my right side there is a big open space and this is when I find out we are not alone anymore.

Around 12 to 13 people are all over the place, on the floor, everywhere. It's too crowded and hot and smelly.

There is only one old couch and lots of old mattresses on the floor. There is only one fan blowing air for all of us in the room. It's not even enough. I'm sweating already and it's getting difficult to breathe, it is so hot.

I'm hungry, I'm starving. I haven't eaten all day. I don't want to complain. I'm okay. It's alright. Nothing else matters. I'm alive and my sister jenny, a 25-year-old woman, is still by my side every second that passes.

That night we sleep on the floor on top of the old, ugly looking mattresses. It is very uncomfortable because of the hardness of the surface.

I open my eyes after a long night. I look for my sister. She is right there, drinking a cup of coffee. I smell the coffee in the air. I see the sunshine through the window glass, some people still sleeping.

My stomach is growling, asking for food, letting me know it is empty. I'm hungry.

"jenny, *tengo hambre*," I say to my sister. She hands me a hard, long Mexican bread and pours black coffee into a plastic cup. The bread is really hard—so hard that when I try to bite on it, it will crumble. So I dip the bread into my coffee and eat it like that.

All my life I've been doing this. I dip whatever I'm eating, cookies or bread, into my juice, milk or soda. It's just something I do all the time. It's just me.

I don't recall eating anything else that day but bread, coffee and lots of tap water.

There is nothing good to watch on TV. All day long all they play is Cantinflas, which is a famous comedy sequel of this poor man with his pants down his ass with suspenders and a little hat.

The TV is very small and it works with an antenna. It is also black and white.

We are told the rules:

- Listen to them.
- Do as they say.
- Stay together, keep the same pace.
- Don't turn back, no butts.

We are divided into three groups. Me and my sister are in the same one.

He is talking to us. He is the coyote, the person in charge of bringing us to the other side of the border. Group #1 is already on its way. They were on the move early in the morning. Each minute that passes is full of tension. The clock keeps ticking and soon it will be my turn.



A couple of hours later, a telephone is ringing. The coyote grabs the telephone. Then he says a code and his nickname. This phone is no ordinary phone. It is black, big, with a long antenna.

The coyote keeps talking on the phone. I'm just so amazed with this object. I've never seen one like that before.

He presses a button and puts it back into his pocket. He says, "Group #1 just arrived at the other side of the border. We have the green light."

It is our turn now.

We all get into a circle, hold hands and pray to the Lady of Guadalupe.

For an instant I feel like she is there, present, watching us, protecting us.

It's getting late and we should be going to sleep. Tomorrow it will be a very long day, and we need to rest. I go to sleep on an empty stomach.



I remember having this dream of being in space, while I'm floating and looking at the rings of Saturn, the gas storms on Jupiter, the Milky Way and the stars. It is just me alone, surrounded by the darkness and the glints of light from the stars that look so much like glitter as I am trying to reach for one.



"*Despiértate, Esperanza, levántate.*" Time to wake up. My sister looks ready. I don't know what time it is.

"Everybody, you are just allowed to bring one pair of clothes and one pair of shoes, nothing else." The coyote speaks.

I have to get ready. I brush my teeth. No time for a shower. I'm looking into my luggage, trying to find something to put on as I discover in a corner lots of old backpacks and

suitcases with clothes in them. They were left behind by people a long, long time ago, which is the same thing we are about to do. We are leaving our stuff behind. Maybe it'll help somebody else after us.

My sister Jenny is rolling the dollar money and important papers like her ID, phone numbers, and directions to addresses in case of an emergency. She bags it and saves it in her bra, just like mom and grandma used to do when going to the market. As she is doing this, avoiding anyone in the room seeing her, my stomach makes a loud noise. I'm really hungry. I think my sister hears it. She might be hungry as well. I haven't seen her eating. We haven't eaten anything.

She approaches the coyote. She is taking money out of her jeans pocket and handing it to him.

"Can you please get us something to eat? Please."

He says he will as soon as his partner comes back, because he can't leave us in the house by ourselves.

A while later they switch, and then he comes back with two big white shopping bags. There are two two-liter bottles of jarritos— Mexican soda, pineapple flavor—and inside the bags are tacos— Mexican tacos—he bought from the lady across the street. We have enough tacos to share with everybody. We share them with these poor and worried people and the coyotes. We all ate, I remember. Eating like six tacos by myself, they tasted so delicious.

We asked what they were made of because it didn't look like chicken or steak. The coyote said in a very suspicious way, "You really don't want to know. If I tell, you might stop eating them. All you need to know is that they are made of different parts of pork."

Oh well. It is not really a big deal. It tasted good and I'm not hungry anymore. That's what really matters.



Some time around noon he got a phone call. It's our turn. We've got to be ready, we are going NOW.

After two days of being inside the house with no communication with the outside world, the big wooden door opens and the light is bothering my sight. I step out. The sky is bright blue, sunny with big fluffy white clouds.

I started thinking of my mom, wherever she might be. She is looking at the same sky I'm looking at this exact moment. I feel she is with me, she is watching me. I picture her face in the sky looking down at me.

"I'm getting closer and closer to be with you Mami," I say to myself.

Outside on my left side there is the SUV in the driveway. I don't know if it's the same, but it looks so much like it.

"Get low, stay low, hurry, hurry get in!"

The door is open. I get into the SUV. This time they throw us the black hoods to put them on by ourselves. This has become so familiar to me, I am so used to it, I'm not scared of it anymore.

The doors close. Everyone is inside. I feel the air conditioner on my skin. I can hear the air exiting from the vents. I smell air freshener mixed with body odor all compressed inside this packed space.

The car is on the move. I can't see where we are going. All I hear is the motor running.

Sometime later a man says we can take the hoods off our faces. The car keeps moving. I'm confused. He says there is no more need to use them anymore.

The first thing I notice is the big and high steel fence to my right. That's the border. My eyes cannot believe this, so big and close. The street is deserted, no other cars present or people at this time. I keep staring at the wall all the time. The SUV keeps on moving. Some parts of the wall made of steel have graffiti painted on them, plastic flowers and crosses, missing people and wanted posters, and of course, warning signs in both Spanish and English.

The SUV keeps on moving, the driver changing gears, turning the steering wheel, until he stops and meets with a man inside a blue pickup truck. The engine never stops. The man in the pickup waves his hand and the driver keeps on

going. Nobody ever got out of the SUV, it was more like everything was well planned, so well organized to avoid any kind of problem.

The SUV stops, no buildings or houses around. I see through the windshield a very deserted area. The prominent color is brown.

The doors get unlocked and they open. We all start to get out. In the air, I smell erosion, dust, rust. The heat is so uncomfortable. I look around. It kind of looks like a junkyard, scrap metal every- where, cars parted out with just the frame itself.

There is a trailer house with no glass in the windows, no doors. It looks very old and uninhabited.

We are told to follow the coyote inside. While we are on the move a second man is sorting us.

We get inside. It is very dusty and dirty. Picture a big long rectangle, that's what it looks like. It is unfurnished. There is nothing inside.

The coyote hands us black plastic bags like the ones used for construction work, the heavy duty ones.

"Get naked. Everybody now undress!" The coyote has given us an order and we are supposed to follow it.

What does he mean "get naked," is he being for real? Right here, right NOW? His facial expression seems very serious.

He yells again and in a blink of an eye everybody starts to get naked.

I'm trying to focus on myself. I don't want anybody to see me naked. I was told my body is God's sacred tool, and so as I am getting undressed at the same time I am trying to cover myself from others. It isn't an easy task.

I don't remember being curious and trying to see others. I was so concentrated on myself. It was very awkward because we were all strangers with the same dream and situation.

Of course it all happened really fast.

The coyote gives each and every one of us wet suits to put on. They have a very strong smell like rubber. They are black and very difficult to put on. They cover us from our feet all the way to our necks. The zipper is on the back and it has a long string to help us unzip it by ourselves. It is uncomfortable to put it on, trying to fit in and stretch it at the same time. It feels very tight and makes me hotter than before.

Remember the bags we were given. We are to put the clothes we had on inside them, make a knot and double bag them. As I am doing this, the loud sound of a helicopter appears.

"¡Al suelo, todos al suelo rápido!" We all get on the floor without thinking of it twice.

Adrenaline starts pumping in my veins. I don't know what's going on. My instinct is to cover my head with my hands. As I'm doing this, I get a flashback from when I was little, living in Nicaragua and being so scared when earthquakes happened. Mami and Daddy would always be present to rescue me, pick me up, and I would feel safe with their arms around me.

The sound stops. The helicopter disappears. We are told every- thing is fine. We can get back up.

This time Mami and Daddy are not present, just my sister is with me. I say to myself, *I'm okay, you've got this, you can do this*, and somehow courage flows through my body.

The coyote is giving us instructions. Once we exit this trailer, we are told to follow his commands.

We should keep together. No one is to stay behind. If someone does so, we shouldn't go back and play hero. We should keep our bags close to our heads, watch very carefully where we are walking and listen.

The time has come. It's time to leave the trailer and start our quest. Everything seems to be under control.

The sun is bright. This wetsuit is making me sweat so much. It is too hot.

We start walking out, leaving the trailer behind us. We have a man guiding us up front and one behind us, making sure everything goes well.

At my left there is a huge concrete wall and straight ahead all I see is scrap metal, pipes, and these huge square-looking metal frames.

There is no way around it. We can only go through there, avoiding trying to get hurt, being careful. I am ahead, just behind our guide, because I am young, more active and flexible, and I can move faster.

All the time I am on the move, climbing the bars and going under the squares and below. I am always turning back and keeping an eye on my sister. She is pretty far back, and also she is kind of heavy. She manages to do well and never falls behind.

After a while we finally get to the other side and there is an opening in the wall. It isn't very big and it is made in a triangle shape. Nobody is missing. We are all together.

One by one we go through the hole in the wall and get to the other side.

There is water, a pond, a canal, kind of like a river, I can't tell exactly.

No grass, no trees. The hill on the other side of the river is mostly soil. Grass I guess is hard to grow in this unsuitable and brilliant weather.

With my bag in my right hand, and looking around me, I approach the edge of the pond. The coyote is already in.

“Do we have to get into the water?”

“Get in. Hurry up. Get into the water. jump,” he says.

“I don’t know how to swim.”

“Don’t worry. I’m here. It is not deep.”

No time to think about it or negotiate. It is out of the question.

I jump into the water. I don’t know how it happens. I think I bend my knees, because the water gets into my nostrils. My reflexes quickly kick in. I straighten my legs, get up and cough. There was no way I am going to let this water into my mouth. This water is not clean or treated. The water color is black! Black, can you believe such a thing, how dirty and unhealthy could it be?

“This is bad, this is really bad,” I say to myself.

It even smells funky.

I keep spitting because I have this nasty, horrible taste in my

mouth. Yuk . . . I think I didn't swallow. I spat and coughed just in time.

We need to walk to the hill, climb it and get to the other side of the metal fence—the border—we can't keep going through the water. It's blocked.

The coyote is the first one on the hill. The next is me. There is a thorny shrub on the way. My suit almost gets caught on it. It scratches my face. I don't notice it at the time until my sister pointed it out.

"What happened to you, Esperanza?" I touched my face and noticed blood on my hand. The salt from my sweat was burning into my scratched face.

Face to face with the famous fence, so high and impenetrable- looking.

At the bottom of the fence there is a hole dug into the ground. just like the one dogs dig in the backyard.

We get on all fours, and slide through the hole. My hair, my nails, my face are all dirty.

My sister does pretty well. She isn't so huge after all. We laugh, it's so funny! I'm so proud of her. She's keeping up with me. She is doing all this for me.

We jump back into the water. Ahhh, I can't stand the funky smell. It is a combination of motor oil and sulfur.

Time to keep on moving.

Every step I take, I keep on feeling metal objects and pipes on the bottom of my feet. I'm trying to be as careful as I can be because I don't want to trip and fall and repeat the same mistake from before—no, no, no way!

A while later, the coyote shouts, "Slow! Wait! You two go first. Keep your head out and keep the bags close to your heads. Next the three of you. Do the same and follow the current."

What's going on? What's happening? Something is wrong.

Curiosity is killing me, so I turn around and take a look, trying to see around me.

Surprise. I'm in shock.

"OH MY GOD—OH MY GOD! Did he see me? Can he see me? OH MY GOD—OH MY GOD!"

All these questions running in my head. I'm freaking out.

I've seen an officer up on the hill, standing in his brown, greenish uniform with a rifle around his shoulder and binoculars in his left hand.

For some inexplicable reason we didn't get in trouble. The bags were supposed to hide our heads and give the illusion of garbage bags floating on the black and dirty water. Apparently there is no danger anymore.

The coyote tells us to keep moving faster.



What just happened? Impossible! I'm sure he saw me back up there. Why didn't he do anything? We are so lucky! God is on our side.

We keep on walking in this black, dirty stinky water. Ahead of us there is a tunnel. As soon as I start walking into it, I notice plastic crosses, flowers, names written on the walls. The tunnel is kind of dark and I'm getting goose bumps.

"Do people die in here?" I ask myself.

At the other side of the tunnel, at the end, I see far away the end of this water. I can't wait to get there. I'm getting closer and closer . . . to where I really want to be, with my Mommy.

What's that foam on top of the water, white foam with brown stuff on top?

"What is this?"

At my right there's a three to four-foot high hill. It's pretty high. The coyote gives us the order to climb it. One of the coyotes is up there. The other one is still in the water.

"You go first," he says.

I'm the youngest, the lightest, so I go first. I'm trying and trying to get up there. I'm digging my nails into the ground,

digging and digging till I get a grip and try to push myself up. I feel hands holding me. The coyote is helping me and it's being so difficult, I'm feeling so, so heavy. I finally get up the hill . . .

I turn around. Now the only people in the water are my sister, the coyote, and another tall skinny man. They're trying to help my sister to get up. We are running out of time. A lot is going through my mind. These two men are trying to push my sister up the hill. What can I do? I lie down on the ground and start cheering for her, "Vamos, jenny, tu puedes!" Come on, jenny come on, you can do it!

I grab her arms and try and try. She is so heavy. Or maybe that was the moment that made it feel so crazily impossible. Between the two guys in the water pushing her up and me, she finally gets up the hill.

"Ahh," I gasp. We are still together.

"Rápido, desnúdense. Cámbiense la ropa." What? Here? Right now? They want us to get naked and get our clothes out of our bags and get dressed? If I did it once, I can do it again. It shouldn't be a problem. My sister is naked already. I'm trying to stay behind this little bush, which doesn't help a lot, because it doesn't even have leaves in it. I open my bag. OH MY GOD!

“What happened?” someone asks me. *My clothes are wet, my clothes are wet.* How did this happen? Now I remember that spiky tree back there when I was crossing the fence.

“You go last,” the coyote says. I’m scared, I’m last. We all have to jump this little four-foot wall. On the other side there is a big parking lot and a supermarket, with not a lot of cars around. I’m trying to rinse out my clothes as much as I can.

“*Dios mío, Dios mío, Dios mío,*” I keep saying to myself, just asking for a miracle. My clothes are still wet, but that’s not the worst of it, my sneakers are soaked and wet too. I’m in big trouble. They are not stupid—they are leaving me for last, just in case I get in trouble they—the ICE people (immigration)—will take me while all the other ones will be safe. Right now all I’m doing is praying and praying.

Finally after everybody goes into the supermarket it is my turn. Every step I take my shoes go squishy, squishy and leave a trail behind, which evaporates from the hot asphalt. I look behind. I look up front and I see the heat waves. That’s how hot it is. All I’m asking is, *Please God, dry my clothes.*

I walk into the supermarket, my shoes squeaking, everyone looking at me. I’m leaving the floor behind me wet. These people are looking at me. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to say. I keep my head up and just act like I’m buying some cookies. This American old couple looks at me like I’m an animal. I will never forget their looks and their heads shaking in disapproval.

One by one, two by two, we will start getting into a truck outside waiting for us. Again I'm the last one. Am I going to get in trouble at some point? I'm just waiting. It can happen, I know it is possible.

There is a gray pickup with a camper in the back where soon we will get in. We all are stacked, yeah, one on top of the other one. It is so hot. We're all sweating. We're all stinking, and on top of us they throw a heavy blanket.

OH MY GOD. It's getting worse. I'm about to get a heat stroke. I'm just trying to keep my breathing in sync.

"*Concéntrate*, Esperanza. *Concéntrate*." My sister is in the front passenger seat, while I'm burning from inside out. The pickup keeps on moving. I can't wait to get to wherever they are bringing us. My breathing becomes slower, and slower...