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# From the Darkness They Came

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[This piece is dedicated to the memory of Camila*, a devoted Guatemalan mother who sought justice, but was denied life. All stories in this title are true as related to me by the people affected. Names and some details have been changed to protect their privacy.]

Snow accumulated on the front steps of the school building that early morning on Keeler street. The scraping of shovels on sidewalks and hissing of CTA buses is how the west side wakes in the winter. When I first saw Jocelin, the temperature hadn't yet topped ten degrees, but the Chicago Public School system doesn't shut down unless it's colder than negative fifteen. It was my sixth year teaching, and by then I had learned the subtle signs of migrant families in distress, disoriented and cold in a world away from their own. What gave it away first was her clothes, worn across continents and climate zones. She wore cheap jean-print pants that cut off right above the ankle. Her short sleeved shirt revealed dark arms naked in the polar blast, hands and fingers moulded by years of hard manual labor, her chest recoiled from the martian cold of mid-winter Chicago as she hugged herself in pain. She and her girls had come a long way from Honduras. I hadn't yet noticed the ICE ankle brace locked into place; a clunky, black box protruding from her lower leg, marking her as a border crosser. Her accomplishment was Olympian; she traversed the Central American peninsula, all of Guatemala, up through Mexico and crossed the border into the United States on foot with her three young daughters, no coyote, cheating death in every nook. Many more of my students' families had crossed too, leaving everything behind, leaping into the unknown, living under the table, part of the eleven million undocumented people in the county.

These mothers despised the tracking devices around their ankles. "*Me siento como un animal,*" Geraldo's mom, Camila, said as she fantasized about cutting through its tough adjustable strap. It

humiliated her, like a leash, but she could be deported for removing it. She found that the local *tiendas* and *taquerias* would deny her employment for wearing it, no one wanted to draw attention from la migra. She begged me to help her find a job, "*tengo que pagar una deuda, si no mi familia en Guatemala sufrirá.*" Her words hung ominously, an unpaid debt meant blood, so I introduced her to Ana's mom, Gladys, who offered her fifty dollars a week to help out with a tamales food-cart in Humboldt Park. Their hands pressed masa with unstoppable clapping as they molded pockets of spicy green pork tamales sold for a buck each. Lines of construction workers with tired eyes lined up each dawn to buy them by the dozen, steaming from plastic bags. Camila learned how to make Mexican tamales in their straw-colored corn husks, distinctly different from the banana leaf ones she knew so well from Guatemala. They'd hand me a vegetarian batch, sometimes with piping hot *atole* to drink as payment for translating parent meetings and school functions. Many never went to school, but they'd be damned if they couldn't understand their kids' teachers.

It would be a few months before Jocelin returned to school again, and with three daughters. Her youngest was still too little for school, but Karina and Natalia had missed almost a year of education. She had been turned away from registering the girls after under-trained front office staff demanded proof of vaccinations for her kids before enrolling them. "*La migra me tomo los documentos*" she explained. In reality, because the family was in a temporary housing situation, they should've been registered without precondition. The girls unnecessarily missed months more of schooling as Jocelin took up work at different plastics factories in Chicago's west suburbs for 9 bucks an hour so she could pay for their shots. She rode two buses past abandoned warehouses, sidewalks lined with memorial candles, and the giant Coca-Cola plant on Division and Cicero, where the Humboldt Park and Austin neighborhoods meet. She went to different factories each night, depending on where temp work was needed. Everyone knew a friend or cousin who needed work. The only catch was a Social Security Card, which

could be bought for about 115 dollars by asking around. I warned Jocelin never to have it on her, especially when going to her immigration check-ins and court dates. "*Lo enterraré detrás de mi casa*" she assured me, despite the unthawed frozen ground, hard like cement. That little blue card stopped her family from starving, but would mean an accelerated lane to deportation if found. Using a falsified or copied Social Security card for work is a felony and is a common reason for expedited deportation proceedings. ICE agents look for these in every crevice of the body. She would be sent back to Honduras if they found it.

The girls were left alone in a shoddy apartment with unfinished inside walls as their mom worked each night. Her eldest daughter Karina was left in charge of the two smaller kids while their mom worked to afford vaccines, about 120 dollars per child. She was a thirteen year old with severe black eyes, a dark complexion like her mother's, and taller than most of the kids in her class. Her face carried a childish and whole-cheeked meekness, yet bore the worry and interruption of displacement. At school she had stomach pain and anxiety attacks, which worsened in her all-English classroom. She listened to a *musica cristiana* playlist on her mom's phone to calm down. I learned how to thoughtfully write her journal prompts, some topics were off the table. No talk of death, no talk of when she had crossed. Karina surprised me when I asked her what she wanted to work as, "*quiero estudiar idiomas*" she said, "*una lingüista*" I taught her. She had missed much of the school year, but was academically on par with most of her seventh grade class. Her sister Natalia was in fourth grade, also ahead of the class, and was learning English by the hour. She forged a friendship with a third grade girl from Guatemala with silver teeth and long black braids. In the dust-storm of displacement the kids forged a small place for themselves, whispering and giggling to each other. Feeling comfort for the first time in months, they slowly learned again how to be children.

During the prior school year in Honduras, members of a local gang demanded that Karina carry small bags of cocaine into her

school. They likely figured that a young girl with no criminal background would arouse less suspicion. Once home, she told her mom what happened, speaking only in a whisper as if the *pandilleros* were in her walls. Jocelin knew what turning down the *mara* meant. She was powerless to save her daughters as long as they stayed in Honduras. The country had devolved into a US sponsored narco-dictatorship under president Juan Orlando Hernandez, and she was on the bottom of it, as a nearly illiterate single mother born into ravaging poverty, and there was certainly no money to pay the police for protection. When Karina didn't show up to school for a week, two teen boys went to her house and marked the entire family for killing with three small squares spray painted on their corrugated wall. They also identified the house as one without a man. The images of her gutted and raped daughters must've done it. Jocelin decided in that moment to leave everything as it was, lock the doors, and head north. She gathered her life savings of about ninety dollars and burned a candle in prayer.

Camila and her sons Geraldo and Alejandro left Guatemala after her estranged husband pulled a gun on them and pressed a machete to her throat. Ten years of domestic abuse culminated one hot night in a poor neighborhood of Champerico, a gritty port city on the Pacific coast of Guatemala. He was arrested after shooting his gun into the air while trying to kill his oldest son, Alejandro. After hearing that a hired killer was after them, and that her abuser was out of jail, Camila agreed to pay a coyote 8,000 dollars for passage to the United States, reasoning that it was safer to be guided than to go alone. She had heard of the women and children kidnapped, robbed, murdered, raped, abandoned, and disappeared in the thick of the Sonoran desert, left for the vultures to devour. A different mom once told me that she crossed years ago and was kept in a crowded hut in the desert for days with a group of miserable and sick people. Outside there was a shallow pit with a woman's decomposing body in it, her black hair sprouting from the gravel and sand like a desert plant. In Guatemala, Camila worked as a mobile food vendor, frying potatoes and chicken on the street for ten quetzales a serving, and

on most days she just about broke even. The cost of her passage guaranteed her a life of debt. Poverty she could handle, a machete to her throat she could not.

They crossed into Ciudad Hidalgo, far south in the Mexican Chiapas state and were herded into the back of an open top semi-truck. Border guards were paid off to look the other way. Women were separated from men. "*Les rogué por mi hijo*" she told me, and eventually she was allowed to keep Geraldo with her. She thought of him as her sensitive boy, soft spoken and sincere. They traveled back roads for three days under the striking sun. The truck bounced along curved mountainous roads, edging over precipices, past rusted and ruined carcasses of cars and vans looted of anything that could be sold as scrap metal. They ate dust bouncing through Chihuahua state towards the border on their last evening, when the truck was pulled over by Mexican Federal Police who tapped their batons on the outside of the trailer creating a fearful echo like a massive broken bell which woke the weary bunch inside. Within striking distance of the US border, the police pulled them down from the truck, and lined them up along the highway in plastic zip tie handcuffs. They beat the driver ordering payment, "*peaje*" as they called it. Bribes of one hundred dollars were demanded for each passenger, which Camila did not have. A one-eyed stranger who also traveled north offered to pay a lesser amount for her and her kids. He gave a golden ring as payment for himself, which the police happily accepted. The truck was allowed onward, creaking towards the United States. The metalic trailer reflected the desert sun's last rays. It rolled on, full of desperation, rosaries, and last hopes. They came to a sharp halt, darkness meant time to walk. With small plastic bottles of soda and some warm water, blankets thrown over shoulders, sleeping toddlers, mouthed words of prayer, darkness deepened. The task now was to walk or to die.

Jocelin and her three girls left Honduras, passing through Guatemala on a series of old refurbished school busses painted bright like a sailor's tattoos. Tires hugged the edges of unguarded mountain roads shared with an assortment of basket-bearingwomen,

stray dogs and burning piles of trash. In Guatemala City, they disembarked the defeated bus, stinking of burnt rubber. The next bus to Huehuetenango and towards the Mexican border left at five a.m. the next morning. She laid her smallest one on a sheet of cardboard upon the steps of a church for the short night. After another day on the road, they transferred to an overweight pickup truck that poured black smoke into their fourth night of travel. Strangers nodded to each other in the dark, whispering just over golden teeth. The pickup truck took them into Mexico, from where many would never leave. In a smidgeon of a town in southern Chiapas, Jocelin spent her last few pesos on a stick of butter with a loaf of white Bimbo bread and a Coke. She poured half of the can into an unwashed baby bottle. Without a coyote to prod them along and with no money, the family temporarily settled in a slum outside of the city of San Cristobal to save funds for the final push north. The girls' father lived in Chicago. She'd never heard of the place, and hated the guy. She met an old lady whose sister had died, and had an unoccupied shed behind her own. The girls cleaned, pumped water and did chores as rent. Jocelin found early morning work unloading produce from battered trucks at a local market. She took her youngest with her, sick with diarrhea. The little girl slept beneath two chairs on a blanket by stocks of cabbages her mother would take home.

About a week into their stay at the old lady's house, Natalia accidentally broke their only coffee mug. On the floor a faded, and now parted flag of Texas. Karina decided to walk alone to a local *tienda* seeking a replacement but having no money. Long links of sealed chip bags hung from the gated shop. Customers ordered from outside, yelling through the metal bars. The local news ran on an unwatched fuzzy TV in the corner, showing the American president speaking on mute, then panning to a shot of the border wall under construction. Karina explained her situation to the store attendant, and promised that she'd pay the *tienda* back for an adhesive glue tube. The shop worker refused, saying it was too much of a risk for him. *"El negocio está muy mal,"* he lamented. A fat guy in a red and white soccer jersey stood behind her, smokinga cigarette. He

over-eagerly offered to pay for the tube of glue, shoving a bill into her hands. Karina stepped backwards onto a cat's tail which sprung up and bit her calf. When she fell to the floor, the man tried to take Karina over his shoulder, stumbling towards a waiting car, but she slipped out and bolted home, flying over puddles and agitating the local street dogs. Abducted women and children are often found on the side of highways, disgorged and mutilated beyond recognition.

The southern borderlands are as rugged as terrain comes in this world. Ravines and canyons create death traps, littered with the bodies of deflated and dried out animals and humans. Shredded backpacks and lost shoes show where bones can be found. Makeshift crosses are stuck into the crusted earth in memory of the disappeared, those thousands swallowed whole by the sun. Camila and her boys must've thought of *el norte* as a vast land of stinging bugs and needle bearing brush that'll rip your clothes off. The Arizona wind was brisk and unwelcoming as they stepped in a single file line across the endless landscape. "*Solo se camina al anochecer*" warned the man with a broom who swept away their footprints from the scrambly stone slope, trying to evade detection. Geraldo's older brother Alejandro followed the coyote closely, who scanned the sky for Border Patrol helicopters and surveillance drones. A pit of darkness grew behind them, those left behind stayed behind. Cheap cloth sneakers tore open on sharp stones and filled with pebbles and sand. Rattlesnake coils submerged with the vibration of their steps. Mouths and lips cracked and split and turned black. When the sun rose it came time to hide beneath dried mesquite brush, which offered almost no shield from the sun. Splinters gathered underneath fingernails, ants blistered the children's skin, women prayed to Jesus and an assortment of virgins in their impossible sleep. Geraldo expected his father to be hiding behind a cactus with a gleaming machete, waiting. The more experienced of the bunch warned them to keep their shoes on tightly the entire time, as running for dear life could be needed at any moment, "*perder un zapato aquí es una pena de muerte.*"

Karina's family made it to the western edge of Tijuana, a highly patrolled part of the border, without a chance of crossing undetected. They reached a slatted barrier that extended into the sea. Her could fit between two of the slats by turning sideways, but the gap was too narrow for the rest of the family. Jocelin pulled her daughter back to the Mexican side, and swore death rather than have her family separated. Further down the fence was the Pacific Ocean, where the slats extend about a hundred yards into the water. As if her motherly instinct could part an ocean, they stepped in, quickly losing footing. Her smallest daughter had never swam before, and small waves washed over her head. She climbed onto Jocelin's back, coughing salt water from her little nose, *"aguante mi amor, ya casi llegamos."* A current swept them to the last of the slatted barriers, where Jocelin hooked on, hugging up against its metallic edge. Slat by slat, with her kids holding onto her jacket, she dragged against the water and towards the shore. Her arms shook and her blinking eyes stung with salt. The family of four lay on the wet sand, cold, shivering, and in the US. A green striped Border Patrol SUV pulled up. Two agents stepped out, and strolled towards them. Jocelin cried in fear and relief. She was handcuffed as the agent spoke to her in short Spanish phrases she couldn't hear with her water clogged ears. Her daughters cried as the four of them sat on the hard bench seat behind a metal mesh that separated them from the driver, who blasted the AC and radio, indifferent to the otherworldly accomplishment he'd just witnessed. Karina wiped her mother's face down with her own wet shirt sleeve.

Within an hour, Jocelin and her girls were taken to an enormous gray warehouse surrounded with extensive fencing topped with razor wire, a private detention center run by the GEO Group. Wearing their same soiled clothing, each of their fingerprints were taken. Jocelin sat before a stout mustached man with a thin gold chain linked to his glasses. He spoke with heavily accented Spanish demanding her details, then printed a picture of her onto a long form in English, which she signed without understanding. She explained that she wanted to work and put the girls in school and that their

father lived in Chicago. She told them about the ganghunting them back home. By the end of the interview, her head was in her hands, crying only the tears a mother could cry. She spent three days sleeping on the floor so her youngest daughters could share a mat. The fluorescent lights never turned off and the human stench was so severe that guards could be heard retching beneath their facemasks. At all hours she could hear laughter, labored breathing, prayer, and tears. Some of the women screamed at the guards demanding access to showers and pleading for menstrual pads. On her fourth morning, an impatient Hispanic woman walked into the group holding cell and called her name. "*Te vas a Chicago. Alistate.*" Her ankle tracker was fastened as she sat self consciously in a plastic chair. "*Si te la remueves, te quito la familia. Te pongo en la prisión,*" said the officer. Together with about a dozen others, they were driven in a windowless, flat-nosed white bus to the local Greyhound bus station and were dropped off on the platform loading buses to Chicago. Upon noticing the situation, a Mexican grandma traveling with her grandson gave Jocelin a pair of children's sneakers, inadequate for the hard Midwest winter. "*Que Dios te bendiga*" they said to each other repeatedly, hand in hand. A metallic old Greyhound pulled up to the curb, stopping exactly behind a painted yellow stripe, hissing and vibrating noisily.

Camila and her boys stepped over the ruined border barrier in a place where the jagged metal had corrugated through. Barriers along this section of the border turn into rusted ruins within a few years, bent by the sun and pocked with bullet holes. They had walked all night, and well past dawn, breaking the cardinal rule about moving during daylight hours, risking capture or death by heatstroke. But water was low and the need to arrive was pressing on their throats. They took their first steps into the country and walked towards a thin line of dust in the distance. They shuffled towards a brown concrete building with a parked van outside, as the sound of an AC box buzzed like a million flies. For those still walking, the need for water outweighed the fear of capture or return.

The outpost-turned-prison was frigid, and neon white lights

spotlighted the bare inside of the building. They called it *la hielera*, the icebox. Camila trembled, squinting her eyes as if in a mirage. There were two fenced off sections with a gate between them. Men to the left, women to the right, without exceptions. After an initial interview with an intake officer, Camila was given an extra-large manila envelope for her growing pile of immigration paperwork and hotline information she couldn't read. She was taken to the women's side and Geraldo and Alejandro were taken to the men's. Three days of crying and begging ensued. Even the coyote hadn't separated her from her little one she thought. On his first night, Geraldo developed a fever and was left to lie on a concrete bench, shivering until lunchtime the next day. Camila got word of her son's condition from a man she recognized from the truck in Mexico, who shouted the news through the gate. Alejandro had not wanted to tell her. She begged guards for medicine, with her hands facing upwards as if in Sunday mass. Geraldo didn't get medical attention or a single change of clothes during those three days. "*Ni un Panadol le dieron*" she said to me.

Alejandro was jailed with his brother during those three days in detention, but instead of being released to travel to Chicago with his family, he was transferred to the Otero County Immigration processing center in New Mexico, where there were dozens of hunger strikes in protest of terrible conditions. He had recently turned eighteen and would be deported back to Guatemala alone. Camila and Geraldo were dumped at a Greyhound bus station with a plastic bag containing all of their belongings, their shoes without shoelaces. A Catholic organization waiting for regular groups of immigrants coaxed the two into a van with hot chocolate and doughnuts and drove them to a homeless relief center run out of a church basement. They gave them two bus tickets to Chicago, seran wrapped sandwiches and a small pocket bible in Spanish. Alejandro was imprisoned for almost a year before being deported back to Guatemala alone. Camila and Geraldo were dumped at a Greyhound bus station with a plastic bag containing all of their belongings, their shoes without shoelaces. A Catholic organization waiting

for regular groups of immigrants coaxed the two into a vanwith hot chocolate and doughnuts and drove them to a homeless relief center run out of a church basement. They gave them two bus tickets to Chicago, seran wrapped sandwiches and a small pocket bible in Spanish. Alejandro was imprisoned for almost a year before being deported back to Guatemala without his family. He called his mom and threatened suicide in his jail cell. Camila was emotionally wounded, and would cry on some afternoons when she picked up her son from school. *"Nunca pensé que me quitaran mi hijo,"* he clapped her palms against her eyes as if to stop them from falling out. "*Solo Diosito me impide de suicidarme*" she said to me once. Roughly a year later Alejandro would try for the border again, making it undetected, but he would never see his mother alive again.

Upon stepping outside the Greyhound station where the Eisenhower Expressway unloads traffic into the Downtown Chicago Loop, the harsh air seemed to suck smoke from Camila's nostrils and mouth. She arched her back and looked up to the great frigid skyscrapers; iron, steel and brick immersed in low-hanging clouds. It made her dizzy. Too far from Guatemala she thought. Eventually, her brother picked them up in a paint splattered work van with ladders fastened on top that squeaked when he hit potholes. Camila walked into the front office of the school wearing an ankle tracker, with an unsure adolescent son behind her, head bowed, hair gelled in a wave. I assured her that I'd help Geraldo learn English, and that they'd get all the help they needed, an impossible promise. Geraldo's trauma was quiet and internal, not like the outward messy kind I'd seen in other kids. He'd speak only in short, canned responses and offered plenty of silence which carried a weight, retaining a pool of memories, like a tired old man. His mind's eye saw the violence, a dead horse dried out in the desert, his father drunk with a machete, a gun fired into the night, the separation from his brother, the fever of fleeing home suddenly. They shared an unfurnished basement unit, sleeping on blankets on the floor. When a few of Geraldo's teachers got word of this, we donated the family mattresses and a couch, untethering the furniture from car roofs before heading to school

in the earlyin the early morning. There were also online fundraising campaigns that helped them pay rent and stay housed. Against school district policy, I drove both moms to the Catholic Charities of Chicago downtown relief center. Beneath granite buildings which echoed from the roaring of train cars flying overhead, we escaped into the homeless shelter where both moms were given shoes and frozen groceries for a week. An old man wearing multiple layers limped by, his pockets full of plastic bags. This is where Chicago's tired and forgotten sought refuge on the coldest nights, when mornings came with frozen bodies found beneath viaducts on Lake Shore Drive.

After months of waiting, Camila and Geraldo were given an appointment with an immigration attorney working from a Vietnamese community center in the Uptown neighborhood on the North Side of Chicago. I decided to drive them to avoid them missing their appointment. At a rushed intersection, my car sputtered and died. I pushed it to the corner, and both of them stepped out onto the sidewalk. I felt an all-compelling force in that moment to ensure that they arrive at their appointment regardless of cost or effort. I would not abide by a world where mother and child could go so far to seek peace, only to find an old Elantra in their way. I called her a ride, assuring her that I'd make my way there once my car was towed. I then called the legal clinic to update them, and they told me they didn't have any Spanish speakers available to translate. Refusing to reschedule, I translated the first half of their asylum application via speakerphone in a shared Uber. Once I arrived, I translated Camila's interview to an enthusiastic young lawyer who mulled over the details of the domestic abuse, typing away notes about the regular beatings she'd withstood for years, the unspeakable things her kids had witnessed. Camila's asylum case was eventually picked up by a pro-bono attorney working with the National Immigrant Justice Center. But about a year later, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Camila contracted the virus and died suddenly, leaving behind her teenage boy, engulfed in a world of uncertainty and loss. Her family's wishes for a dignified burial in Guatemala have been made impossible due

to the pandemic, and as of May 2020, the issue of Geraldo's guardianship is yet to be resolved.

Jocelin's family of five was already crammed into a small, unfinished apartment when a second family of three they knew from Honduras moved in. Jocelin welcomed help with the rent, and especially from a fellow Honduran mom. The new family arrived late into the school year; a ragged-voiced woman with blotches around her pupils, a fair skinned and illiterate third grade girl with a voice like her mom's, and a dumpling of a little boy who'd missed kindergarten. The six kids slept in rows of donated mattresses and blankets on the floor, with the two smallest ones sharing the couch. Waking hours were hectic, children cried, toys were thrown, and Karina watched the bunch while parents worked nights and weekends. The desperate arrangement of eight people sharing the apartment became unbearable. On the first day of summer break, Jocelin's estranged husband and the landlord demanded that they leave, threatening to throw their garbage bags of donated blankets and used toys out into the smog of Chicago summer. I got a call from Karina who'd taken her mom's phone and whispered to me that they had nowhere to go, and that her parents were fighting. Jocelin screamed into the rising heat about the girl's father dumping them into homelessness, enough to cause him shame as neighbors excoriated him from their porches and open windows. They had until the end of the month he decided. That was the very last time I spoke directly to that family, although I did learn that Jocelin was denied pro-bono legal representation for her asylum case, likely because she couldn't document the danger they faced back home, the way Camila had. They'll most likely be deported back to Honduras, as so many before them. I must entertain both realities; that Natalia, Karina, their baby sister and mom are safe, and eating dinner together under a shared roof, that girls are in school, building their lives to be different. I also hear them crying somewhere dark and filthy, where violence is king, and the past repeats itself. I see Geraldo building from his mother's death, a brave young immigrant, completing his schooling and fighting like hell for his people. But too, he may end up back in the deportation machine, sent back to Guatemala without a

mother or father.

That school year made me quit. My second graders had grown tall, and soon had to apply to high schools. Some of the kids flourished, others disappeared, and at least one died. And now I'll never fully know how things turn out, and I must leave those threads untied. These hundreds of children in my mind carry on in some place and time. With them they carry the history to which the adult world submitted them; the vile legacy of American moral, spiritual, and societal corruption, the weaponization of children, the singling out of women and girls, the violation of the basic human tenet that children are sacred, and that any civilization that forgets is doomed to its own barbarous failure. From the darkness they came, but with light on their shoulders. The brilliance of those children may fix us, mending where we were corrupted, forging an indisputable clarity, so that we may understand forever that children and families are never illegal, and that every fiber of the shared human future depends on the smallest baby, feverish and alone, in the most crowded border prison camp of our era.