

THE
COYOTE'S
BICYCLE

The Untold Story of Seven Thousand Bicycles
and the Rise of a Borderland Empire

KIMBALL TAYLOR



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For Angelene

I want to extend special thanks to José Antonio Castillo Garcia, Dan Watman, and Ben McCue, without whose collaboration and generosity of spirit this book would not have been possible.

A Note to Readers:

Names have been changed and identities have been obscured in order to protect migrants and the smugglers who cross them.

“The bicycle will be found,” said the Sergeant, “when I retrieve and restore it to its own owner in due law and possessively. Would you desire to be of assistance in the search?”

—FLANN O’BRIEN, *The Third Policeman*

Prologue:

EVERYBODY LOVES A BIKE

This is the story of several thousand bicycles that made an incredible journey. They were very ordinary, used bicycles. Mountain bikes, with their knobby tires and sturdy frames, made up a large percentage of the total. Some of these sported shocks and disc brakes—accessories you might think necessary for a trip of this distance and nature. But there were also fragile-looking ten-speeds, three-speeds, and fixed-gears. I once glimpsed a pink-and-purple girl's bike with a small white seat and frills at the handle grips. Heavy American beach cruisers rolled on comfortable balloon tires. English roadsters and Dutch *omafiets* suggested sleek market runs down grass-lined lanes. The bikes were made in France, the United Kingdom, the United States, Italy, Japan, Indonesia, Vietnam, Taiwan, and China. They were adorned in all manners, but the consistent theme was an admirable patina of road wear, rust, dings, dents, and scrapes. The seats and handle grips took the shapes of the bodies that touched them. Yet there were bikes with no seats, no brakes. Some bore labels of origin—shop emblems, registration stickers, or evidence of sale at auction by a police department. In a superstitious, totem-like fashion, an unknown cyclist had drawn simple, elegant waves along the

black rubber sidewalls of an unremarkable bike's tire—giving it the blessing of oceanic drift. There was another cycle I remember because of its brilliance: a classic lowrider fashioned from a boy's Schwinn, with the "ape-hanger" handlebars, crushed velvet banana seat, gold piping, and gold-colored rims. The bike lay on its side, spokes sparkling in the dirt like a roulette of icicles. Many of the bikes fell into the category of "utility," a style that peaked in the 1960s and conjured the image of a straight-backed professor pedaling between ivy towers. There were a number of rugged BMX racing bikes that evoked sunny suburban lots and dirty socks. A few high-tech-looking road bikes and classic gems turned up, but soon vanished. I never saw a tandem bicycle, but could easily have missed it. A high-wheel would have been impossible. Clown bikes, depending on personal definitions, abounded. Most of the bikes were not worth much. Some of them were missing important parts. All of them had generated thousands of dollars in their life spans. They had been snatched up by criminals, confiscated by police, purchased by human smugglers, dumped in a swamp, sold to a movie studio, contracted to the military, utilized in war training, co-opted in prisoner reform, donated to orphans, sold at swap meets, cycled and recycled again and again.

Not one human being who influenced the course of the bikes understood their full trajectory or end destination. No one knew how far they had traveled in a group. Few who handled or pedaled them were aware of their specific bike's origin, its next step, or even its next owner. The bikes were not invisible, but at important stages, they were unseen.

The journey was not made entirely on their own two wheels.

The bicycles rode in trucks packed tight alongside boxes of AK-47s, grenade launchers, and pyrotechnics. They shipped out to a small, craggy, restricted island off the coast of California called San Clemente. They were crammed into the backs of border-enforcement vehicles.

They flew to the Hawaiian archipelago. They drove north to Canada, east to Texas, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Virginia. The bikes rolled over the Mexican border powered by the feet of illegal immigrants. They rolled under the seats of actors and horse trainers and pumpkin farmers. Convicts rode them in prison. Real soldiers preparing for battle in Afghanistan took time out to pop wheelies on them. Finally, after years of service, the bikes again coasted under the feet of regular citizens, boys and girls. The bikes are out there now, still rolling. You might own one yourself. Most of their riders have no idea how well traveled their well-worn wheels really are.

When I tell the story of the bikes, listeners invariably ask, “How do you know?” or “Who arranged it all?”

To the first question, all I can say is that I happened upon a large pile of ordinary bikes in an unlikely place, under bizarre circumstances. Everybody likes bikes, I’ll say, and when I saw this motley collection of tubes and cranks and frames and wheels—the bicycle equivalent of a shipyard after a hurricane—I discovered that I liked these bikes most of all. I am a person attracted to thrift stores and yard sales. The more battered and unloved an item’s appearance sparks an equal and opposite sentiment in me. But I wasn’t the only one. A small, feverish cadre of people—ranchers and farmers and alley-trawlers—drawn by the mysterious arrival of bicycles in the bushes, in the river, abreast trails, by the roadside and under bridges, bicycles that poured down with a winter rain that seemed never to end, stopped to pick them up without knowing why. Or, maybe, even caring. Lucky finds don’t inspire deep inquiry.

I, however, am also attracted to a yarn, to irony, circularity, and meaning. It is a documentary flaw, I know. Phenomenal events take place without portent or meaning every day. And so, despite the mystery of the bicycles in plain sight, it is understandable that not many who wheeled their prizes homeward ever bothered to ask *why—why here?* A front-page article in the city’s only major

newspaper reported the event but never asked as much—emitting only a “Huh, look, a bunch of bikes.”

And yet, varying ideas of value just might help answer the question of “Who arranged it all?” Because, maybe, we all did. A pile of discarded cars is an eyesore called a junkyard. The last time I entered a junkyard, I needed a rear turn-signal assembly for a 1982 Nissan extra-cab. I didn’t look around or admire the other clunkers. Bikes, however, belong to that class of essentially elegant innovations of travel—an airship, an airplane’s wing, a sailboat’s hull, a keel, a kite, the fin of a surfboard, a bicycle in motion. Bicycles execute the will-powers of the people who buy, find, steal, trade, and use them; they mark the memories of the people who love them. I like to think that it was the curious sight of ownerless cycles descended from nowhere that sits at the heart of this tale—because suddenly they became available to the will of whoever came upon them next; suddenly their destinies were without limit. I didn’t collect the bicycles myself. I merely wanted to know where they came from and where they were going and how far they could get. I began to understand the nature of their remarkable journey only by seeking out, speaking to, and investigating the people who had handled them one to the next.

At a certain point, as I charted the expanse of the bikes’ adventure, I tried to draw rude diagrams and flow charts. I once tried to draw a map of the journey, but this was difficult; I needed to illustrate things as big as the world yet include details as small as a ditch. In truth, I felt as though I’d caught the tail of a comet, all of the glinting and glittering bits shooting past in the darkness and somehow the very trailing end slowing just enough to get me all tangled up in it. The question of the bikes cost me a good few productive work years when I could least afford it. Following worthless bikes, I was warned a number of times, could cost me everything. On a couple of occasions, I was told, “Don’t end up with your head in a bucket,” and “You might end up off in the desert somewhere.” This

was due to the fact that on my own, I was unqualified to sniff this story out. My Spanish is questionable. I'm not a criminal. I'm not affiliated with the military. My motives to expose the story ran at odds with the interests of those who knew the story best. There was no way I could ever keep up with either the speed or trajectory of this comet. It was headed for strange places and worlds that wouldn't admit a regular, unassociated citizen like myself.

So on the trail, I made unlikely allies: movie makers, a Border Patrol agent, a Homeland Security investigator, a couple of Navy SEALs, a few ranchers, some environmentalists, human rights activists, human smugglers—people Mexicans generally refer to as “*mal-andros*” or bad guys—bike freaks, social agitators, artists, architects, academics, and people obsessed in various ways with small aspects of a story I couldn't always explain. Everybody likes bikes, was my simple premise. Everybody likes to talk about bikes. And to get this story right, I had to believe that people like to talk about bikes to the extent that they'll talk about them even while they're stealing them, fencing them, breaking them down into sellable pieces.

The most critical part, however, the questions of where the bikes I was interested in had come from, and how they ended up in ownerless piles, was only answered after I made an alliance that became a friendship, with a fifty-year-old, ex-con deportee who worked at the public bathrooms in Tijuana and lived in a fake ship. Our meeting was not preordained, but it was meaningful in a way that defied logical connections. Because, as it turned out, El Negro was not just a man with entrée but an extraordinary investigator who delved into the border slums. And from his underworld interviews—with the dons of Tijuana smuggling and itinerant cycle mechanics alike—I was able to piece together the story of El Indio, an impoverished child of *campesinos* who walked out of his tiny Oaxacan village, arrived at *la frontera*, and built an empire on the strength of a single foolhardy idea.

Abandoned bicycles hold the unique ability of reflecting the desires of their finders. They are equally junk and prizes. Art and vehicles. They move people and goods and plans along. They become machines in the service of their riders' willpowers and destinies. By following the mass of these bikes that caught my eye even as they rested, I thought I'd discover just where that collective willpower and destiny led.

Everybody likes bikes.

1

We know that the important early bicycle was a milkman's bike, and that it was saddled with a large wire basket designed to hold fifteen-liter milk canisters. It wasn't likely the first bicycle in the village, but it was the only one in living memory. And aside from Don Ricardo's ancient tractor that, even in good times, none of the farming families could afford to rent, the bicycle was the only mechanized vehicle for many miles around.

Pablo, or Pablito as he was known at age twelve, woke every morning at four with the cackle and crow of the village roosters. By then, his mother had already been awake and working for an hour or more. Her quiet shuffling was an integral part of his morning. Like many of the other families, Pablito's lived in a one-room wood-and-thatch house with a dirt floor. There was no sink. There were no cabinets or bureaus. The stove consisted of three stones enclosing a small fire. In cool weather, this was the heater. And still, the home wasn't as cramped as it might have been if his two older brothers and two older sisters hadn't, one by one, as each came of age, walked out of their small Oaxacan pueblo on the thin, rutted road, and headed off into *el Norte*.

For breakfast, Pablito was given a few tortillas left over from those made the previous evening on the *comal*. Clutching the now

cold tortillas, he stepped out into the dark morning and made his way across the yard to a spindly ranch gate. It was constructed of tree limbs and wire, and was attached to the gatepost by leather hinges. Pablito had known the cow whose pieces of hide formed those hinges. Every morning Pablito waited there, next to the gatepost, for the arrival of his best friend, Solo.

The fresh air, the smell of dew on the earth, and the rich scents of the surrounding mountain forest all mingled in the predawn. Pablito listened to the noises of his village as each of the families, 150 residents in all, began to wake and prepare for the day. Morning fires flickered here and there in a rolling landscape that held cold, wet vapors like little clouds in the folds and depressions. When Solo arrived in the bluing light, Pablito hardly had to look.

We know that each wore leather huarache sandals with soles made from car tires. Their patched, loose-fitting clothing had been handed down by Pablito's brothers and Solo's one male cousin who was also in *el Norte*. Sometimes it was very cold as the boys hiked an hour or more into the mountains. At that time of day, before the sun broke above the peaks, the shroud of green forest looked black.

In the foothills, they approached the tree line and fanned out to scour the forest floor, gathering pieces of dry wood. Each boy needed enough to last his family's fire the entire day and following morning. As the season wore on, the boys walked deeper and deeper into the trees to gather the necessary amount. They filled slings, simple frames formed from sticks. A cloth headband was attached, and when they slipped it over the crown of their heads, it relieved some of the load from their backs. They bent low and heard the sounds of small life scuttling all about. There were skunks and fox and anteaters and snakes. Leaves shook above, too, as birds and squirrels passed through the branches. Teardrop oriole nests hung from the outer limbs of the great guayacan tree like rattan lanterns marking the way. Now and again Solo fabricated noises, pitching sounds or deep gravelly groans.

Or he claimed to see things, like the swish of a tail or any slight hint at the presence of the *onza*—a large cat related to the jaguar that few in the village had ever seen. In the stories, the toothy creature was sometimes said to be yellow with spots and sometimes black. When people didn't know what they'd seen, they generally called it a *tigre*, the catch-all word for any big feline. And it was this image that Solo relished. He'd played this teasing trick with the noises so often that it wasn't funny anymore so much as tradition.

Of the two boys, Pablito was slightly shorter. The village was known to produce small people, so minute differences in height were noticed. Solo could comfortably carry a full sling of wood. Pablito took pains to match the size of Solo's load, plus a stick or two. He rarely spoke on their descent into the village, perhaps due to the discomfort—the cloth headband put a strain on the neck—but Mixtecs were well known for their reserved demeanor. Those from other provincial states believed Oaxacans to be tough, perceptive, and cunning, but they were also notorious for masking these qualities with a kind of rural quiet city people sometimes took for ignorance.

Not Solo, though—he was a talker. If Pablito didn't care to chat, Solo didn't mind carrying both sides of the conversation. As he left the tree canopy, the words seemed to awaken. The boys squinted into the rising sun. The vapors and mists were gone and the blue land they'd left below in the darkness was now a patchwork of deep greens and browns. Gray trails of trash fires lifted column-like into the air, and Solo's need to talk seemed to rise with the temperature.

"My friend," he said, "I know you're always caressing your dream of one day going to the United States and working alongside your brothers. I will ask God to help satisfy this yearning because I know you are too proud. You believe He thinks this dream a little piece of nothing, but maybe not."

A yellow-bellied flycatcher darted from bush to bush before them. A hawk wheeled in the sky above. This was not a new

conversation for the boys, but one that evolved in the telling and the things they'd learn from those who returned or who passed through. Fathers and sons tended to leave one at a time, and once established, they'd send money and, eventually, send for the others. Women composed most of Solo's family, and he hadn't heard from his cousin in a long time. So it was expected that Pablito would go first—at the request of one of his brothers, perhaps. “And someday in appreciation of my assistance,” Solo said, “you will help me to get to the United States as well.”

This had always been the plan.

Solo stopped to adjust the sling on his back, and then he hurried to catch up to Pablito, who never dallied. When the idea of leaving was talked through, it often seemed too big an undertaking. The village was an entire world where everyone knew and helped each other. Nearly everything outside of it was foreign to the boys. At these times, Solo would apply subtle brakes to his narrative—lest Pablito up and depart before both of them were grown and ready. “Even though you hold on to your dream,” Solo pointed out now, breathing more heavily as his full sling weighed on him, “you also love your family. Your grandfather is old but he's strong and he knows a lot of things.”

Solo could think of three aspects of Pablito's life in the village that might keep his friend around: the boy's unique connection with his paternal grandfather, the bountiful wildlife and natural beauty that surrounded them, and the best time of their day, when Pablito and Solo set out on the milkman's bicycle. “Those are some things you love,” Solo said.

Pablito didn't agree, or even nod. He didn't shake his head or avert his eyes. He was simply quiet in the rhythm of walking the hard-packed path with the sandal soles made of car tires.

They came to a familiar curve in the trail and discovered that a dark bull had taken up a position directly on the track. To the left

stood a marshy papaya grove where two pale heifers hovered like ghost cows in the deep greenery. To the right ran a wire fence covered in brambles. The boys were about as tall as the wheels on an oxcart. Even if it were not angry but merely startled, the bull could trample Pablito and Solo. It settled its great bulbous eyes on them and shuffled its hind legs around until its whole mass pointed at them like a compass needle. It became clear that the animal would not move without prodding. The boys whooped and whistled. Solo raised his arms to appear taller. Pablito then bent and grabbed some fallen papayas—he instructed Solo to do the same—and they lobbed the green fruit into the path of the bull until, as if receiving the message after some delay, it shuffled off into the grove and casually joined its mates.

The boys continued on. Eventually, Pablito said, “My brothers sent some good money this time.”

“*Verdad?*” Solo asked.

Pablito didn’t answer. He’d never lied to Solo.

“It’s a good thing,” Solo said. “Maybe your father will rent Don Ricardo’s tractor and working the fields will be a snap.”

But Solo knew that Pablito’s father would not rent the tractor, that he would harness the oxen as always. Remittances like these were coveted—to build new rooms onto shacks, for example, sometimes even of cinder block. A family could invest in a gas generator or a horse or a cow. Regrettably, overdue maintenance had a way of diminishing hopes for wholesale improvements. Thatch roofs needed to be replaced every eight years. And at seven pesos for each palm frond, even if friends and neighbors contributed their labor, the costs could add up. As often as not, however, the patriarch of a family would simply drink the money away.

Pablito waved off the idea of renting the tractor.

“So what will your family do with the *plata?*” Solo asked.

“They say, maybe, the school,” Pablito answered.

Their grammar school education was coming to an end. This was the limit for the majority of villagers, as families had to pay out of pocket for anything further. Transportation to the school was another challenge. Pablito might have hesitated to mention the possibility because it was no secret that Solo's family, despite the boy's desire to attend, wouldn't be able to pay. Solo and his siblings sometimes sustained themselves on local fruit for days, and occasionally went to sleep with nothing in their bellies. Still, Solo's optimism didn't wilt. "The lucky ones get to go," he said. "We just need to get lucky."

The boys footed it down out of the hills. Open land gave way to fenced sections. They came upon the small outlying ranches where scarecrows commanded the fields. Soon, they separated to drop the firewood at their respective houses. A farmer worked a light green plot of sesame in the distance, but not many of the men remained this time of year. A cadre of women would be down at the little river, standing to their knees in the brackish water, scrubbing laundry. The lady standing farthest out handed a clean article off to the next woman, and then a third set the pieces to dry over bushes, warm cobbles, and branches. Solo, whose walk home passed that way, always noted the conversation. Occasionally he re-created it for Pablito upon rejoining the path to the dairy: "They're talking about washing machines again," he said. "As if it's something new. Everybody knows about washing machines."

Husbands and sons returning for Christmas often rode with workmates in secondhand cars acquired in *el Norte*. They'd drive night and day to get home, sputtering through the badlands of the interior and over the sierra. Big towns and notoriously dangerous regions were avoided. Both bandits and police were a concern, as the workers often packed the autos with goods too expensive or unavailable in Mexico. The women dreamed of conveniences, but neither the cars nor large appliances ever entered the village. The men, likely

as not, would hike in, bearing used clothing but first-rate baseball bats for the village team.

“When we are old men, Pablito,” Solo would say, “the river talk will still be about washing machines.”

The milkman's bicycle was a very sturdy, very old utility bike with solid rubber tires, two parallel top tubes, and wide, level handlebars. The steel basket was mounted astride the front wheel. A metal dipper with a hooked handle hung from the bike frame. When the boys stopped at a home, one called for the proprietor and the other lifted the dipper and measured the correct amount of milk from the canisters. The bike's seat was made of petrified leather and wobbled on worn springs. Fenders, front and back, helped protect the dairy and the riders from mud splatter in the rainy season and loose rocks in the dry. The rear axle bolts held little posts threaded on either side, which the boys called *diablitos*, or little devils. One kid could stand over the rear tire with a foot on each of these *diablitos* and balance while holding on to the bike rider's shoulders. If done right, the sensation was like flying.

Braking, however, was a matter of art. The milkman's bicycle boasted only a front brake, and with the weight of the load over the fore wheel, even a modest squeeze could send the boys over the handlebars. So, whoever was in back had to apply the sole of his huarache to the rear tire. The foot quickly became hot, and the *diablito* rider would switch to the other foot. Usually, this was Solo's position. Pablito would yell, “Brakes,” and Solo would lift his skinny leg like a flamingo and place it on the tire.

The dairy farmer was not young, but from his choice of deliverymen, his appreciation for youthful adventure was evident. His cheeks were deeply lined and he wore his graying hair in a short pompadour that shook as he worked and made his proclamations. And he always made proclamations when filling milk canisters and loading them

into the basket. In many ways, globalization was coming to rural Mexico. There were trade agreements and monetary reorganizations and food and currency crises like the Tequila Crisis and the Tortilla Crisis, the demand for imports increasing even as corn prices tumbled, all putting pressure on small farms and businesses like the milkman's, and always with the same result: people left the village.

The boys held the bicycle by the handlebars, and listened.

"There you go, men," said the milkman finally, as he lifted the canisters into the basket. "That should be enough. Don't worry about the Garcia house. They left yesterday."

Pablito made a low whistle, slipped a leg over the frame, and mounted the saddle.

When the canisters were full, the bike was heavy. Pablito stood on the cranks and pushed with all he had. It was a matter of will to keep it righted at the slow revolutions he could muster. Solo jogged behind to give the occasional push. In this way, Pablito eventually gained momentum. Solo followed, and when the bike reached the proper speed, he hopped up onto the *diablitos*. The milkman waved them off.

It wasn't a small thing that the bicycle offered the sensation of balance without a foot or the hoof of an animal, without a single living part having to touch the earth in any way. The stability was in the movement, and the movement was like a trick. Nothing else in their experience offered such a sensation. When Pablito and Solo experienced flying, in some very real ways, it was. The falling was real too. The roads of their village weren't much more than ox trails cut by rivulets and irrigation ditches. When they'd started this job, the milkman offered the usual tips of bicycle instruction: maintain your speed, steady your hands, keep your eye on the road. The bike will follow your gaze. Then the milkman simply walked off to tend to his cows. In truth, Pablito and Solo had taught each other to ride, one running alongside the other and spreading his hands as if to

catch a fall. This hadn't been easy on the rutted roads and trails. The bike's bent kickstand and brake lever were proof of the challenges. And yet, they were the only two kids in the village who knew how to ride at all.

We know the delivery vehicle also provided something special that, maybe, another bike couldn't—unquestioned entry into the lives of their neighbors. The boys rolled into the yards, barns, up to the homes of any villager. When Pablito or Solo gave a kick to a tire-chasing dog, no one scolded them. Permission was never required to open a gate or to cross a field. They absorbed the news, attitudes, and gripes of the families in wisps and snatches of conversation. They could appraise their neighbors' crops and yields, and thus their futures.

By the time the boys made their stop at Pablito's house, if there was any news to share, his grandfather would be there to listen. The gate was always open and with Solo on the handlebars, Pablito bumped one wheel and then the other into and out of the dirt sluice that lined the property, steered between the gateposts, and rolled into the yard. A rooster and some hens peeled away. The bike came to a crisp stop and Solo popped off the bars, landing on his feet. Pablito attempted to use the kickstand out of habit, even though it was bent beyond repair, but finally laid the bike on its side.

"*Dime*," the old man said—tell me. He rested in a threadbare hammock tied between posts under the thatch porch. He was wide-shouldered, round, and powerful. His bright eyes peered from under a straw hat set askew and his hands were clasped over a bright T-shirt celebrating an American sporting event. This was tucked into dirty trousers.

"They're talking about the May rain and about corn and washing machines and the United States," Pablito answered.

"The Garcia family left for *el Norte*," added Solo. "They are going to Kentucky to twist the necks of chickens in a factory building as

big as the village. The hens live in tiny boxes stacked up to a metal ceiling—higher than the trees. The cousin, Yonny, he works there now and he told Garcia there's lots of work. So they left."

"Is that so? And how will they get to Kentucky?"

"They took the bus," said Solo.

"But how will they cross?"

"I don't know."

"In my day, we were invited."

Pablito's *abuelo* tended to brag in the manner of old men, mentioning just a few succinct facts that suggested a not-too-obvious elevation above most others—an attitude he would naturally deny if confronted. In this case, he referenced his involvement in the Bracero Program, a guest worker agreement struck between the United States and Mexico during World War II. That history was lost to the boys, however. They merely looked at the man.

"These days, to cross, the people associate themselves with *mal-andros*," he said, "and who knows what they'll get for their efforts."

"They say, maybe, ten dollars an hour," said Solo.

The *abuelo* invited them to sit and be educated. In the shade of the porch, they shared a dish of cold beans and salsa. Afterward, they said good-bye to the old man, mounted the bicycle, and pedaled off to the dairy. They parked the bike in the barn and draped a dirty piece of canvas over it. Then the boys walked to the schoolhouse, a pale yellow cinder-block building with square windows, a tin roof, and a mural depicting turtles along the side. Pablito and Solo sat in the schoolhouse, where, along with the dozen or so village primary students, they studied reading and math from two in the afternoon until seven in the evening—school hours for the children of *campesinos*.

We know from Solo's narrative—details he relayed well over a decade later while living thousands of miles from his childhood pueblo—that

one day surely stood out from all of the other days on which the boys hiked into the hills to gather firewood and delivered milk on the milkman's bicycle and went to primary school—a moment that cleaved their childhoods into two distinct pieces.

Pablito returned home in the early evening to find his parents in the house, having themselves recently arrived from collecting the money his brothers had wired to a bank office located in the municipal seat. On special occasions like these, Pablito's mother prepared a meal of mole and hot peppers and beef—a rare treat.

Pablito's father would have worn a baseball cap that was a gift from his eldest son, a collared shirt, loose trousers, and huaraches. He looked like a version of Pablito's grandfather, one that could sit neatly inside the original, differing only in the slight mustache, dark hair, and obliging sensibility. His mother always wore a traditional dress with an apron on top that she'd embroidered with jacaranda flowers. A lantern lit the room. After the plates were wiped clean, Pablito's mother and father likely exchanged glances, and his father cleared his throat. When discussing family matters, they tended to become more formal, even with the children. Pablito would have been alert to the change.

His parents then informed Pablito that they'd be using a portion of their windfall to send him to secondary school. "It is a blessing we are very thankful for," his mother said, "a gift we weren't able to provide for your brothers or sisters." But also—it was his father who spoke this time—they told the twelve-year-old that the two of them would be using some of the money to travel into *el Norte*. Pablito's brothers and sisters had arranged their way, and had prepared a home there in a city called San Diego that was so close to *la frontera* that it seemed not so far away from the village, despite the miles. Pablito would be staying behind to attend school and to take care of his grandfather. If his parents were prosperous, after Pablito finished his studies, they would send for him. If not, they would return to the village.

We don't know Pablito's expression on hearing the news or his response if he made one. We don't know what his grandfather might have said, if he offered advice drawn from his extensive experience or anything at all, and we don't know what the body language of Pablito's parents expressed once they'd unburdened themselves of the decision because Solo, who was at home with his own family, wasn't present to witness the event, and Pablito never conveyed more than the essential facts. That was his way.

Only once, soon after the parents departed, when the boys were working in the side field with Pablito's grandfather, was the topic addressed. Solo heard the old man say, seemingly in response to no one: "It's okay. The country is good. Everything over there is very clean. That's what people say, right? It's so clean. The roads are straight and machines come by to sweep them. Can you imagine? But some things are more important: family and the pueblo and peace and nature. These are treasures; better than clean noisy cities where things cost so much you have to work daily just to remain poor."

Later, Solo explained that it wasn't exactly as if Pablito had been deserted; simply left in a shack with a solitary old man. In the village and nearby, Pablito had two aunts and one uncle and several cousins. And a few nights a week one of the families in the village who owned a television and a gas generator would set white plastic chairs out in their yard. They'd place the TV on their windowsill with the screen facing out. All of the village kids and a few of their parents would come together and watch. Some brought nuts and dried mangos with salt and chili powder or fruit juices tied off in clear plastic sandwich bags. These would be passed around. Most of the villagers were related in one way or another, and gatherings were always very family oriented.

Pablito attended secondary school most of the day and his studies required additional time. But throughout the years, he and Solo continued to meet each morning to walk into the hills to gather

firewood, and after Pablito came home from school, they delivered milk. Solo noticed that when *Pablo* did speak, which is how Solo began to refer to him, he didn't sound the same anymore. The words he used had changed. And we know through Solo that one day not long after Pablo had finished secondary school, the teenagers met as usual to hike into the forest, and on returning they split to go to their respective houses. When Pablo reached his yard, he felt something amiss. The place was too quiet. The hens were still locked in the hutch. Inside the house, Pablo found his grandfather. "He still looked strong, lying there," Pablo told Solo, "but he had no breath."

The boy's grandfather had simply failed to wake in the little one-room wood house, but we don't know why. It's likely that the family doesn't either. He was old, they said, that's all. Pablo received some inheritance, but he sold livestock to pay for the service. His aunts and uncle helped out too. Pablo's parents had yet to send for him and he didn't know if they would. He didn't know much about them anymore. In the old days, workers had returned for Christmas, but those days were gone. Communication from *el Norte* was patchy.

Around that time Pablo and Solo took work as laborers to help build a *tiendita*, or little corner store. The job started on a Monday. The town bricklayer played shortstop for the village team, and the Sunday before work was to begin, the team played a game in another pueblo. Pablo and Solo didn't attend, as the hosting village was far away, but they saw the players whooping and strutting into town on the heels of their victory. The boys heard the men celebrating that afternoon and well into the night. The entire village could hear them. And everyone woke to a traveling crescendo of barking dogs and laughter as the players made their ways home in the blackness that preceded the roosters' first cries.

"I guess that shortstop isn't going to show up for work today," Solo told Pablo as the sun rose in the sky. "I heard someone brought turtle eggs to the party—steamed—which are supposed to make you

strong, right? Not strong enough, I guess. If the boss comes yelling one more time, I'm going to quit."

"You can't quit something you never started," Pablo said.

"Start where? How? We've never set any bricks before."

Pablo stood and picked up the mason's trowel. He grabbed the wooden wheelbarrow and the bucket of water. He lifted a bag of cement, ripped it open, and began to make a mixture for the footing.

"Just wait for the shortstop," Solo advised. "You're going to mess it up."

"Nothing is going to be messed up," Pablo said. "We're going to pull this work off today, before the *dueño* fires us."

The first side wasn't pretty, or even level, but at a quick glance, Pablo passed as a mason. Nothing in the village, made by man anyway, was ever level.

"I bet you're a good shortstop, too," Solo said. "No point in sticking around here with talent, *hombre*."

Building the walls of the *tiendita* was not the most memorable work. And frankly, if Solo reflected on it, it was only to question whether the bricks remained in place beyond a wet season or two. Solo remembered his exact words to Pablo only because they came true faster than he'd thought.

Two days after finishing the *tiendita*, Pablo asked his friend for a favor. "Solo, I want you to do the thing you promised, and pray to God for my travels. I'm going to *el Norte*."

"You're finally joining your parents?" Solo asked. Eight years had come and gone since they'd left, so much time, Solo thought, that it seemed as if the parents might never send for him.

"I don't know," Pablo said. "I'm just going." And he walked out of the village on the thin dirt roads.

We know that he had no arrangements to cross into the United States, and little knowledge of what the process entailed. He didn't

know Mexico City, or Tijuana, or anything in between. Pablo walked to a village bigger than his own. He hopped aboard a local *colectivo* and rode it to a small town, and there he caught another to a bigger town. He arrived in Mexico City after dark and boarded a three-day bus that rarely stopped. The drivers took turns sleeping in the motor coach under the cabin. The bus had televisions in the headrests and a bathroom with a plastic toilet and running water. Out the window he saw types of cars that had never wheeled into the village. He saw mountains and deserts. And at the terminus of a string of marvels, Pablo landed in Tijuana with a few thousand pesos—the sum of his grandfather's estate—which was enough to feed him for a few weeks as long as he purchased nothing else and slept in the open. For safe-keeping, he placed the coins and dirty bills in a little pocket he'd sewn into his underwear.

The main bus station would have looked like a gleaming international transit hub—Paris or Kuala Lumpur—to the country kid. Its floors shined. It held shops and restaurants. Pablo would have seen other *campesinos* who looked like he did, wearing sandals, patched trousers, and weathered hats. And immediately, in the presence of city dwellers dressed in suits or crisp jeans and leather shoes, he would have known the difference. He would have known, before learning the term, that he was a *pollo*, a chicken, something to be preyed upon. And likely, he would have seen the men who approached *pollos* fresh off the buses from Michoacán and Zacatecas to offer their services. He would have seen the local police who competed with these men to snatch up *pollos* and sell them body and soul to the coyotes.

But like the other newcomers without money to pay the smugglers, and looking so poor the police had no interest, Pablo found his way to the border fence—*la línea*—and walked along its rusted arc and curve to a broad river that was paved with cement, filled with trash, and smelled of sewage. This wasn't a river anybody would

wash his family's clothing in. Pablo walked the paved shore until it ended in dirt at the boundary of the United States. He saw the Border Patrol waiting there in white-and-green trucks and observed the gangs of deported men who idled along the river. Some broke the concrete and dug burrows and caves into the banks, where they lived. Others congregated to smoke and snort *chuki*—methamphetamine—and to huff paint or glue or gasoline under the walking bridge from the United States. Men lined up at a public water spout to bathe their blackened bodies in view of tourists passing by.

Pablo would have known that the only difference between himself and these men was time.

It was in January, six months after Pablo walked out of the pueblo, that Solo learned his friend had wired him money, an intimidating sum. The wire arrived with instructions for Solo to meet Pablo in Tijuana. Solo was surprised that his friend hadn't made it to the inside, to San Diego, yet. He worried that something was wrong with Pablo's family, and that this was the reason they hadn't sent for him long ago. The instructions included a personal note: "Thank you for your prayers. There's good work here in Tijuana."

Days later, when Solo stepped off the red, white, and blue bus from Mexico City—wearing trousers, a worn linen shirt, huarache sandals, and a cowboy hat—he was nearly knocked over by the hustle of the bus station. He took in the gleaming floors and bright ticket counters. He saw women in uniforms. He saw the people in fine clothing. And at some point, Solo noticed a short, dark man in square black sunglasses, standing still among all the travelers hurrying to and fro. This figure wore a loose-fitting T-shirt untucked over baggy canvas pants, and spotless black tennis shoes with bold white stripes. The man made a low whistle.

"Pablito," Solo said, "you are a *cholo* now!"

