

Lole

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Author's Note

Recently, I've been deeply inspired by my own roots and family history. This journey has been about more than just tracing my ancestry—it's been a pursuit of clarity, understanding, and self-discovery. In the process, shaped by my surroundings and the current challenges our society faces, I've found solace in grounding myself in where I come from.

Storytelling holds a profound significance—it transcends generations, preserves legacies, and, at times, is all we have left when everything else fades. Stories connect us, allowing us to share experiences, struggles, and perspectives. Storytelling and writing can also take many different forms, as was my hope with this piece.

As a Political Science student minoring in Communications, Spanish, and Women and Gender Studies, I sought to weave a political statement into a narrative inspired by someone incredibly special in my life. At its core, my message is one of empathy—an invitation to step into someone else's world, to see through their eyes. After all, as the saying goes, you can't judge someone until you've walked a mile in their shoes... or perhaps 200.

There is a common misconception about stories. If you tell a story enough times, you will eventually start to believe it, even if it isn't accurate. If you tell a story enough times, you will eventually recount it by memory. If you tell a story enough times, others will catch on, hopefully sharing it with close circles. The hope is that by sharing these, we never forget our stories. Our legacies. Our loved ones. But what if this is wrong?

If you tell a story enough times, it will no longer be painful. It will no longer define you. You can reconcile what *was* with what will *be*.

That is *my* hope in telling you Lole's story. That someday it won't be painful. It will not define us. To help us reconcile the past with what our future can be.



1 "It's not coming anymore."

2 "Yes it is! Don't be so impatient!"

3 "Stop. Just a few more minutes. It's only about three"

4 "Besides, are you eager to start?"

The three boys sat waiting. The bus was about fifteen minutes out. Leonel checked his watch one more time. The sun beating down on his forehead. They had been sitting there for two hours already. Their hopes dwindling, they sighed and groaned. It was well over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. The asphalt smoked and cracked under the cars passing by. The sun burned their skin and made it dry to the touch.

"Ya no va a venir," said Jaime.¹

"¡Que sí, no seas desesperado!" yelled Leonel.²

"Ya, solo unos minutos más, apenas van a ser las tres,"³ hushed Lole. "Además, ¿traen muchas ganas de empezar?"⁴

Jaime sat quietly, contemplating. Their journey was not short, their journey could end their lives. They heard the bus a few blocks down. The rattling shell and the smell of burnt tires approached them.

They all looked at each other with wide eyes.

Lole turns to them and says, “A ver si no nos deja tirado el camión primero.”⁵

The boys chuckled at Lole’s witty joke. He had always been witty, maybe even a little impromptu at times. If you asked Lole’s mom about his personality she would tell you, “Lole siempre ha sido así, y se enoja muy pronto si no le gusta algo”. But surely, you will find out for yourself.

The three boys sat in the back of the cramped bus. They shared a seat that looked like it used to be leather and had three seatbelts. The sponge was now exposed with ants crawling out of it. The seatbelts were ripped out.

“A ver si no nos morimos aquí primero,” said Leonel.⁶

They burst out chuckling and laughed so hard until they were red in the face. Their laughter died down, the realization setting in like a rock in the pit of their stomachs. The decision started to weigh heavy. Carving a pit between their stomachs and their spines. The boys were thin and ghostly. Lole, the oldest of the bunch, was malnourished well into his teenage years. His teeth slowly decaying, his eyes and cheeks hollow, his skin with a loss of elasticity and even a purple tint. His olive skin tone did not glow, instead it had a gray overtone. His eyes though, still fierce and dark brown, the color of the rich soil that birthed him.

Leonel and Jaime are Lole’s cousins. The three have been inseparable since they were little boys. Leonel and Jaime are siblings and Lole has five brothers. Lole is the second oldest of the six. This makes a whooping cluster of cousins. How do you pick and choose your friends? Well, for these boys it was predetermined. The invisible hand picking and choosing their circles. They didn’t mind though. Their little circle was enough, and they had to follow in their siblings’ footsteps, setting precedent for the

younger ones.

If one sibling or cousin got into a fight, the whole family would show up ready to fight. The boys made it their tradition to get into brawls. That’s why they all had unique nicknames. Lole’s was “guerra” a rough translation for “war” and his brothers were notoriously “piranha” a type of fish, and “pitalua” a Mexican-Colombian boxer from their time. Leonel’s nickname was “lion” (we probably saw that one coming) and Jaime’s was “nito” like the sweet bread covered in chocolate (his skin was a little darker). Each name spoke to their characters or their fighting style. I’ll leave that up to your imagination.

The three boys grew up as each other’s neighbors, their homes within walking distance from one another. In their countryside village, everyone knows everyone. Your great great great grandparents, your third cousin from your mom’s side, your father’s uncle’s aunt, and your dog is probably related to your neighbor’s cousin’s dog. Because everyone knows everything about each other, word travels fast. You cannot misbehave because your mother or father will know when and how before you even stepped foot in your home. Because word travels fast, you cannot keep a secret. So, the boys’ whole village knew they had embarked on this journey this afternoon. Before they said their goodbyes to their friends and family, they said their goodbye to Saint Jude Thaddeus whose statue resides in a small chapel in their village.

Only one person can go at a time. There is only enough space to kneel inside and for a small vase of flowers. The rule is that after your prayer, you must bow your head and kiss Saint Jude Thaddeus’s feet. When Lole went in, he stayed silent. He didn’t know what to say. He was contemplating what would be of his life for the following days. Perhaps the end. Perhaps the beginning of new opportunities. So, he

⁵ “Let’s see if the truck doesn’t leave us stranded first”

⁶ “If we don’t die here first”

bowed his head, and he prayed. *San Juditas Tadeo, por favor cuida de mí durante mi viaje. Por favor, concédeme la oportunidad de al menos intentar trabajar. Ayúdame a encontrar un medio para mantener a mi familia, permíteme ahorrar para poder escapar de esta pobreza y miseria.*⁷

When he opened his eyes, tears wet his face. His hands were painted with drops of tears. He wiped them away fast and rubbed his eyes. No one could know he was scared.



The bus barely made it to the city. The boys hopped down and were left in a cloud of black smoke. Coughing, they joked and nudged each other. Three boys, unaware of their future but oddly aware of the dangers around them.

“Si te vuelves a dormir, te vamos a dejar,” Lole poked at Jaime.⁸

“Si te vuelves a dormir me quedo con todas tus canicas,” Leonel told Jaime.⁹

Jaime frowned. He kept walking in silence. “No te creas, siempre te vamos a cuidar,” promised Lole.¹⁰ Jaime was thirteen years old. Leonel was fourteen. Lole was just fifteen, turning sixteen in a month.

This was the reality they lived in. To us, these boys are green. With so much potential, so much life to live, too young to grasp the evils of this world. Too young to be marked by the pangs of hunger or lack of water. But in their societies, they are coming of age. These boys are turning into men. Their actions, their character, their strength— will soon

be judged upon what they make of their short lives. Their journey is not just about escaping poverty and violence it’s about a new chance to live. An opportunity to seek the life they dreamed of. If they fail, at least they won’t be taken by violence or hunger. In their world, it’s better for a mother to say her children were taken by the desert than at the hands of desperation and the drug war.

The boys finally got to the bus station. *La central de autobuses de Chihuahua*. The three looked around in amazement. They had never been here before. The boys had no idea how to work the kiosk or where to go to buy their tickets. They scurried to a corner and observed.

“Mira ahí, están comprando boletos de autobús,” Leonel says.¹¹

“A ver si no me la hacen de borlote porque me veo muy joven. Quédense aquí. No se muevan,” ordered Lole.¹² He went up to the ticket office. Hands visibly shaking. He has his wallet in hand and his identification card. He puffs his chest, straightens his posture.”

“Hola, joven, tres boletos para Juárez por favor,” asked Lole to the man in the ticket office. He did not look over twenty years old himself.¹³

“Enseguida,” He goes to print the tickets.¹⁴ “Van a ser 1.260 pesos joven.”¹⁵

“Aquí tiene,” says Lole.¹⁶

“Feliz viaje, gracias,” said the man.¹⁷ Lole turned around and put the tickets in his pocket. The bus was leaving in half an hour. Just in time. He finds Jaime and Leonel sitting.

“Ya tengo los boletos. Vamos a hacer fila para

7 Saint Jude Thaddeus, please watch over me during my journey. Please grant me the opportunity to at least try to work. Help me find a way to support my family, allow me to save so I can escape this poverty and misery.

8 “If you fall asleep again, we’ll leave you”

9 “If you fall asleep again, I’ll take your marbles”

10 “Just kidding, we will always take care of you”

11 “Look, that’s where they are purchasing bus tickets.”

12 “Let’s see if they don’t make a fuss because I look too young. Stay here. Don’t move.”

13 “Hello sir, three tickets to Juarez please”

14 “Right away”

15 “That will be 1.260 pesos sir”

16 “Here you go”

17 “Safe travels, thank you”

tomar buenos asientos,” Jaime and Leonel listened and followed suit to Lole’s orders.¹⁸ The three boys were onto the next part of their journey. So far, they have had a slow start.

Lole was right, the bus arrived a few minutes early, allowing the passengers to start filling the bus. The three boys got good seats, right in the middle of the bus. They had a big window, comfy seats in a row of three... Oh! and working seatbelts. The next four and a half hours would be a breeze. When they finally sat down, they were all relieved. Lole sighed.

“No te acomodes mucho. Cuando lleguemos, tenemos que buscar un taxi rápido,” said Leonel.¹⁹

“Ya sé cómo le vamos a hacer. Pero por lo pronto, hay que dormir un rato,” replied Lole.²⁰

“A Nito no le tienes que decir dos veces,” laughed Leonel.²¹

Lole leaned over and saw Jaime leaning his head against the window, sound asleep. He smiled and sat back in his seat. He closed his eyes and crossed his arms. His smile slowly erasing from his face. *Gracias por dejarnos llegar hasta aquí.*²² After thanking San Juditas, the relief consumed him. He quickly fell asleep.



Once again, the bus came to a halt. They had finally arrived at their next destination. Leonel tapped on Jaime and Lole who were deep asleep.

“Levántense, ándenles, ya llegamos,” whispered Leonel.²³ The boys stood up, gathering their small backpacks and jugs of water. Slowly, the bus began

to filter out. *La central de autobuses ciudad Juárez.* Now, the boys were more than six hours away from home. Lole felt nauseous. It all started to feel too real. People around him were moving, but all he did was stand there. Looking at the bus center. The people moving, carrying suitcases, with their families, with backpacks, children crying, the elderly walking slowly. His jaw started to lock. His stomach gurgled. He swallowed hard.

“Lole... Lole... Lole,” Jaime was tugging on his sleeve. “¿A dónde te fuiste?” asked Jaime.²⁴

“Nada, nada, estaba pensando,” replied Lole.²⁵ He motioned Jaime and Leonel to follow him. He put his backpack on the ground. He looked around, making sure no one was watching them. He took out a pocket-sized map from his bag and carefully unfolded it. Scattered across the map were several tiny “x” marks.

“Miren, aquí estamos verdad? En Juárez.”²⁶ Tenemos que bajar más, por el desierto. “El coyote nos dijo que nos iba a acercar lo más que pueda. Pienso que va a ser por este rumbo,” explained Lole drawing a line down south.²⁷ This was just an inkling.

“Oye, pero acuérdate que tenemos que llegar de madrugada. Ya son casi las diez de la noche. ¿Si nos dará suficiente tiempo?” asked Leonel.²⁸

“Pues yo creo que sí. No hay otra manera. Tomaremos un taxi hasta donde está el coyote. Mira esta es su dirección,” Lole pulled out a piece of paper from the pocket of his shirt.²⁹

Leonel nodded in agreement. Lole put the map away, folding it into a small square. He tucked it

18 “I have the tickets. Let’s get in line so we get good seats”

19 “Don’t get too comfortable. When we get there, we have to find a taxi. Fast.”

20 “I know what to do already. For now, we should sleep a little”

21 “You don’t have to tell Nito twice”

22 *Thank you for allowing us to get to this point.*

23 “Get up. Come on, we are here”

24 “Where did you go?”

25 “Nothing, nothing. I was thinking.”

26 “Look. We are here right? In Juárez.”

27 “The coyote told us he was going to get us as close as he could. I think it’s going to be around this area.”

28 “Hey, but remember that we have to arrive at dawn. It’s almost ten. Will we have enough time?”

29 “Well, I think so. There’s no other way. We’ll take a taxi to where the coyote is. Look, this is his address.”

in his shirt pocket this time. They walked out of the bus center, and at the front was a taxi waiting. They walked up to the nearest one and knocked on the passenger window. The man rolled his window down. He looked to be about sixty. He smiled and said, “A donde joven?”³⁰

Lole handed him the piece of notebook paper with the coyote’s address. The taxi took it from his hand and read it. He paused for a moment, then looked up at Lole. He stretched his neck and saw Leonel and Jaime. His expression softened.

“Sí, yo los llevo. Súbanse,” said the taxi driver.³¹ “Chuy. ¿Cómo se llaman?” he asked.³²

Jaime replied, “A mí me dicen Nito. Este es Leonel y Lole, son mis primos,”³³

“¿A dónde van, hijos?” asked Chuy.³⁴ The three boys looked at each other. They didn’t know if they should tell Chuy. Could they trust him? Lole’s father had warned him about people who extort travelers. They threatened to take you and dump you in heavily patrolled areas. Sometimes they held a gun to your head and forced you to give up your US dollars. Chuy interrupted his thoughts.

“Mis hijos también se fueron al Norte, ya hace unos años. Están bien, pero cuando junten suficiente dinero se van a regresar. Dicen que la vida es muy difícil allá. A veces, más que aquí,” shared Chuy.³⁵ The boys sat there. Without saying a word. This is what everyone warned them about.



Before they knew it, Chuy was dropping them off at a gas station. *Un Oxxo*. He waved them goodbye and advised them to hide their money in their shoes. If they were searched, the money in their bags would rat them out. He also told them to not eat any plants. No matter how edible they looked, and to not touch any plants, especially if they had fruits on them. Chuy told them to pray every night, and if they heard weeping or voices, it was a figment of their imagination.

“Dios los lleve con bien,” said Chuy.³⁶ He did a U-turn and went on his way.

The three boys looked around. Unsure of what to do next or what to look for. They had never met el coyote in person. Nor had they ever talked to him. Jaime and Leonel’s father had hired this coyote when he crossed the border with Lole’s father and a few of their friends and cousins. They made this deal for the three boys.

“Alisten los dólares. Solo lo que nos pidieron,” Lole said, raising his finger and pointing at Leonel and Jaime in warning.³⁷ “Vamos a hacer lo que nos dijo Chuy. El resto de los dólares nos los metemos en los zapatos, por dentro del calcetín,” said Lole.³⁸

“Pero se van a sudar los dólares,” protested Jaime.³⁹

“Pues, ¿qué tiene? Si no, nos van a chingar después,” said Leonel.⁴⁰

“No va a ser por mucho tiempo, espero. Además, traigo bolsas de plástico. Podemos meter el dinero ahí y luego dentro del calcetín,” explained Lole.⁴¹ He took out three plastic produce bags from his

30 “Where to, young man?”

31 “Yes, I’ll take you. Hop on.”

32 “Chuy. What are your names?”

33 “They call me Nito. This is Leonel and Lole, they’re my cousins.”

34 “Where are you going, my children?”

35 “My children also went up North a few years ago. They’re doing well, but once they save enough money, they’re going to come back. They say life is very hard over there—sometimes even harder than here

36 “May God watch over you on your journey”

37 “Get the dollars ready. Only take out what they asked for.”

38 “We’re going to do what Chuy told us. The rest of the dollars we’ll tuck into our shoes, inside our socks.”

39 “But the dollars are going to get all sweaty.”

40 “Well, so what? If not, they’re going to screw us over later.”

41 “It won’t be for long, I hope. Besides, I have plastic bags. We can put the money in there and then inside our socks.”

backpack. He handed them to Jaime and Leonel. They put their money in the bag and then inside their socks. Just as they finished, a truck approached them. Flashing its headlights onto the boys. The back of the truck was filled.

The driver opened his door and slammed it shut behind him. He yelled at the passengers in the bed of the truck. Men started to hop off. They began walking away, some going into the gas station. The three boys watched in confusion. Lole pointed at the bushes across the lot from them. People started to come out of those bushes with backpacks and blankets. The man finally approached him. His outfit matched his brand new 1990 GMC 1500. He wore perfectly pressed Levi jeans; his cowboy boots were rounded full quill ostrich in a shade they had never seen before. He had a matching belt, and his hands were decorated with gold rings. This is not what the boys had envisioned.

Lole could not stop staring at his boots. The man noticed, “Cuando empieces a trabajar en el Norte, te podrás comprar unas iguales,” he said.⁴² Lole smiled at the thought. He imagined what walking in a brand-new pair of boots would feel like. He looked down at his own. Dusty and bursting at the seams. He has had the same pair of boots since he was Jaime’s age. The leather was so worn that it was velvety, and his toes were permanently scrunched from wearing boots that were probably two sizes too small.

“¿Usted es el coyote?” asked Leonel.⁴³

“Depende de quién pregunta,” said the man.⁴⁴ “No se crean. Sí yo soy. Los voy a llevar junto con todos ellos,” he said, pointing at the line of people behind his truck.⁴⁵ “Pero los voy a dejar que se suban

en frente,” he said.⁴⁶

The boys all smiled at each other. They were going to ride in a brand-new truck. God was definitely on their side. Before they made their way in, they stomped their feet on concrete. Shaking off the remnants of dirt on their boots. They made their way in, careful not to touch anything. They squeezed on the one seat. Lole looked back through the window and there was loud chatter. Perhaps a fight. He saw el coyote talking to a man, inches away from each other’s faces.

“Ya te dije que yo no llevo a viejas,” said el coyote.⁴⁷ “O te vienes solo o los dejo a los dos,” he warned.⁴⁸ The man walked away from him, holding his hand was a woman. El Coyote closed the bed of his truck and walked to the driver’s seat.

“Solo faltan ustedes de pagarme, trescientos Americanos. Por cada uno,” said el coyote.⁴⁹ The boys each handed el coyote three hundred dollars to cover their trip. He counted the money. He stuffed it in his pocket and started the truck. Soon enough, they were on their way. Their drive was three hours.



DAY 1

Día 1

It was around five in the morning when the coyote woke the three boys up. The truck stopped on the side of the road. None of them knew where they were exactly. Wide eyed, the boys stared at each other. This was really happening. Coyote ushered everyone off his truck. His instructions were vague. Walk North. If you get lost, follow the sun and the moon’s pattern. Hide from wolves. Stay alert

⁴² “Once you start working up North, you’ll be able to buy a pair just like these.”

⁴³ “Are you the coyote?”

⁴⁴ “Depends on who is asking.”

⁴⁵ “I’m kidding. It’s me. I’m the one. I’m going to take you along with everyone else.”

⁴⁶ “But, I’ll let you ride in the front.”

⁴⁷ “I already told you, I don’t take chicks.”

⁴⁸ “Either you come alone, or I leave both of you behind.”

⁴⁹ “You three are the last ones left to pay—three hundred American dollars. Each”

for rattlesnakes. Take turns sleeping. All the men around them started walking their separate ways. Some in groups of four or five. No one talked to the boys. Was it really time to part?

“¿Nos va a dejar aquí?” asked Jaime.⁵⁰

“Pues sí, así es el trato. Tienen que arreglárselas como puedan,” said el coyote.⁵¹

“Pero le pagamos trescientos dólares cada uno. Mi papá no le dijo nada más?” asked Lole.⁵²

“Eso es lo que cuesta el puro viaje. Si quieren que alguien te lleve por la frontera cuesta más. Y yo no hago ese tipo de trabajo. Si quieren regresar, los llevó de regreso. Pero el viaje sigue cobrando,” said el coyote.⁵³

“No. Gracias,” said Lole.⁵⁴ He turned away to face his cousins. His expression gave away his anxiety. From a distance, he heard el coyote rev his engine and speed off.



The Chihuahuan Desert is the largest in North America spanning over approximately 250,000 square miles. The elevation varies between 3,500 to 5,000 feet. Annually, this ecosystem gets less than ten inches of rainfall. During the summer, this desert is scorching hot, reaching temperatures over 100 degrees. At night and during the winter, it can be cool. The Chihuahuan Desert crosses the borders and touches parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, but 90% of it is in Mexico within the states of Chihuahua and Coahuila. Other states like Nuevo Leon and Durango are merely grazed by the desert's presence. The three boys spent two days and two nights in this desert. Although less common today, *el lobo Mexicano* once reigned over these lands, a threat

50 “Are you just gonna leave us here?”

51 “Well... yes. That’s the deal. You’ll have to figure it out on your own.”

52 “But we paid you 300 hundred dollars each. Did my dad not tell you anything else?”

53 “That’s just the cost of the trip itself. If you want someone to take you across the border, that costs extra. And I don’t do that kind of work. If you want to go back, I can take you back—but you’ll have to pay.”

54 “No, thank you.”

55 “Let it be what God wants and has planned.”

to the immigrants that walked this desert. From the boys’ starting location near a desolate human settlement (that no longer exists today) due to the influx of crime and war on drugs to Artesia, New Mexico, the boys traveled approximately 256 miles, 200 of which were on foot.



Que sea lo que Dios quiera y tenga planeado, Lole prayed.⁵⁵ The boys kneeled, surrendering to the desert and God’s will. The sun was rising, the glow of their morning hitting the ground around them. Lole stood up and nodded at Leonel and Jaime. They began changing their clothes, adapting to the heat that was to come. They stripped their sweaters off, leaving their cotton t-shirts and button downs on to protect them from the sun. They used handkerchiefs to tie them around their necks, the peaks facing backward to protect the nape of their necks. Leonel and Lole were old enough to have a military tag necklace, so they wore those. Jaime, too young to register yet had his mother sew a piece of paper to the inside of his shirt with his information. Better safe than sorry she said. They used an extra handkerchief on their heads and a baseball cap on top. They clipped their water gallons to their backpacks and their journey officially began. The breeze was cool on their faces, but not for long.



After three hours, Jaime was desperately asking for a break. Leonel kept insisting that they had to make it a few more hours before they could stop. Lole kept walking, with his gaze fixed ahead, silent

and stoic. You see, it was a weird thing to feel the weight of your actions on your shoulders, but no one around you to protect you. Being so young, doing adult things, but not understanding your place in the world. This naivety is probably what saved the boys' lives. Not knowing the profound danger, they were submitting themselves to. Trusting the will of God and the pattern of the sun, guided by a map they didn't fully understand how to read.

By the time they agreed to stop to eat lunch they had walked for what felt like seven hours. They couldn't know for sure, none of them had a watch. Jaime opened his gallon of water and chugged hard. Lole grabbed it from his hands, scolding him.

"No puedes tomar tanta agua. Se te va a acabar muy pronto. Solo un trago cada vez que paremos. No sabemos si vamos a volver a hallar agua," he scolded Jaime.⁵⁶

"Mi papá dice que hay un arroyo a la mitad del camino. Así es como vamos a saber que vamos bien," said Leonel.⁵⁷

"Pero hasta entonces, no podemos tomar de bastantes tragos," said Lole.⁵⁸

Jaime lowered his head. The three boys dug into their backpacks. They each had five cans of beans and a spoon. This was their food for the next few days. They could not carry more because their backpacks would be too heavy. They couldn't bring fruits because they would spoil with the heat. And they couldn't pack more food because if they had to run away from *la migra*, they couldn't have their backpacks weighing them down. The boys sat on the cracked desert floor. The clay was a pale gray. Lole ran his hands through the mud cracks.

"No creo que hallemos agua. Y si no hallamos el

arroyo—" he said.⁵⁹

"No pienses así, si los vamos a hallar. Solo que alomejor ya de tarde," Leonel chimed.⁶⁰

"¿Dónde vamos a dormir?" said Jaime.⁶¹

"Ya veremos. Tenemos que hallar unas piedras o algo, para que podamos repechar un poco. No vamos a caminar de noche. No te preocupes," assured Lole.⁶² "Apúrense a comer, falta mucho todavía."⁶³



NIGHT 1

Noche 1

Hours later, Lole still led the way. The three stayed silent during most of their walk. All you could hear was their boots against the dry mud and loose rocks. Their breathing heavy, their bodies fully drenched in sweat. Lole was starting to get anxious. All you could see for miles ahead was a dry plane. How would they spend the night? He was hoping there would be a nook of sorts, a big rock they could lean against and sleep through the night. There was nothing, just dry desert floor and weeds. The sun had already set.

The three boys agreed to finally stop. They could hardly feel their legs and feet. Their clothes and handkerchiefs were soaking in sweat. Their socks and boots felt hot. They sat on the ground, the cracks in the mud radiating heat. They took their shirts and shoes off. Jaime pointed at Lole's feet. His soles were one large blister.

"No te las puedes reventar. Te va a doler mucho," said Jaime.⁶⁴

"¿Por qué no dijiste nada?" said Leonel.⁶⁵

⁵⁶ "You can't drink that much water. You'll run out. Just one sip each time we stop. We don't know if we'll find more."

⁵⁷ "My dad said there should be a stream halfway through. That's how we'll know we are on the right track."

⁵⁸ "But until then, we can't chug our water."

⁵⁹ "I don't think we will find water. And if we don't find the stream—"

⁶⁰ "Don't think like that, we will some. Maybe just later in the evening."

⁶¹ "Where are we going to sleep?"

⁶² "We'll see. We need to find some rocks or something to shield ourselves a bit and rest. We're not walking at night. Don't worry."

⁶³ "Hurry up and eat, we still have a long way to go."

⁶⁴ "You can't pop them. They are going to hurt too much."

⁶⁵ "Why didn't you say anything?"

“Solo pensé que me dolían los pies. Y los sentía calientes,” Lole winced.⁶⁶

Again, they sat in silence. Unsure of what to do or how to help. They ate and slowly sipped their water. They had to set up camp before there was no light.

“Voy a seguir así, mañana me voy a envolver los pies con paños,” said Lole.⁶⁷ “Pero por lo pronto, ayúdenme a destender la lona.”⁶⁸

Jaime and Leonel stopped eating. They stood up to help Lole with the plastic in his backpack. This was their shelter for the night. They folded the plastic tarp in half, they would lay on the ground and use the top half to cover themselves during the night.

As the sun set, the three boys took their spots on the plastic tarp like tightly packed sardines. They covered themselves over their heads so no one would see them and to protect them from the winds and sand. At sunrise they would continue their journey.

Lole jolted awake. He had forgotten where he was. Startled, he reached to his side. Leonel and Jaime were both there. He could hear steps surrounding them. He lay still, trying to make sense of the sounds around him. He tried to control his breathing, making them shallower and separated. The steps continued around them, it felt like they were being encircled. Lole couldn't nudge Leonel, if he did, he would startle him and whatever was around them would know about their presence. Lole held his breath... he heard sniffing at the bottom of the tarp. Over his head he felt a shadow. He looked up, and right as the tarp flapped in the wind. There he saw furry legs and the tip of a tail. *Un lobo*. His whole body tensed. He continued to hold his breath.

Afraid that they would be attacked.

The wolf retreated without a trace. Lole was still afraid to move. He finally nudged Leonel. He startled awake looking for Jaime.

“Shhh... creo que hay un lobo cerca,” said Lole.⁶⁹

“¿Estás seguro? ¿En dónde está?” asked Leonel.⁷⁰

“No se pero anda oliendo haber que encuentra,” Lole whispered back.⁷¹

“Nos tenemos que asomar. O si no corremos el riesgo que nos ataque,” said Leonel.⁷² They carefully pulled the tarp down. It was starting to get light out by now. Everything was tinted a hue of blue. Carefully, Lole sat up and looked around. There was nothing that he could see. So, he quickly laid back down pulling the tarp over his head. It must be around four in the morning, he guessed. He wouldn't be falling asleep again.



DAY 2

Día 2

*Dios, gracias por dejarme ver el amanecer de otro día más.*⁷³ Lole had gotten up as soon as it was dawn. He left Leonel and Jaime sleeping in the tarp. He cracked open another can of beans and started eating them as he walked around in search of water. His feet ached with every step he took. The soles of his feet felt like they were on fire and his left sock began to get wet. The blister... He sighed and started to make his way back. At this rate he would be limping at the end of the day.

Lole woke up Jaime and Leonel. As they ate and gathered their belongings, Lole lay on the tarp, looking up at the sky. The last few cold breezes

⁶⁶ “I just thought my feet hurt. And they felt hot.”

⁶⁷ “I can keep going. Tomorrow, I'll wrap my feet.”

⁶⁸ “For now, help me spread out the tarp.”

⁶⁹ “Shhh... I think there's a wolf nearby.”

⁷⁰ “Are you sure? Where is it?”

⁷¹ “I don't know, but it's sniffing around.”

⁷² “We have to peek. Or else we run the risk of being attacked.”

⁷³ God, thank you for allowing me to see the sunrise of another day.

swung by, playfully, kissing his cheek.

“Domi muy bien anoche,” teased Leonel.⁷⁴

“Es un hotel de cinco estrellas,” laughed Lole.⁷⁵

The rest of the day the three boys walked. And walked. And walked. And walked some more. Sometimes they would joke around. Most of the time, they would sing. Lole was a serial whistler. But they tried to keep the noise to a minimum in case they were not alone. Deep down, Lole was worried they were being followed by wolves. But at some point, during the day the desert started to feel like his oyster. By no means was his journey easy. The constant walking with raw blistered feet was not comfortable. His jeans and clothes were soaked. He was uncomfortable in his body, constantly overthinking and trying to make sense of what would be of his life the next day. Lole started to worry when his thirst was no longer satiated by small sips of water. His jug was $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way done. Leonel and Jaime were on the same boat. Lole’s stomach hurt. Like bad.

After emptying his bowels behind a bush and near a Mapimí. Lole felt worse. (A Mapimí is a tortoise native to the Chihuahuan Desert, and yes, while Lole emptied his bowels the Mapimí eyed him). Not because of the Mapimí, but because he felt his stomach somersault and his jaw clench. His mouth started tasting acidic. He hunched over, vomit erupting out of his mouth. His ears were ringing as his body wretched. He was severely dehydrated.

“¿Estás bien Lole?” called out Leonel.⁷⁶



NIGHT 2

Noche 2

At some point during the day the three boys got lost. Instead of continuing North and through the border, they ended up walking South-East deeper into the Chihuahuan Desert. They knew something was wrong when the desert planes turned into abundance of cacti, and mountainous ridges. The loose sand and dry clay of the desert ground soon changed into valleys of rocky terrain. The vegetation was no longer dry and dull. Still, they remained hopeful. Lole would tell his cousins that the only way out of the desert was to go all in. So, they kept walking. This time, they walked until a little after dusk when they could no longer see, and the stars no longer illuminated the sky. Again, they set up their plastic tarp, but this time between two ridges. The rocks under them were cold, sending chills down their spines. So, they got closer to one another. Shoulder to shoulder. Eventually, Leonel and Jaime fell asleep. But not Lole. He was shivering head to toe. His feet ached terribly, but he couldn’t take his shoes off. That would expose him to the wind. Lole kept cupping his hands and blowing on them, trying to warm up. But his sweaty clothes clung to his skin, trespassing his bones. He was so cold his spine felt like it was contorting. He prayed the night would end. He prayed for the sun. He prayed to God so the desert would not take him.



DAY 3

Día 3

“Lole ya levántate. Creo que dormimos de más,” Leonel shook Lole. Lole opened his eyes. He tried to move. He groaned. Every inch of his body hurt.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ “I slept really well last night.”

⁷⁵ “Of course, in this five star hotel.”

⁷⁶ “Are you okay, Lole?”

⁷⁷ “Lole... get up. I think we overslept.”

“Ya voy,” replied Lole.⁷⁸ He slowly straightened himself up. Moving slowly. His limbs were stiff and cold. He couldn’t feel his feet. They were numb. His fingertips were tingly, slowly regaining sensation. Lole sat facing the sun as Jaime and Leonel folded the plastic tarp. He hoped this would be the last time he spent a night out in the desert.

Today was the day God answered his prayers.



The three boys reached a conspicuous barbed wire fence. They stared at it then at each other. They looked to their left, and to their right. It stretched across for miles and miles. There were no markers or signs of people around.

“La cortamos?” asked Leonel.⁷⁹

“Pues yo creo,” said Lole.⁸⁰ “Y así seguimos el tramo. Yo creo que ya estamos cerca”⁸¹

Lole kneeled and took out a small pair of pliers from his backpack. He cut three pieces of barbed wire. Jaime and Leonel covered their hands with their handkerchiefs and moved them. Once they crossed this fence, they put the barbed wire back. As if nothing had happened. About 600 feet in front of them, there was a road. The first sign of civilization in two days. Once they realized this, they exchanged smiles and quickly walked toward the road. Once they reached the edge of the road, they continued walking what they hoped was West.



Eventually, the three boys reached a 7-11 convenience store. Without realizing it, the barbed wire fence they cut was the border. The border dividing them from home and their new life. Before going into the convenience store, Lole took off his boot and sock. He fished for his roll of dollars in the plastic bag. When he walked inside the store, his eyes fell upon a family size bag of Doritos and Fritos cheddar cheese dip. On his way to the register, he saw a bag of cuties, so he grabbed those too. He had never seen “little oranges” before.

Leonel and Jaime were waiting outside. As soon as Lole exited the 7-11 they ushered him to a pay phone across the street. Lole took out a piece of paper. The number his father had given him. He put coins in the pay phone and dialed the number with shaky hands. Leonel and Jaime crowded around him.

Ring 1. Ring 2. Ring 3.

“¿Quien habla?” answered the man.⁸²

“Papá, soy yo Lole. Ya llegamos al Norte,”⁸³



78 “I’m coming.”

79 “Should we cut it?”

80 “I think so.”

81 “That way we can follow the path closely. I think we are getting closer.”

82 “Who’s speaking?”

83 “Dad, it’s me, Lole. We made it up North.”