

THE OTHER SIDE

STORIES OF CENTRAL AMERICAN
TEEN REFUGEES WHO DREAM OF
CROSSING THE BORDER

Juan Pablo Villalobos

Translated by Rosalind Harvey

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

These are true stories, and I consider this book to be nonfiction, although it employs some of the narrative techniques of fiction in order to protect the protagonists' identities. All the stories are inspired by the testimonies of ten immigrant minors, collected in separate interviews conducted in June 2016 in Los Angeles and New York. The names of the young people have been changed so as to preserve their anonymity.

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NICOLE
AND KEVIN

WHEN THE IMMIGRATION OFFICER CALLED ME UP, HE SAID:

“Do you have kids?”

“Yes,” I told him, “I have two.”

This was toward the end of February 2014, and back then Kevin was sixteen years old and Nicole was still little, only ten.

And he asked me:

“Where are they?”

“In Guatemala,” I said, because that’s where they were: I had left them with their grandmother when I came to the United States in 2007.

“Who do they live with?” he asked.

“My sister,” I told him.

They had lived with my sister ever since my mom was killed. Yeah, the gang had killed my mom. They killed her in her own home. They had been charging her a “tax” like they do in Guatemala. My mom used to pay it to them until one day she’d had enough and told them she wasn’t going to pay any more. But they got their dues in the end: My mom paid them with her life. They killed her in her house. And then they killed my brother-in-law, who my kids thought of as their dad.

“Have you spoken to your children in the last few days?” the officer asked me.

“No,” I told him, “my sister told me she’d given them permission to go on a trip.”

“A trip?”

“Yeah,” I said, “with school.”

He was silent for a while, and you could hear him shuffling papers. Then he said the names of my children and asked me if that was what they were called. I told him it was, and he was silent again for a moment.

“No,” he said at last, “your kids aren’t in Guatemala.”

“Sorry?” I said.

“Your kids are here,” he said. “We’ve got them here, on the San Ysidro border.”

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KIMBERLY

YOU CAN'T REALLY TELL WHAT TIME IT IS WHEN YOU'RE IN the freezer. Not even if it's day or night. The freezer is the cell they put you in after Immigration catches you. They call it the freezer because it's a really cold room, and the only thing they give you to put over yourself is a kind of metal blanket. It's so cold I'm getting a cramp in my leg, although the cramp is probably from standing up the whole time. When they shut me in here, there was no more space to sit, or to lie down and sleep, because all the girls were sleeping on the floor and there wasn't any room left.

"Psst, hey: Don't fall over," one of the girls says.

"What?" I ask, because I didn't understand what she meant and because I didn't see which girl said it.

There are a lot of people in this cell, maybe sixty or eighty, all girls around my age, or even younger. There are some really little girls here, too. I was in another freezer before. There, we were all mixed in together, boys and girls, and there wasn't any space to sit down or lie down there, either, because it was so full.

"You closed your eyes and you're about to fall asleep standing up," the girl lying at my feet says.

I rub my eyes to stop myself feeling so drowsy and, as the

girl sits up, quickly stretch my legs to try and get rid of the cramp.

“Sit down,” she tells me.

I obey before she has second thoughts. When I sit down my back hurts, but at least I can rest my legs. I sit in front of the girl, dark-skinned like me, her hair all tangled and dirty because we can't have showers here, or even a wash. She must be the same age as me, or fifteen at most, anyway.

“I woke up because I was hungry,” she says. “Aren't you hungry?”

I tell her I'm not, that when I'm scared I lose my appetite. Now I realize that in all these days, since I left my grandparents' house, I've hardly eaten anything. There were a few days when I don't think I ate anything at all, when we were on the bus and we didn't even stop to eat. Then I got sick in the house where we were waiting to cross the border. I got an upset stomach from eating all that Mexican food.

“Do you think they'll bring the food soon?” the girl asks me.

I tell her I don't know, that they only brought me in here a few hours ago and they haven't brought any food since then.

“Did they only just catch you?” she says.

“No,” I say. “They caught me two days ago, but they sent me somewhere else first.”

“What did they give you to eat there?” she asks.

"A carton of milk and an apple," I say.

"That's it?"

"That's it," I tell her. "Once in the morning, once at lunch, and the same thing at dinner. That's all they gave us."

"Here they give you a sandwich," she says. "And some juice. How old are you?"

"Fourteen," I say.

"Me too," she says.

I can tell by the way she speaks that she's from El Salvador like me, although I guess she's from the capital.

"My name's Kimberly," I tell her.

"Where are you from?" she asks.

"Ahuachapán," I tell her. "What about you?"

"Why don't you lie down?" she says. "If you like, I'll stand up for a bit so you can have a rest. But you'll have to let me lie back down."

She stands up and motions at me to lie on the floor. So I do.

— — —

"Hey, you: It's my turn now."

I open my eyes and see the ceiling of the freezer. The girl is bending over me, shaking my shoulders. I sit up and she settles down at my side.

"What did you say you were called?" she asks. "Sorry, I'm so hungry I forget stuff."

“Kimberly,” I say, “but people call me Kim. You can call me Kim if you like. Did I sleep for long?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she says. “It’s impossible to tell the time in here, but it felt like ages to me because my feet are hurting now.”

We both fall silent and I try to stir myself so that I can stand. I yawn and my head spins, as if I can’t get enough air. I’m so tired I can hardly tell when I’m awake and when I’m asleep. The first night, in the other freezer, I didn’t sleep at all, then later on I did; I’d fall asleep in fits and starts.

“The other freezer where I was before was worse,” I say, playing for time. If we start chatting then maybe I can stay sitting down a while longer. “The place started to look like a garbage dump because people would just drop their apple cores on the floor and it never got cleaned. And they would drop their milk cartons, too. And I was ill, I had the flu really bad. I was in there for two days, and then they started listing the people they were going to move to the other freezer. They called my name and they put us on a bus and brought us here.”

“Do you think they’re going to send us back?” she asks me.

“Where to?” I say.

“I mean, are they going to deport us?” she says.

“I don’t know,” I say. But I don’t tell her that I spent the first night crying, that I really wanted to go back to El Salvador. I

was thinking about my grandparents. I didn't tell her that if they asked me to sign the deportation papers I'd say yes. Ever since I crossed the river, I couldn't stop crying and crying and feeling really sad. And I kept thinking: *What am I doing here?*

"I remember this old man who fell into the water when we crossed the river," I tell the girl instead. "We were in the boat and they were taking us across, saying we had to get out really carefully and run over to the other side. And the old man couldn't get out, even though he wasn't that old, and so they picked him up and threw him into the water. He was completely drenched, and they just left him there. Nobody helped him, because you can't stay on the bank for long. We all ran off, they didn't tell us where we had to go, so we ran over to this hill, with trees all over the place. There was no path and we had to push our way through. It was pitch black, and no one had a flashlight or anything because they'd told us we couldn't bring anything with us.

"There were about thirty of us: there were some pregnant women, some really young kids, and we couldn't find a way out. A little boy was crying. We had to turn back around and find another path. I saw an old woman carrying a bottle of water and I asked her if I could have some and she wouldn't give me any. She said that she had to keep it for herself. I haven't forgotten that, that she wouldn't give me any water. We saw some lights

off in the distance and walked toward them. The truth is I had no idea what we were supposed to do, which way we were supposed to go, nothing. Then suddenly a car appeared. It was the police.”

“Now I’m going to sleep for a bit,” she says abruptly, and starts to stretch to make me get up.

I get to my feet and feel that my legs are numb, or rather, I don’t feel my legs at all. It’s as if they’ve been cut off.

“But if they bring the sandwiches, wake me up,” says the girl.

— — —

“Hey, you: It’s my turn,” I say in a low voice so as not to startle her, but the girl doesn’t wake up.

I think it’s been about two hours since she lay down and I’ve got a cramp in my legs again. At that moment the door to the cell opens and a woman pushing a cart comes in: It’s the sandwiches. The girls begin to stir. I bend down and say into my friend’s ear, “Wake up, they’re handing out the food.”

We grab a sandwich and a carton of juice and sit down to have lunch. Or breakfast, or dinner. Who knows what time it is. The sandwich has a slice of ham in it. The juice is orange.

“Where are you trying to get to?” asks the girl.

“To my mom,” I say.

“But where exactly?” she says.

“Hempstead,” I tell her.

“Where’s that?”

“Near New York.”

“And who did you live with back in El Salvador?”

“I lived with my grandparents on my mom’s side,” I say, “in Ahuachapán, and I was with my grandparents on my dad’s side for a bit, too—they live in San Salvador. But before I came over here I was with my grandparents on my mom’s side. I lived with my older sister and my little brother.”

“What about your dad?”

“My dad left when I was really small; I never spoke to him at all, I didn’t spend any time with him. My mom separated from him when she was pregnant with me. I went to live in San Salvador for a while because he was there, too. But while I was living there he didn’t come and visit me, didn’t call to ask how I was. So I would call him or go and see him at his place, because if I didn’t go then we never saw each other. And because I was always with my grandma on my mom’s side when I was little, I felt kind of empty when I left her, so that’s why I decided to go back and live with her.

“Sometimes I think about the fact that neither of my parents are going to raise me, and that makes me really sad. Because my mom went to the United States when I was four. She’s the one who’s always been there for me—she would send

money to my grandparents to help out. She was always looking out for me. But I can barely remember her because when she was in El Salvador, I was still really little. Sometimes I would cry about that, like, why can't I be near her?"

I eat the rest of my sandwich thinking about my grandparents and about what my mom would be like. Sometimes I try to imagine her, but I don't know what she looks like. If I ran into her on the street I don't think I'd recognize her. "The hardest thing that ever happened to me was leaving my grandparents," I tell her. "What about you?"

"I want to get to my mom," she tells me.

"And where's she?" I ask.

"In Arizona," she replies, brushing crumbs from her lap. "If you want to sleep for a bit you might as well do it now while I'm feeling a bit stronger. I'll be hungry again soon."

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I wake up when the girl shakes me by the shoulders and tells me to calm down and stop shouting.

"Shhh, shhh," she says, "you have to be quiet."

"What happened?" I ask.

"I think you were having a nightmare," she says. "You started shouting. Anyway, it's my turn, you've been asleep for a while now and I can't stand up anymore."

I sit up and make room so she can get comfortable. I remember the nightmare; it's still in my mind.

"What were you dreaming about?" says the girl.

"Something really awful that happened to me on the way here," I say. "In Reynosa, on the border. I was in a house where there were a lot of people headed this way. People waiting. Every day people would arrive, and others would leave, because the place wasn't big enough for so many people. We were all waiting to cross over, but to me they kept saying, *Tomorrow, tomorrow*, and yet they never came to get me. There were mattresses on the floor and that's where we slept. They brought us burritos to eat and I got sick, I got a stomach bug. I could hardly eat. There were some older women there who looked after me. They told me to stay close to them, that they wouldn't let me sleep anywhere else because there were a lot of men around. But there was one night when one of the women got up, I don't know where she went, and a man came over and lay down right next to me. And he started saying nasty things to me. And he started coming closer as if he was after something else, as if he wanted to take advantage of me. And then I woke up one of the women and told her what was happening, and she argued with the man, stopped him from bothering me. And he got all defensive and said he wasn't doing anything. But the next day, when at last it was my turn to leave, he came

outside with me and gave me a piece of paper and told me to hang on to it. He had given me his phone number. I screwed up the paper and I threw it in the trash.”

“You were really lucky,” the girl says.

I nod at her, and then we both fall silent. I look at all the girls lying on the floor, wrapped in their thin foil blankets; this is when it’s coldest, it must be really early in the morning.

“My aunt made me get an injection before I left,” the girl says suddenly, as if she’s been thinking about it for a long time. “In case something happened to me, so I wouldn’t get pregnant.”

I wait to see if she says anything else, but she says nothing, and I understand perfectly what she’s talking about.

“The school I was at had a prison next door where they locked up all the gang members,” I tell her. “Whenever I got out of school all these guys were there. Guys who wanted to hurt us. They wanted us to get involved in bad things with them. They’re always saying stuff to girls. Whenever I’d get out of school they’d be there waiting. I would come out with my friends and they’d tell us to go various places with them. They asked me lots of times, but I always said no. There are a lot of out-of-the-way places where they did their things. None of us wanted to. And if we refused, they’d threaten to do something to us. That’s why I decided not to go to school anymore, because I became too afraid.”

“The police stopped us again in Mexico,” I say to the girl. Two or three days have passed, and now we have more space in the freezer, because some of the girls have been taken away. At least now we can both lie down or sit, or stretch our legs, or do whatever we want. Sometimes we lie down and as we get sleepy we tell each other things. Really, I’m the only one who talks, because she hardly ever tells me anything. But I prefer talking to her, because if I stay quiet I start thinking about my grandparents. And about my mom, about whether they’ve told her I’m locked up here yet.

“They’d stopped us a few times already,” I continue. “When we were on the bus. The bus would slow down suddenly, then stop. We’d look out the window and see the police: the trucks and the men in their uniforms. Sometimes we’d be asleep, and they wouldn’t say anything to us. They didn’t wake us up. Maybe they thought we were Mexican. Other times they’d make us get off and ask for our papers. I showed them a birth certificate and an ID card from El Salvador. They’d ask us questions about what we were doing and who we were traveling with. Then they’d start asking for money. One cop would order another one to make us get off and handcuff us. They made as if they were going to arrest us and take us away, to frighten us. They’d say that unless we gave them the amount

they were asking for, they would send us back right then and there. They'd deport us from Mexico. We'd give them the money we had on us and then they'd let us through."

At that moment, we hear the door to the cell opening and the girl practically leaps to her feet.

"They're going to feed us again," she says.

But they fed us not that long ago, so it must be something else. A woman immigration agent comes into the freezer and tells us that some of the girls are going to be transferred to a home in Phoenix. She says she has a list and is going to read out the names. She starts to read and then a few names later she says, "Kimberly," and my surname.

She stops reading and tells us that the girls on the list are to go with her. My friend tells me her name wasn't on the list, that she has to stay, and I realize she never told me what she was called.

"You didn't tell me your name," I say.

"It doesn't matter," she says, and gives me a hug.

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SANTIAGO
AND DANIEL

THE KID WAS WALKING ALONG, SWEATING BIG TIME, MAKING out he was totally oblivious, as if he didn't realize he'd just crossed over from the other side. But of course he knew—everybody knows; there's not a single person in Ilopango who doesn't know where the dividing line is, and that's why my guard went up. I thought: *This kid's plotting something, he must be a lookout for the Salvatrucha.*

He was eating a bag of potato chips and he was pretty heavy; I guessed he was around fifteen or sixteen—far too old to be acting so dumb. He had a backpack on and looked very dapper, with his brand-new jeans and his shirt all freshly pressed—I thought I'd better take a look and see what he had in his backpack, why he was going around all dressed up like that. I crossed the street and caught up with him.

"Psst, hey, stop where you're going," I said.

He turned and glanced quickly at me, kept on walking, all hoity-toity, slower now, but without stopping. If it was down to me I'd have stabbed him in the gut by now, burst that snooty bubble of his—no one can walk around pretending they can't hear someone from the 18th talking to them. Only thing is, I always get asked, "Who gave you authorization, who do you think you are, going above the guys at the top, you've got to take a good look at who it is before you take out your piece . . ."

“You’d better stop, kiddo,” I said again, and grabbed him by the arm.

He stopped walking without looking at me and I could hear him breathing heavily: The kid was nervous. He knew who he was talking to and already his legs were starting to tremble.

“Are you ignoring me or what?” I asked him.

He said nothing, just carried on huffing and puffing like a horse. I shoved his shoulder and he fell against the wall, without putting up a fight. Sweat poured off his forehead like a fountain.

“Where are you going all dressed up?” I said.

He wiped the sweat away with a folded handkerchief he took from his pocket, and glanced around before replying, as if he were looking for someone. Unlucky for him: There were hardly any people out in the street, and the few who were walked past quickly so as not to get mixed up in any trouble. Everyone knows you don’t get involved with M-18 just to stand up for some random kid.

“I know Yoni,” the boy said, when he realized there was nothing to do but talk.

“Well, what a coincidence—so do I,” I told him.

He tried to walk away, but I grabbed his arm and pushed him again.

“Seems to me you’re a lookout for the Salvatrucha,” I said.

He fell silent again, not saying a word, not even looking at me, just staring over at the end of the street as if he were going to find someone who would save him. The only thing this kid knew how to do was huff and puff like a horse.

“You think I didn’t see you come from the other side?” I said. “The other side belongs to the Salvatrucha—don’t make out you didn’t know that. Everybody knows that. Where are you going?”

He took his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead again.

“What’s the matter, you melting or something?” I said.

“Yoni’s my friend,” the fat kid said again. “Just ask him.”

“I will ask him, but first you’ve got to tell me where you’re going.”

“I’m going home,” he told me.

“Where do you live?” I asked.

“Around the corner,” he said. “At the inn.”

“And what were you up to on the other side, eh?” I said. “I think you’re a lookout for the Salvatrucha.”

“I went to do a school project,” the kid said, pretending he wasn’t a lookout at all. “A group project—one of the other kids in my group lives over there. I can show you what’s in my bag if you like, so you can see.”

He took off his backpack, undid the zipper, and showed me he was carrying books, paper, school stuff. He had another packet of potato chips in there, too.

“And your buddy’s not in the Salvatrucha?” I asked him.

“I just went over to do my homework,” he said. “Honest, ask Yoni, he knows me, he knows my family.”

“OK, I will,” I told him.

The boy was about to do up his backpack again, but I stopped him.

“Give me the potato chips,” I said.

I grabbed the chips and gave Yoni a call. When he picked up you could hear the sound of the TV in the background really loudly; he must have been watching a film with his girl.

“Yoni, we’ve got a problem here,” I said. “Can you hear me?”

Yoni must have paused the film because the racket stopped and all I could hear was his voice as he replied.

“Quickly then, I’m busy,” he said. “What’s up?”

“There’s this kid on his way back from the Salvatrucha side and he says he knows you,” I said.

“What’s his name?” asked Yoni.

I asked the kid, who was wiping his forehead and his neck again, what his name was.

“Santiago,” he said. “Tell him my grandma owns the shop, over there in the inn.”

I repeated what he'd said to Yoni.

"Bring him here," Yoni said, and ended the call.

"Yoni wants to say hello," I told the boy.

I took him by the arm and started walking. The kid dug his heels in, and since he was so large it was hard to force him.

"My grandma's waiting for me," he said. "I have to help her in the shop."

"You can tell that to Yoni," I said. "Now get a move on, or you'll see what happens to you. It's not as if I don't know where you live."

I took out my knife and showed it to him. The kid averted his eyes, but he did start walking right away. We crossed several streets until we got to Yoni's place, with me eating the bag of potato chips on the way. I was starving because I'd been on lookout duty since early—since twelve o'clock—and it was nearly five now.

Yoni was sitting with his girl watching the movie, and they were eating pupusas. I'd seen the film before: It was the story of a little boy who could talk to dead people. Yoni pressed pause when he saw us come in and the boy immediately started accusing me.

"This guy's threatening me," he said to Yoni. "I was just coming back from doing my school assignment. It's not my fault my teacher put me in the same group as a kid who lives on the other side."

“He said he was your buddy, Yoni,” I said, “but he was coming straight from where the Salvatrucha lot are—I saw him coming that way.”

“His grandfather used to own the inn,” Yoni told his girl. “The one around the corner—there was a time when my dad used to rent a room from him, but you don’t rent rooms out anymore, do you?” he asked the kid.

“Not anymore,” the kid replied. “When my grandfather died, my grandma decided that the inn would just be for the family.”

“And who else lives there?” Yoni asked him.

“My great-grandma, my aunt, my uncles, and my cousins,” he replied.

“Didn’t you have a brother?”

“Yes.”

“And how old is he?” Yoni asked. “He was called Daniel, wasn’t he?”

“He’s ten,” the boy replied.

“And you?”

“Fifteen.”

“Is your mom still in the U.S.?”

The kid said that she was and took his handkerchief out again to dry the sweat on his neck, his face, and his forehead. Yoni looked at him, a half smile on his lips, and squeezed his girlfriend’s hand to get her to look at him, too.

“Everyone here in the neighborhood loves your grandmother,” he said. “We respect her, but you shouldn’t take advantage of that if you don’t want everyone to think you’re a wimp.”

Yoni’s girlfriend burst out laughing, and so did I. The kid screwed up his handkerchief and stuffed it back in his pocket.

“I’m sick, Yoni,” the boy said. “I’ve got something wrong with my heart—I had to go to the cardiologist because I get tired really quickly and I start to sweat.”

“Are you serious?” Yoni asked.

The kid said that he was.

“I’ve got a big heart,” he said, “bigger than normal.”

“Sit down,” said Yoni, and he gestured at a chair. “Don’t you go fainting on me now.”

“I can’t stay long,” said the boy. “My grandma’s waiting for me: I have to work in the shop this afternoon and I’m already late because the assignment was really difficult and then this guy,” indicating me, “stopped me.”

Yoni got up from the sofa where he was sitting, left the plate of pupusas on the table, walked over to where the fat kid was, and pushed him down onto the chair.

“Did the Salvatrucha stop you?” he asked.

“They stop everyone,” the kid replied, practically in tears.

“And what did you tell them?”

“Nothing.”

Yoni clicked his tongue, exasperated by this point.

“Are you going to start blubbering now?”

He huffed and puffed again, but internally, like he was gulping down his snot.

“What did you tell them?” Yoni asked him again.

“They wanted to know where I was going, and they came with me to my friend’s house,” the kid said. “When they saw that I really was just going to do an assignment they left.”

“You aren’t lying to me, are you?” Yoni asked.

“No.”

“You remember Marco?” Yoni said. “We caught him acting as a lookout for the Salvatrucha, and you know what happened to him.”

Just then Yoni’s phone rang, and he went into another room, so we couldn’t hear him. The boy saw his chance and wiped his forehead with his handkerchief again. Then Yoni came back.

“I’m going to need you to hide something for me at the inn,” he said.

“I can’t,” the kid said.

“There are loads of rooms there,” Yoni said. “You’re bound to find a safe place to put it.”

The kid said nothing, didn’t even look at Yoni while he was

talking; he just stared at the floor as if someone were going to burst up out of the ground to rescue him.

“It’s just for a little while,” Yoni said. “Until tomorrow.”

“I can’t, really I can’t, Yoni,” said the boy. “If my grandma finds out—”

“I’m not asking you,” interrupted Yoni. “I’ve just been told the police are sniffing around.”

He hurried off into the back of the house and returned with a white bag. You could smell what was inside it as soon as he entered the room.

“You: Go with him,” Yoni told me. “Make sure he hides it and doesn’t throw it out on the way home.”

He scooped up the kid’s backpack, which was lying on the floor, and took out the books and files that were in it. He put the white bag inside, then zipped the backpack up again.

“What is it?”

“What do you think?” asked Yoni. “Can’t you smell it? Give it to El Meche when he asks for it, later today or tomorrow.”

“Who?” asked the kid.

“This guy!” Yoni replied, pointing at me. “You want me to introduce you or what? Now get out, we’re done here.”

The kid stayed sitting in his seat. He gave Yoni a sidelong glance.

“What are you waiting for?” Yoni said.

"I need my school things," replied the boy.

"El Meche will give them to you when you give him the bag back," Yoni said.

The kid stood up and slung his backpack over his shoulder. Yoni pressed play again and, in the film, we heard someone cry out. It was the mother of the boy who talked to dead people: She'd just found him speaking an unknown language, his eyes rolled back in his head.

We went back out into the street; it looked like it was going to rain. It smelled of the dinner the woman in the house next door was cooking, and I hadn't even had lunch yet.

"Where am I going to put it?" the boy asked me while we walked.

"That's your problem," I said. "Didn't Yoni say there were lots of rooms in the inn?"

"But they're all occupied," the boy said.

"Well, put it in your room," I replied.

"My brother sleeps there, too," he said. "And my uncle—my uncle will realize."

"That's not my problem, kiddo," I told him.

We turned the corner and crossed to the middle of the street. His grandma's shop was on the other side, a shop that sold everything: food, drinks, toiletries.

"You'd better not let my grandma see you," he said.

I crossed the street and went into the store. An old woman was sitting behind the counter, watching a TV that stood next to her. She looked at me as if the devil himself had entered her store. I grabbed a couple of bags of potato chips and a few cans of soda while the boy said hello to his grandmother and apologized for being late. He really was a wimp. I left the shop without paying and I could hear the old woman shouting after me, but I just walked off.

The next day I didn't go and collect the white bag because things with the police had gotten complicated. Yoni said that some lookout had ratted on him. We all lay low for a few days, and then Yoni finally sent me to get the bag. I had to wait a while because the grandmother was in the shop and I couldn't see the kid anywhere. But when he didn't show up and it was starting to get dark, I had to go into the shop and speak to the old woman.

"Is Santiago here?" I said.

The grandmother pretended I didn't exist. She didn't reply or even look at me, just carried on watching the TV. I took out my piece and put it down on the counter, half blocking the TV so she'd pay attention. She turned around and walked over to a refrigerator in the back, reached up, and took down a bag from the top of it. She dumped it down on the counter, and I grabbed it and ran off to find Yoni.

“The kid wasn’t there,” I told him, handing over the bag.
“But his grandmother gave it to me.”

Yoni opened it up and counted the baggies inside.

“Do you want me to go and find him?” I asked him.

“He’s already gone to the other side,” he told me.

“To the Salvatrucha’s turf?” I asked.

“The other side means the other side,” he said. “They sent him to the United States.”

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