

Sin Papeles

Introduction to

The Uncertain Journey: Stories of Illegal Aliens in El Norte by Margaret Poynter

They clear the tables, wash the dishes, and mop the floors of our restaurants. They wash our cars, manufacture our clothing, do our laundry, dig our ditches, and man our factory assembly lines. They plant and harvest our crops, mow our lawns, and toil in our canneries and fish-packing plants. They stand on our street corners selling fruit or offering to shine our shoes.

To get these menial,¹ tedious, low-paying, often physically grueling² jobs, these men and women walk, crawl, and swim across our southern border, facing hardships and dangers in the darkness of night. They come from such impoverished³ countries as Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, and Haiti, where at least half of them live in dirt-floored hovels with no plumbing or electricity. Only a few understand English; most of them can't read or write their native language. The jobs they find here are dreams come true. The money they earn may make the difference between whether their children remain uneducated or go to school. It may even determine whether those children will live or will die from lack of food and medical care.

¹ suited to a servant; lowly

² tiring to the point of exhaustion

³ made very poor

They are the tens of thousands of *sin papeles*, "those without papers," who enter the United States illegally every year.

Before the start of the twentieth century, there was no such thing as an illegal alien in the United States. All immigrants were welcomed because our young, growing country needed people to work in our factories and to farm our vast expanse of empty land. Then, as our cities grew crowded, and our good farmland scarce, laws were passed to control the number of people who were allowed to become legal residents and, thus, to take jobs. To enforce those laws, the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was created. The United States Border Patrol is the "police force" of the INS. Its officers have the job of apprehending illegal aliens as they attempt to enter our country.

Most of the people who enter the United States illegally are Mexicans. For them, getting into *El Norte* is just a matter of walking or swimming across a largely unprotected border. Salvadorans, Colombians, and Jamaicans, however, usually hire a *coyote*, a smuggler of people, to provide transportation and guidance. In the plazas, bus depots, and coffee shops of their countries, the *pollos*, "chickens" or "those who run," make contact with *coyotes*. Money changes hands, and a time and place of departure is arranged.

Most *coyotes* are honest, with a handshake guaranteeing the eventual success of their mission. However, the possibility of dealing with a dishonest *coyote* is the first hazard many illegal aliens must face. Some *pollos* have been stranded in life-threatening situations, and smugglers sometimes extort more money from their former clients by threatening to report them to *la migra*, someone who works for the immigration service.

Because of the numbers of men and women who look to *El Norte* as the answer to their pressing problems, *coyotes* do a brisk business. Some of them work individually, recruiting a few people at a time. Others belong to a far-flung network of

smugglers who contract with the owners of large ranches and farms to furnish crews of workers.

The *coyote* networks are remarkably efficient. Several years ago, the border patrol started using helicopters in the area between Tijuana, Mexico, and San Ysidro, California. Within a week, *coyotes* in Quito, Ecuador, were telling their clients how to avoid being spotted by the aircrafts' searchlights.

There's a border patrol checkpoint twenty miles to the north of San Diego, California, but there isn't enough money or manpower to keep it open twenty-four hours a day. The *coyotes* post lookouts to signal when it is safe to transport their *pollos*. Two minutes after the checkpoint closes, vans and trucks that have been parked a few miles south are being loaded up and are on their way to Los Angeles.

The border patrol is familiar with the *coyotes*' strategy. They often know the names of most of the lookouts and what shifts they are working.

Since the border patrol and the illegal aliens are on opposing sides in an ongoing war, there have been some violent confrontations between them. Usually, though, they are friendly enemies. As a border patrol agent takes his busload of illegal aliens to a port of entry where they will walk back across the border into Mexico, he knows that at least half of his prisoners will try to return to the United States within twenty-four hours. "Adios, *amigo*," the deportees may say to their captor. "Next time, we will be more careful."

"I'll be watching for you," says the border patrol officer with a smile.

In one case, two border patrolmen got their car stuck in the sand on the northern side of the border. "Can you give us a hand?" they called to two Mexican youths standing on the opposite riverbank. Without question, the boys swam across the river, helped the patrolmen out of their predicament, then returned to Mexico.

"I have a lot of respect for the people who come here

looking for work," said one border patrol officer. "What other choice do they have? But still, it's my job to catch as many of them as I can."

The fact is, though, that only one out of every five illegal aliens is caught at the border, and only half of the alarms set off by the border patrol's electronic sensors are responded to. "There are just too many of them [the illegals] and not enough of us," said an immigration official. "Only about thirty miles of our two-thousand-mile border is fenced. To do our job right, there would have to be an officer standing every few feet, twenty-four hours a day, along the entire border."

Once a *sin papeles* is in the United States, there is little chance he will be caught by the immigration service. He may simply take a bus to the nearest city where he will disappear into the crowds, or he may walk to a nearby farming community. In many cases, a *coyote* will have arranged to transport him in a van or a truck or, less often, on a late-night airplane flight to a prearranged job site.

Most immigrants are heading for California, Texas, Arizona, and Florida, but they may end up working in the garment district of New York, the factories of Chicago, or the fields and orchards of Michigan and Oregon.

To most Mexicans, being deported is nothing but an inconvenience. The trip back from their country may be hazardous, but it is one that is easily made again and again. But to Ecuadorans or Hondurans, who may have sold all their possessions and also gone into debt for their trip to the United States, deportation means that they will return home to face even worse poverty than they endured before they left. The fear of *la migra* remains with them every minute they are in this country.

In some cases, this ever-present fear is compounded by the fact that imprisonment or death may await the deportee when he or she returns to his or her homeland. Thousands of Haitians fled to Florida when their lives were threatened by a tyrannical dictator. The unstable governments of some

Central American countries cause citizens to be favored by the rulers one month, only to find that they are objects of persecution the next. Such situations have caused thousands of Guatemalans and Salvadorans to flee to the United States. If they are caught by the INS, they may be able to avoid deportation if they can prove that they are political refugees. Unfortunately, such proof is hard to come by.

After a *sin papeles* enters the United States, he is a stranger in an often hostile land. An unscrupulous⁴ employer can easily victimize⁵ a desperate man or woman who is willing to take a job no matter how low the pay or how poor the working conditions. Most *sin papeles* are afraid to open a bank account, because to do so means leaving a record of their presence in this country. They are also unwilling to leave their money in their dwelling places because if they are deported, they may not be given time to collect their belongings. As a result, many of them carry large amounts of money in their wallets, making them an attractive target for thieves.

Several illegal immigrants may pool their money to pay a month's rent on an apartment. A dishonest landlord, after collecting his money in advance, may report his tenants to the INS. After their capture, he will repeat the procedure again and again, making many times the profit he would make if he were honest.

An illegal immigrant's fear of *la migra* extends to anyone who wears a uniform or is in any way connected to the government. If he is robbed, he is afraid to report the crime to the police. If he is cheated by an employer, a landlord, or a merchant, he is afraid to file a complaint with the proper agency. If he needs medical help, he hesitates to seek treatment from a doctor or a hospital.

⁴ dishonest; without conscience or principles

⁵ swindle; cheat; cause to suffer

Most *sin papeles* come from a culture where family ties are supremely important, and all but a few of them must leave their families behind. As months turn into years of separation, the emotional pain they suffer is tremendous.

These and many other factors combine to overwhelm the *sin papeles* as they try to cope with life in *El Norte*. Fortunately, their plight is eased by many churches, social service agencies, and volunteer groups that give counseling, legal advice, food, and shelter to thousands of illegal aliens every day. This help may represent the only support the immigrants receive as they strive for a better life.

To the *sin papeles*, the hope of getting a job in the United States far outweighs any possible problems they may face. As long as the situation in their homelands is hopeless, they will continue to seek work in *El Norte*.

It's estimated that there are one to three million illegal aliens in the United States at any one time. Many citizens object to this situation.

"They're taking away jobs that belong to us," says an unemployed mechanic.

The fact is that most undocumented, or illegal, workers have only a second-grade education and very few job skills. As a result, they are happy to take the jobs that most Americans don't want or will take only temporarily. Farmers, restaurant owners, and clothing manufacturers would have a difficult time staying in business without the *sin papeles*. Some economists have gone so far as to say that the economy of some states—California, for one—would grind to a halt if all of the undocumented workers suddenly disappeared.

"Illegal aliens don't pay their fair share of taxes," says a grocery store clerk.

Like many American citizens who are unable to find full-time employment, illegal aliens are often paid in cash by people who hire them for gardening or paving a driveway or building a wall. Those who have found more permanent jobs,

however, have federal, state, and other taxes deducted from their checks. The big difference between them and the legal residents is that most illegal aliens probably won't be in this country long enough to collect any overpayment on their income tax or to reap any benefits from the money they have contributed to Social Security.

"But their children are going to school here," a mother of three complains. "Aren't we paying for their education?"

Only a small percentage of *sin papeles* bring their children with them. Also, any illegal alien who lives in a house or an apartment pays rent, part of which is used for the landlord's property taxes, which support our schools. One problem that does arise wherever there are non-English-speaking children attending school is that of communication. Many classes in the Los Angeles, California, school system must be conducted in both English and Spanish. This bilingual education costs more than teaching in only one language.

"Illegal aliens send most of their money home," says the owner of a market. "Since they don't spend it here, our own business people are suffering."

It's true that undocumented workers send a large share of their wages to their families back home. It's also true that hundreds of clothing stores, markets, and places of entertainment have come into existence just to serve the needs of the great numbers of Hispanic and Caribbean immigrants. These businesses contribute to the economic health of their communities. Still, many economists issue warnings about the dangers of a "money drain" from the United States into foreign countries.

"If all these foreigners keep coming, someday they will outnumber us," says a retired army officer.

Many people are concerned about the fact that the number of immigrants, both legal and illegal, has increased dramatically during the past twenty years. Some of them resent having any language but English used in our schools and businesses and polling places. They are frightened at the changes that people from other cultures have brought with them.

But, reply historians, almost all of our not too distant ancestors came from somewhere else. Our current society is a result of the blending of these many diverse cultures. Eventually, as in the past, "they," the immigrants we fear today, will be absorbed into our communities and will become "us," accepted members of our society.

Sin papeles know little about the problems or benefits they bring to the United States. As long as there are no jobs in their countries and there is work to be found here, they will continue to cross our border, and the INS will continue to do everything in its power to catch them. To offset a lack of money and manpower, our immigration officials consider any idea that may help them do their job more efficiently. One suggestion has been to build a wall along our entire southern border. It was decided that such a structure would be too expensive to construct and to maintain.

The busiest illegal alien entry point is located just a few miles south of San Diego, California. Recently, a string of powerful floodlights was erected on the levees along that portion of the border. Few *sin papeles* have been deterred.⁶ They simply cross outside the circle of illumination.

Several years ago, someone suggested that a deep, wide ditch be dug just north of the border running in an eastwest direction across the California-Arizona deserts. This idea was never seriously considered. Besides doing damage to the fragile ecology of that area, the project would be very expensive.

The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 was the most far-reaching plan ever put into effect to stem the flow of illegal aliens into the United States. One aim of the program was to give millions of undocumented workers who were already established here the chance to apply for amnesty⁷ and be free of the fear of deportation. Eventually,

⁶ prevented or discouraged from acting

after learning basic English and taking courses in United States history and government, they could become legal residents and even citizens.

The second aim was to make it impossible for illegal aliens to find jobs. This goal was to be accomplished by punishing the employers who hired undocumented workers.

For over two years after the amnesty program went into effect, there was a decrease in the number of people illegally entering our country. Then, as amnesty applicants became temporary legal residents, many of them sent for their families. Also, many *sin papeles* bought false papers and presented them to their prospective employers. Since the employers weren't required to verify the papers, undocumented workers were still being hired.

By 1990 there were just as many people entering our country illegally as there had been before 1986. It had become evident that the amnesty law was a failure. There was talk of hiring more border patrol officers and of supplying them with more helicopters, planes, jeeps, and horses; of putting up more walls and fences; and of installing more lights. The problem with all of these measures, though, is that they don't change the fact that the United States is an irresistible magnet to the poverty-stricken people south of our border.

"They will continue to come, no matter what," said the administrator of a migrant shelter in Tijuana, Mexico. "The United States could build a moat and fill it with sharks and crocodiles, but they will still find a way to cross the border."

Some of our own government officials agree that any attempt to keep out the *sin papeles* is doomed to failure, that the holes in our leaky southern border can never be effectively plugged. They are in favor of having an open border, over which people can come and go at will.

⁷ the act of a government by which pardon is granted to a whole class of persons

“We need the workers, and the workers need us,” they argue. “Don’t punish them just for trying to earn a living.”

The *sin papeles* know they are breaking the law when they enter the United States illegally. The fact that they are considered criminals, however, is unimportant compared to the fact that *El Norte* represents their only hope of survival. They must work or their families will starve.
