

GAZPACHO

Most days of the week, I stand outside of the train station with two large plastic buckets of gazpacho. Nothing fancy. Mostly mashed up watermelon, onion, cilantro, lime. More to quench their thirsts than to fill their stomachs. The boys come out from their corners. They are quiet. Like their bodies, their movements are small. In their eyes, I see the eyes of my own son. When they realize I have food, they simply say, "Please, Señor?" They don't need to ask. They're the reason I live in this border town. I am here to feed them for the last time before they cross into the U.S. Or for the first time they cross back into Mexico. In either direction, I know their journeys have been long. I want to feed them. I need to feed them. If I don't, who will?

My heart? Oh, my father broke it a long time ago. Because of this, when I feel another crack inside my chest, it frightens me. As god is my witness, I don't know how much heart I have left. Both my own history and these train boys are slowly grinding what is broken inside me into a dust. So. I make soup. I cannot sleep when I think that the only thing these children will take into their bodies are the half-finished cigarettes that others toss away.

Fourteen, thirteen, twelve. Friends, brothers. Sometimes, not often, a girl. They are each other's train family—road cousins. They hide on top of *La Bestia*. It is illegal, yes, but there is not much the authorities can do. How can they stop these traveling children when there are hundreds of them riding *el tren de la muerte* each week?

I was once one of them. I made it to the U.S. Two times. Both times, I was sent back. After months in the Migrant Children Detention center, I was happy to be returned to my mother. It didn't matter how good they were to me. It didn't matter how good I was at my lessons. I still felt locked up. Like they were keeping me in a prison. The first time I thought: I did it! I made it! But that America was not like the one on television. TV America is everywhere New York.

After the first time, I thought I would never ride *la bestia* again. But I had to. For my mother. To build her a house with her own bedroom. So she could stop selling food on the street. I wanted to put money in her hands and say, "This is yours. No more cutting your own hair."

I thought that finding my father in America would be the answer to everything. My plan was simple: I would tell him exactly where and how my mother and I had been living, and he would help. Side-by-side, my father and I would work. Side-by-side, we would sign our names at the end of our letters home. Father and son—we would send her our love. And our money.

At the end of my second journey on *la bestia*, I found my father. A miracle!

He said: "It takes more than one night with your mother to make you my son."

He turned his back to me. He closed his door. And all the walls of my life, already built on crumbling foundations, would have fallen on top of me if I hadn't stepped sideways—out of this old house, into the new.

My mother died one year ago—five years after my last border crossing. But I am still building a house for her in my head. I have counted the windows. Seventeen! Also, all the rooms will be on the ground—no stairs—because I want this house to wrap around everyone who enters.

The first time I went on *The Beast*, I was lucky—I was part of a group, four boys and me. They protected me. We each took it in turns to stay awake and watch out for the others. All five of us had been witnesses to the solo riders. We'd seen how many of them rolled close to the edge of the train while they were dreaming.

When someone rolled off, the train stopped for a moment.

My oldest Road Cousin saw someone roll under the train. He didn't tell us what he saw—how the *Dreaming Boy's* body was cut, how his legs landed a few feet away from his hands—until the biggest part of our train journey was over and we were close to the U.S. border—the border in all of our dreams.

We all thought that when we got to America we would be adopted by new families, born again into the life we were meant for. Of course we thought we were meant for it; we were just the same as the New York boys on TV. Except their houses had kitchens as big as churches. And refrigerators with so much food, sometimes things were piled on top of each other—with a special place for eggs and cheese and meat.

But now, here I am: a twenty-year-old father who feeds these Road Cousins gazpacho when the train stops to catch its breath in the station. The rest of the day, I drive a hearse. This is my job for money. When I am driving, hardly a day passes when I do not have to “repatriate” a child’s body. This is what the authorities tell me to call it when they give me a dead Train Child to take back to his mother. There are so many days I’ve had to “repatriate” a child’s body, it would be easy to lose count.

I have not lost count.

I have repatriated 257 children’s bodies.

Each time I load a small coffin into my hearse, a small country turns to dust inside me.

I have a wife now. She came into my life with a child—my stepson. I love him like he is my own. I make sure to hold my boy every day. I don’t want him to take *el tren de la muerte*.

“I can’t imagine,” my wife says, as she stands in the river washing our clothes. I’m smoking my first cigarette of the day, before I have to drive a dead boy back to his mother. “I can’t imagine,” she says again, “how heavy it must be to carry the death of your child.”

It does not matter how many times my wife says *imagine*. I do not imagine. I make gazpacho. When the train’s engine comes to a stop, the Cousins jump down from its roof, and I step out with my two buckets. Their hunger rids them of their fear of being out in the open. They form a line. I ladle my soup into their plastic cups.