

This story was the canary in the coal mine. I could tell my relationship with David Remnick was going downhill, but confirmation came when he assigned this story at 3,500 words. I'd never heard of a 3,500-word story in The New Yorker. All stories were at least 5,000 words. But the word came down: 3,500 words and no longer. Sure enough, when I handed it in, David pronounced it "cursory" and killed it. I should have known then I was in trouble.

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Grupo Beta.13

In the Mexican village where I used to live, my daughter and her friends played "wetbacks and Border Patrol" (*mojados y Migra*) the way I used to play cowboys and Indians. They would sneak through nearby sugarcane fields and cow pastures to a parklike hilltop they called "Los Angeles," while I – invariably forced to play *La Migra* -- would try to catch them.

The game always ended the same way. I'd catch a few, but most would slip through and taunt me mercilessly when we met up in "Los Angeles." "Okay," I'd snarl at the ones I'd caught, "I'm deporting you guys tonight!" "No matter!" they'd sing, knowing exactly how the real border works. "We'll try again tomorrow!"

These kids had never seen the border any more than those of my own youth had seen Apache country. But like the Frontier of my New Jersey boyhood, *la frontera* looms large in the mythology of Mexican children. Most of my daughter's friends had fathers or brothers up north; one Mexican in ten lives in the United States, about half illegally. The wages they send home are said to be Mexico's third-biggest source of income after tourism and oil. But Mexicans don't only go north for the money, any more than young Americans join the military out of pure patriotism. A stint in the United States is a rite of passage, a taste of independence from the cloister of village and family life. It can be a money-loser; the high cost of living up north may more than offset the low-wage jobs they find, and many end up returning home with nothing. Yet they continue to go, and encourage their little brothers, nephews, and sons to go. In Mexico, there's nothing shameful, aberrant, or criminal about breaking U.S. immigration laws by dashing across the desert. As far as most Mexicans are concerned, the American southwest and California are rightfully theirs anyway, stolen by perfidious nineteenth-century treaties. Barging north is a Mexican tradition, and a proud one.

Consider the centerpiece of the hot, grimy bus station in the Baja California border town of Tecate. Rising from a gray linoleum floor Jackson Pollacked with cigarette butts, candy wrappers, and the sticky

glaze of spilled soda is an incongruously spotless display case glowing with a backlit poster of Mexican President Vicente Fox. In rolled-up shirtsleeves, his craggy, mustachioed face softened into a warm smile, Fox spreads his arms in the welcoming embrace of the Christmas season night. "Dear Countryman," reads the text. "Like you, a million two-hundred thousand Mexicans return to their country in this season, and this time we have prepared like never before to receive you. I, personally, am going to be determined that during your travel and stay in Mexico you receive the treatment you deserve. Welcome home!"¹ Three hundred yards north of the bus station, border jumpers are reviled as criminals; here, they're heroes, worth a presidential welcome.

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The border became deadlier in 1994, when the Clinton administration launched two initiatives – Operations Hold the Line and Gatekeeper – that toughened border enforcement around El Paso, San Diego, and other border cities.² By necessity, migrants began circling farther into the searing desert and the freezing hills, and the death toll rose: migrant deaths have increased sevenfold since 1995. After the attacks of September, 11, 2001, border enforcement grew stricter still, with the introduction of the National Guard, and in the fiscal year that

¹ File "Fox poster"

² file "2002 Border Patrol interview"

ended September 30, four hundred forty-one migrants died.³ As their advocates like to point out, more people die trying to enter the U.S. each year than died jumping the Berlin Wall in its entire twenty-eight-year history.⁴ So while the United States Border Patrol combs the desert north of the line, trying to arrest them, a Mexican agency called Grupo Beta prowls south of the line, trying to keep them alive.

The Tecate office of Grupo Beta is a brightly painted cement cube on Eighteenth Street, about a mile from the bus station. One recent morning, six Grupo Beta agents milled around out front, loading flats of bottled water into the beds of three bright-orange pickup trucks whose tailgates bore their motto, "*Protección de Migrantes.*" In the back of one, between the spare tire and some gasoline cans, lay a knee-high cement cross. Felipe Flores, a short, balding agent with a round face that relaxes easily into a smile, wore a fire-orange windbreaker bearing the same statement of purpose as the tailgates. Flores was born in Mexico City thirty-eight years ago, studied at the University of Veracruz to be a maritime engineer, lost his seafaring career when the United States embargoed Mexican tuna over dolphin safety, and is mildly bemused to find himself toiling in one of the most waterless corners of the planet. "My penance," he said with a shrug

³ file "441 border deaths"

⁴ file "Berlin Wall deaths." As you'll see, there are no hard figures on this. I've seen everything from 80 to 239. This is a German study, though, and recent, so I'm trusting this. (And just about all the estimates are still less than 441.)

and a laugh, as he ducked inside headquarters for first-aid supplies. He rifled the metal shelves of his supervisor's office: a few bottles of peroxide, some half-used packages of over-the-counter medicines, and, on a shelf marked "*antidepresivos*," four boxes of Firecracker: The Original Giant Red Hot Pickled Sausage. Flores put a couple of Ace bandages in his windbreaker pocket and on the way outside, stopped to pack up emergency rations for hungry migrants: sandwich-sized Ziploc bags, each containing two airline-sized packets of soda crackers, a plastic spoon, a paper napkin, and a can of tuna. "This is as close as I get to tuna now," he said with the same woe-is-me shrug. Each bag also held a pamphlet folded to the size of a credit card, advising migrants to mix sugar, salt and lemon juice into their water to help prevent dehydration; to put garlic in their clothes to avoid being bitten by animals; and to remember that "authorities have no reason to ask you for money." "As a Mexican migrant," the pamphlet concludes, "you have the right freely to transit your national territory."⁵

"This is their country," Flores said, shivering as he stepped out into the morning chill. "There's no law against walking in the desert."

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⁵ file "pamphlet 1"

Grupo Beta's main job is to find migrants before they reach the border and try to talk them into turning back. Flores often carries an album of photographs to show would-be border-crossers the bloated and desiccated corpses of those who didn't make it. "Hardly any take my advice, no matter what I show them," he said, as we climbed into his truck. "They want to get across. They're paying a lot of money to the *pollero*." The term, chickenherd, used by agents and migrants alike, derives from the way a trafficker in human beings shoos his clients across the sands. While drug traffickers are folk heroes in Mexico -- because they export their misery, tip big, and subsidize an entire genre of Mexican music, the *narcocorrido*, which lionizes their exploits -- *polleros* are universally reviled, because they prey on Mexicans. Nobody sings about them.⁶ "Scum," Flores called them. "The worst of the worst." He pulled away from the curb, and the other two trucks fell in behind.

Downtown Tecate, a city of about forty thousand people, appears prosperous. In addition to the vast eponymous brewery, the town hosts more than a hundred *maquiladoras*⁷ -- Honeywell, Toyota, Plantronics -- and many of the gaily painted beauty shops, shoe stores, and bootleg-DVD shops we passed had "Help Wanted" signs in their

⁶ I've been to many record stores in Mexico over the years, asking if there are any *pollerocorridos*, and have never found any. The people I ask are disgusted by the thought.

⁷ File "Tecate maquiladoras". The company names are of factories I saw myself.

windows. Before plunging into the desert, we stopped at a scarlet-painted restaurant, where the group settled into white plastic lawn chairs around a long folding table and agreed unanimously on *machaca* – a kind of dried-beef hash popular in northern Mexico. The waitress brought it on big oval platters, along with a tall cylinder of warm tortillas and cups of sweet Nescafe. I asked about the agents' snappy orange windbreakers and brand-new pickup trucks; the last time I rode around the desert with Flores, in 2001, he'd been dressed like a migrant himself, in worn jeans and a ragged soccer shirt, and he'd driven a decrepit unmarked Jeep Cherokee that conked out several times. He'd also had, jammed in his waistband, a Beretta nine-millimetre pistol whose utility in a long-range gun battle (driving a band of thugs away from a group of migrants) he'd extolled at length. At the mention of guns, everybody at the table started talking at once.

“The thinking in taking away our guns was, you're an agency for the assistance of migrants. They're not criminals. You don't need guns,” Flores said.

“It's politics,” said Luis Delgado, who wore a hip Van Dyke beard and never removed his wraparound shades. Like Flores, Delgado is college educated; he studied accounting for five years at the University of Tijuana. In 2002, Fox's government decided to soften the profile of Grupo Beta, and differentiate it from the heavily armed U.S. Border

Patrol.⁸ Fox issued Grupo Beta a fleet of new trucks, and orange windbreakers. He also took away the agents' guns and put physicians in charge of their fifteen offices along the border.⁹ "The government thinks we're the Red Cross," Flores said, "but this is police work."

At the end of the table, his boss, a physician named Luis Hernandez, pushed away his plate and lit a cigarette. Hernandez, dark-skinned and round-bellied in a tight-fitting golf shirt, used to run the emergency room at a psychiatric hospital and must surely be one of the last physicians anywhere who chain-smokes Marlboro Lights. He indulged his agents' critique of the policy change that put him, as a doctor, in charge. "A migrant sees a cop, he goes the other way," he said in a slurred Tijuana accent so strong that his lips barely moved. "We want them to come to us. As a doctor, I understand better the psychology of this."

Flores snorted. "With these new colors they can see us a long way off," he said, pinching the sleeve of his windbreaker. "The *polleros* run off alone, and abandon the migrants. Or they yell, 'run!' and the migrants go tearing off, into barbed wire and thorns, and hurt themselves."

⁸ this is how the chief of the Tecate office, Luis Hernandez, explained it to me. He, Flores, and Delgado can be reached at 011-52-(665) 654 24 49 or jlhernandez@inami.gob.mx

⁹ file "list of offices" from a Grupo Beta pamphlet

Though there's no law against "walking in the desert," it is a felony, in Mexico, to be a *pollero*; the sentence is six to twelve years in prison. Grupo Beta agents carry handcuffs -- which in Mexico are called *esposas*, or "wives" -- and are authorized to arrest *polleros*. Without guns, though, that's almost impossible. Not only are the *polleros* themselves dangerous, the desert also crawls with bands of armed thugs who prey on migrants. They keep their guns buried in the hills, Flores said, and dig them up to go marauding. "They have everything; revolvers, shotguns, even the goat's horn," which is what Mexicans call the AK-47, for its long curved magazine. Delgado, the accountant, chimed in with the economics of desert robbery. "The migrants don't carry much money -- twenty dollars, thirty dollars, but you get a group of ten or twelve, that's something."

To the right of Flores sat two quiet men with little appetite, their faces baggy with grief. Augusto and Rodrigo Mendieta, brothers in their forties, had arrived at the Grupo Beta office around dawn, from Quito, Ecuador. They were on their way to see the spot in the desert where Augusto's twenty-one-year-old son, Gabriel Alejandro Mendieta, perished. Working in his father's small auto-parts store last summer, Gabriel, a burly, baby-faced boy who favored a shaved head, had been seized by a desire to visit his mother and sister, who live in Long Beach, New York, on Long Island. "Three times he tried to get a tourist

visa," said Augusto. "Three times they turned him down. But Mexico gave him a visa." Gabriel called Augusto from Tecate on July 22, saying he was about to make the illegal crossing. Then he disappeared.

Flores picked up the story, the Mendieta brothers listening intently. "I got a call from the municipal police on July 27," Flores said. A rancher on the Mexican side of the border had found a shirtless, unidentified corpse. Flores photographed the body and opened a file on it, but had no way of knowing who it might be. A missing-person report, filed by the Ecuadorian embassy at Augusto's request, never made it to Grupo Beta Tecate. "Five or six days ago, *el señor* started calling Grupo Beta offices himself," Flores said. "We looked back at our files, and found that unidentified body from July." He faxed photos to the Mendieta.

It wasn't the heat-disfigured face that identified Gabriel for his father; it was the plaid boxers and the khaki pants with the cargo pocket on the knee. Now Augusto and his brother were on their way to mark the spot near the border where Gabriel died. Flores whispered that this was only the second time in his eight-year career that a relative of a dead migrant had come along to do such a thing. Grupo Beta doesn't mark the spots where migrants die.

Augusto pushed the *machaca* around on his plate. "I've been a Catholic all of my life," he said in a tone of quiet bewilderment. "But my brother is an evangelical Christian. I might join his church. It's a more direct relationship with God. I need that now."

Delgado, in his wraparound shades, lightened the mood by showing around a ticket stub from Disneyland, where he'd recently taken his family. As employed men with jobs, families, and bank accounts, Grupo Beta agents often get multiple-entry tourist visas to the United States. "You don't always make it, though," Delgado said. "It all comes down to the interview. If the immigration guy at the consulate doesn't like the look of you, that's it. You don't get the visa. And then you have to wait a whole year to apply again."

From around the table came ruminative murmurs of a phrase so common in Mexico, and so emblematic of the talent for acceptance that being neighbors with the United States requires, that it may as well be inscribed on the currency: "*Así es.*" That's how it is.

Flores took the Disneyland ticket and his eyebrows launched skywards. "Sixty-three dollars!" He whistled. The agents said they take home the equivalent of two hundred and fifteen dollars a week. All eyes swiveled toward Dr. Hernandez, their boss.

"Check please," he said.

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Grupo Beta agents feel a kinship with the migrants they are commissioned to discourage. "No, I never wanted to live in the United States," Flores said as he piloted the truck eastward, second in the convoy. "I don't know why; it just didn't appeal to me. But my cousin went, my friends went. It's an adventure, an idea, a dream. It's like, 'I want to have the pickup truck. I want to come home with the gold chains and two cellulators.'" Illegal immigrants may look like the wretched of the earth when captured by *La Migra* after days of walking in the desert, they may keep their eyes down when bussing tables or waiting for day labor in a Home Depot parking lot. But many, if not college educated like Flores and Delgado, are from their economic class. It takes money, connections, and bravado to embark upon the journey. Many of Mexico's poor can barely imagine what's in the next valley, let alone muster the resources or vision for a trek to the United States.¹⁰

At a sign marked "Rancho Eden," Flores turned north toward the border on a deeply rutted sand road. I asked him how a boy like Gabriel Mendieta – who had no experience with the American border – would have found a *pollero*. "He'd have gotten off the bus in Tijuana and been spotted by the *enganchadores*" – the hooks. "The

¹⁰ this is not only my own observation of eight years of living in Mexico and writing about migrants, but is also supported in a recent World Bank study, found in the file "World Bank migrant study."

enganchadores wait in the bus station, in the cathedral, in the park. They look for the young men, the ones who look scared and confused. And they say, 'do you want to cross?'" Flores imagined Gabriel's trip: He would not have been carrying much money. The *enganchadores* would have walked him to a public phone, called his mother in Long Beach, and agreed to deliver him for, say, fifteen hundred dollars. They'd have taken him to a house or a hotel room and kept him there until they had five or six more migrants. At that point, they'd have sold him and the group to a *pollero* for about a hundred dollars apiece. "It's a little chain," Flores said. After gathering migrants from several Tijuana *enganchadores*, the *pollero* would have driven them a couple of hours east of Tecate: since Operation Gatekeeper, there's too much Border Patrol in the vicinity of Tijuana. The *pollero* would have walked the group into the desert, moving by night and resting by day. From where most set off east of Tecate, it's a walk of about five miles, in soft sand and with little shade, to the border.

Flores slowed to avoid the dust cloud raised by the truck ahead. "This is why the *polleros* don't drive across the border," he said. "The Border Patrol can see the dust. Even at night; they have the cat's eye" – night-vision goggles. Grupo Beta's night-vision equipment is "an old thing from Russia. You have to wear it like a helmet. It's pretty useless." That and the lack of guns impel Grupo Beta to patrol only by

day, when the migrants are sleeping. When the agents are lucky enough to stumble upon a group, the migrants rarely rat out their *polleros* -- not only because they need them as desert guides but because the *polleros* know who their relatives are. Betrayed human traffickers have been known to take revenge. For the same reason, Grupo Beta agents address each other by number instead of by name when using the radio, a habit they reinforce when face to face, as in, "Thirteen, pass the salsa," or, "Three, you got any cigarettes?"

After half an hour, Flores bumped to a stop on a little rise, about forty yards from the rusted iron wall of the border, and we climbed out of the trucks into a brisk warm wind. Flores led the Mendieta brothers to a cluster of mesquite bushes. "This is where Gabriel died," he said. The ground was strewn with plastic water bottles, bits of cloth, empty tuna cans. It was a well-traveled spot. Delgado dug a small hole, poured in powdered cement, and upended several water bottles. He stirred it, then went to the bed of his truck and lifted from it the knee-high cross of cement, which he hefted to his shoulder. He fitted it carefully into the gluey foundation, twisting it down until he'd seated it well. Etched on its front was: "Gabriel Alejandro Mendieta, 11/9/84-24/7/06, Ecuador." The agents stepped away, and the brothers knelt before the cross with their heads bowed. Rodrigo, the uncle, closed his eyes to lead a recitation of *Padre Nuestro*, the Lord's prayer. "You send

us on a path of pain to strengthen and purify us," he finished. "We don't understand, but we follow you."

"Look," Flores said. He bent to reach under a mesquite bush and held up a black t-shirt emblazoned with a gray rhino.

"That's his," said Augusto. He pressed the shirt to his nose, and for the first time all day, his eyes filled with tears and his lip quivered. "It's the biggest mistake they make, taking off their clothes," whispered Dr. Hernandez. "They dehydrate faster."

Less than a mile away, on the United States side, lay a sprawling ranch complex: in the foreground, a green-and-white dot moved toward us, a Border Patrol truck. Flores figured Gabriel's group jumped the fence, spotted the Border Patrol, and clambered back over. The exertion, in the July heat, may have been too much for a heavysset boy accustomed to the temperate, high-altitude climate of Quito. "A woman called Gabriel's mother in New York and asked if Gabriel had asthma," Augusto said. "He didn't. She also said the whole group got across. It was lies. They abandoned my boy."

If the trip had gone as planned, Flores said, Gabriel would have made it another five or six miles beyond the border to California Highway 94, where he would have been sold with the others to the next link in the chain, probably an American, for about a thousand dollars apiece. "That last buyer speaks English, and can move around

easily without attracting suspicion." The buyer would have taken Gabriel to a McDonald's or some other public place nearby, to meet Gabriel's mother and collect the big payout. He would have cleared several hundred dollars.

The corrugated steel wall that runs within a few bounding steps of the monument to Gabriel will be replaced by a seven-hundred-mile long fence, a bit taller and embedded with sensors, if the will of Congress in recent legislation is matched with funds. None of the Grupo Beta agents think the super-fence will deter migrants. "They'll go over, they'll go under, they'll use dynamite," said Delgado. "Make it fifteen feet high, the migrants will get seventeen-foot ladders. *Así es.*"

"They'll have even more accidents, and probably more deaths," Flores added. "You'll have people hitting their heads. You'll have fractures. And the people who have fractures, the *polleros* leave them." I mentioned that it's expensive for a *pollero* to abandon a migrant for whom he's paid a hundred dollars and upon whose delivery he stands to increase his investment ninefold.

"The *pollero* has a whole bunch of migrants to get across," said Delgado, the accountant. "Losing one is a cost of doing business."

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Driving back toward Tecate, Flores gestured to the north at a stony outcropping from which jutted a huge American flag.

“Minutemen,” he said with a laugh. He turned toward it, onto a road that was, if anything, longer and dustier than the road to Gabriel’s monument. It too ended at the iron wall.

Three men stood on the outcropping, watching us through binoculars. A German shepherd stood beside them, ears pricked. We parked and trudged to the wall. An aluminum plinth stood on the Mexican side, embossed with the snake-eating eagle of the Mexican flag and the words, “Boundary of the Republic of Mexico. Treaty of 1853, reestablished by the treaties of 1882 and 1883.”¹¹ Immediately behind the plinth, someone had cut a one-foot-square hole in the iron fence; big enough to talk through, but, with the plinth in the way, too small for egress. In the hole appeared a wizened face with a mustache the size of a croissant. It crinkled into a wide smile. “Welcome!” the face shouted, raspy-voiced, and for the benefit of Flores, “*Hola!*” Through the hole, a hand poked a business card that identified the face as Robert “L’il Dog” Crooks, Patriot Point Posse, Mountain Minutemen, “In a Canyon Near You.” I put an arm through the hole and extended my card, which prompted a speech.

“We’re here to make a statement that this border needs help in order to preserve our sovereignty,” Crooks said. “We need to make changes in the policies of both governments to take better care of the

¹¹ File “plinth”

Mexican people. This invasion could be stopped if the Mexican government was better able to provide for its own." I stooped and peered through the hole. A younger man appeared beside Crooks, and warily extended his hand. "Steve Wilkins, from New York," he said. "I spent thirteen days at Ground Zero. If they're able bring a pound of heroin across the border, they can bring a pound of plutonium." He spoke into his cellphone: "Shoot that photo to my phone."

"What photo?" I asked.

"You," he said.

"May I see it?"

"No."

A Border Patrol car pulled up and an agent in a sharply creased green uniform, whose breastplate identified him as R.M. Carr, stepped out. He greeted the Minutemen by first name. When Crooks held up my card, Carr raised both hands in mock horror, backed away, and drove off without saying another word.¹²

"Tell me the Spanish are bad people and I call you a liar," Crooks said. "My biggest thing is the drug trafficking. We've got to get a handle on that. But if both governments were more capable, there'd be no border issue." He poked a long finger at Flores. "These Grupo

¹² R.M. Carr did say that he was based in the Border Patrol's San Diego office. (619) 216-4000

Beta boys are a blessing," he said. "We need more of them." To Flores he called, "Vaya con dios!"¹³

Walking back to the truck, Flores said, "This is part of what we warn the migrants about. We say, 'There are Minutemen. They're racists. They have guns.'" He sighed. "This whole situation is so dangerous."

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After the encounter with Agent Carr, I called the Border Patrol office in El Centro, California, which is responsible for much of the desert across from Grupo Beta Tecate's territory. Agent David Kim said the Border Patrol and Grupo Beta are cordial, if not particularly well coordinated. "Every time I've personally come across Grupo Beta, I've had pretty positive interactions," he said. "Often, they'll stop and talk across the border. We'll ask, 'have you seen any people?' and they'll say things like, 'if you go five miles to the west, you'll find camp sites.' If there was more of that, I think we'd reduce our deaths more." Flores had told me it's gotten harder for Grupo Beta agents to talk to the Border Patrol -- that since September 11, an agent can no longer radio directly across the border to a green-and-white car, but instead must call his own office, which calls the Border Patrol office, which relays the message to the green-and-white car. Kim hadn't heard of that rule,

¹³ Robert Crooks 805-450-2788 casamigrand@yahoo.com

and said that, as far as he could tell, Grupo Beta agents simply chose not to talk much to their American counterparts. "If they see a group of migrants and don't call the Border Patrol, that tells you something," Kim said.¹⁴

The day after visiting the site of Gabriel Mendieta's death, the agents and I ventured into a lower, hotter, more hostile desert farther to the east, visiting water tanks that Grupo Beta maintains to replenish the migrants' supplies, and topping them up from jerrycans. At noon, the agents found fresh footprints in the sand and piled out of the trucks to examine them. "About eight people," Delgado said. "Early this morning." We followed the tracks on foot for a while, zig-zagging like hunters, until the agents were sure the tracks were headed for the next water tank.

Fresh footprints, food wrappers, and abandoned clothing surrounded the tank. In the sand, we found twenty-one nine-millimetre shell casings. The tank was almost empty, and the agents tipped several jerrycans of water into it. Delgado unloaded a fat-tired, orange four-wheeler from the back of a truck, and he and I rode it out among the crucifixion thorn and ocotillo, following the tracks. After a couple of miles, we passed a small, white-painted cement ingot, and

¹⁴ Agent David Kim, (760) 352-3241

Delgado yelled, "That was the border. We're now in the United States. Woo-hoo."

He made a wide arc and we rode back toward the water tank, carefully checking every arroyo and pocket of shade we passed. When we'd rejoined the others, I asked if they were going to report the tracks to the Border Patrol: the migrants still had five miles or more to walk until they reached the highway. The agents wrinkled their foreheads as though wondering what planet I was from. They are devoted to saving migrants' lives, but not to the point of ratting them out to *La Migra*.

"*De ninguna manera,*" Delgado said with a shudder. No way.

End