



“They’ll smuggle anyone across the river, even me, for a handful of pesos” AA Gill

While Donald Trump plans his wall to keep migrants out of the US, Mexico is facing a refugee crisis as bad as Europe’s. Every year, 400,000 desperate migrants from Central America pour across its borders. *AA Gill* joins them on their perilous search for sanctuary. Photographs by *Patrick Tombola*

Border towns all seem to be looking over their shoulders: they have secrets, places to be. This one squats on a river at the edge of Mexico; the main street runs into the scrub on the bank.

There is a mural of a grinning coyote chasing a chicken — a dark joke for people who don’t have a lot to laugh at. Coyotes are the names given to smugglers; chickens are the people they trade in.

It’s early, but already the day is hot. On the riverbank there is a smell of charcoal, frying tacos and sweat. Men in dirty vests and shorts

struggle to deposit goods onto makeshift jetties, where rafts of planks lashed to inflated inner tubes strain on skinny ropes. The business here is running cornflakes and motorbike parts, ketchup, tampons, probably a few drugs, a little light armament, information, messages of regret, apologies, threats, promises, despairing love and, of course, people.

They smuggle lots and lots of people here. No questions asked, they’ll smuggle anyone: me, for instance. For a handful of pesos, a coyote will take me over the border. I’ve never actually met a people-smuggler before. Mine’s briskly friendly, a plump man, benignly Mexican, with a droopy moustache. He doesn’t look like a

kidnapper, another favoured local profession, but I’ve never met a kidnapper, either. He has hard, hairy hands and a gondolier’s boater. The hat may be ironic.

The river, broad and viscous, shimmies and curdles in clay-coloured swirls of sticks and dead stuff. The little barque is precariously unstable. I squat among the boxes of snack food and sanitaryware as we pole out into the current. My smuggler strains and grunts, punting for the further shore as we spin downstream.

A quarter of a mile on, there is a bridge that is the official border. Guards must be able to see us, but are unconcerned. This is not the Rio Grande, I’m not being smuggled into the United States; we’re at the other

end of the country, in the southern state of Chiapas, where Mexico meets Guatemala.

The Guatemalan border town is a mirror of the one I’ve just left. It is perhaps a little seedier, the wailing music a bit louder, with dozens of shops selling charitably cast-off American clothes. After half an hour, I walk back down to the river and find another coyote to smuggle me back to Mexico, this time with a huddle of giggling Guatemalan women, going for a day’s duty-free shopping.

The story about Mexico and migrants, as seen from the US, is all about Trump and his

CAST ADRIFT Migrants and locals cross the border illegally to Mexico from Guatemala

wall and wetbacks; but the truth is that the crisis is down here in the heat, unseen, unnoticed. Last year, an estimated 400,000 people came across this border, fleeing the murderous triangle of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. Mexico is a net recipient of refugees, but few outside this unforgiving place know or care that it receives almost the same number of desperate souls who fled Syria for Europe last year. There is nobody here handing out bottled water and fresh fruit, offering festival tents and Instagram selfies with National Theatre actresses.

Licho is a big man who seems to be folded up in a corner of his own body. He has solemn brown eyes, a downturned mouth; I have to lean in to hear him. He works on the illegal

dock humping goods, people. Back home in El Salvador, he was a butcher. “A gunman came and shot my father in front of me. I picked up a machete and killed him.”

“Why didn’t he shoot you?”

“No more bullets.”

Licho was 18. He went to jail for seven years. “I’m pleased,” he whispers. Maybe he means proud. “I paid for my crime. I had to kill for the memory of my father.” He came to Mexico with his wife to escape the inevitable retribution. He has two children. It’s hard, he’d like to go back to see his mother. He’d like to be able to teach his son to be a butcher.

Mauritzi, a spindly, handsome boy, spends his day neck-deep in the thick river. A human tug, he pulls the rafts to shore for a few ➤➤➤

coppers. He, too, would like to go home, but can't. His brother was killed because his cousin was in trouble with the gangs. Then they came for him.

The crisis in these three Central American states has been caused by the carcinogenic spread of gang violence. All of them had systemic problems with corruption and coups in the past; but, contrarily, the gang pandemic was inflicted after the political violence was over. Once the Salvadoran Civil War had come to its exhausted end in early 1992, the US government deemed it a good time to return Salvadoran political refugees and criminals, in particular members of gangs — or *maras* — that had taken over areas of Los Angeles. Two gangs in particular: Mara Salvatrucha, also known as MS-13; and Barrio 18, or M-18.

The gangs quickly took root in the three capital cities: San Salvador, Guatemala City and Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. They don't deal in drugs in the way that the Colombian or Mexican cartels do. They may sell a little marijuana or cocaine on the street, but mostly make their living from protection, backed by operative violence that would beggar the imagination of the mafia. They are constantly at war with each other.

Carlos Umberto, a carpenter, sits in a dingy concrete room with a mattress on the floor, a lavatory in the corner and ragged clothing hanging from a sagging string across the wall. He is here with his wife, Oldin Michele, and two sons. He looks

shocked, his face far older than its 38 years. He paid protection — he calls it rent — of \$15 a week. It was a lot. Then the gang demanded \$50. He sold his tools to pay it. He borrowed more money to buy more tools, and they stole them because he must be rich. Then they demanded his eldest son.

He strokes the lad's head. The boy, no more than nine years old, curls next to his father, who says: "They said they would kill me. They demanded sex from my wife and told her to smuggle drugs into prison inside her." He blinks back the tears. "I ran one night. I got the children and my wife, and we left everything. We have nothing." The boys cling to him with tight, solemn faces.

The cruelty of the *maras* is so terrifying that anyone running from it has the right to claim asylum in another country. These people are the first in the world that the UN has designated as refugees from gang violence. But once across the border river here, they are not safe or secure. They have to register as refugees at an office a couple of days' walk away, and the road has police checks. If they are caught, they will be locked up as illegal immigrants in detention camps. Husbands will be separated from wives, teenage children from their mothers, and there is no hurry to process paperwork.

The detention centres are violent and frightening, so most refugees make their way across country as best they can. Chiapas is rural, it's the mango season and the great plantations of trees are heavy

with pendulous fruit, picked by teams of wiry men. The land is sparse and dry, dramatically bleached. Above us there is always a spiral of *zopilotes*, the black vultures whose carousels mark the thermals and corpses — reminders of the constant presence of unlamented death.

Chiapas has had its own troubles: this is the home of the Zapatistas, peasant revolutionaries who are in a permanent standoff with the government. Many of the people are Mayan; there's a lot of army, a lot of police. Everyone is poor. The refugees make their way through this baked, bitter landscape aiming for the very few charity-run safe houses and the railway. The train north is called the Beast.

Jose and Juana sit in a little courtyard of a safe-enough house with 16 members of their family. Jose's face is taut and pale in deep misery. Children go through the motions of play, but quietly, as a comforting memory, or they just sit and stare. Juana, straight-backed, takes a breath to slip into the terrible depths of her story.

Henry Alberto, her eldest boy, went to school and was brilliant, diligent and good. She has his reports, but she can't read them; she is illiterate. Gangs came and told him to join them. He refused. He wanted to carry on going to school, and then to college. He graduated from school. He had his 18th birthday, and then they came back for him and killed him: graduation, birthday and funeral all in the same week.

Juana dissolves. She sinks under the weight of her story and drowns in tears; her hands reach to touch someone who isn't there. Gaping, salted grief washes over the room. The others drop their heads, turn against the pain. Henry Alberto will forever be the best of them, the exception, unsullied by experience. He was killed by his friends, boys he'd known all his life. She gets his graduation photo: Henry Alberto, looking like a million school pictures in his borrowed robes with a rolled certificate, smiling, proud, relieved, hopeful. His mother's breath is sodden with mourning.

The gangs have a relentless need for children. The attrition rate in their endless turf wars is trench-terrible. Children hold their own and others' lives in such scant regard: the gangs send kids to kill their friends and neighbours to prove loyalty and mettle. If they refuse, their own families are victims of the next child desperate for peer approval and purpose.

Further up the road, now, in the state of Oaxaca. Here is the railway where the Beast rests. It's just a track with dusty boxcars, the rails strike straight ahead into a vanishing point at the foot of shimmering mountains. Horses graze at the weeds between sleepers. This town is featureless, no one stirs, there is no cafe, no bar, everything is shuttered, dead. There are people here; I can hear muttering, a tinny radio, but nobody is out in the street.

At the edge of the town, there's a Catholic shelter for refugees; a handful of exhausted Salvadorans sit in the shade of a painting of the suffering Jesus. I knock on the door, the panel opens and, behind the grill, there's a bad-tempered face wearing cobble-thick glasses, saying: "No one is here. The hostel is closed because there is no water."

The man who runs it finally appears. He talks to me guardedly and says that outside of town is one great unmarked grave. There are countless refugees buried there, who were robbed, raped and held for micro-kidnapping, one of the world's fastest-growing illegal businesses. It is done over mobile phones, demanding a wired ransom, usually no more than \$1,000. Killing is the simplest option for non-payment.

In Mexico, almost 95% of crimes go uninvestigated, and you are more likely to be banged to rights for a parking offence than to be found guilty of a murder. No one really knows what happens to many of the 400,000 refugees who come here. We do know that 170,000 Central American migrants were detained in Mexico last year, and 134,000 were stopped at the US border. Yet only 3,423 asylum applications were made in Mexico.

The police and army are regarded as corrupt and impossible to challenge. Salvadorans mutter that this hostel is not a good place, things happen here, people



Top: Licho fled to Mexico from El Salvador with his wife and two children after killing the murderer of his father. Centre: Juana left El Salvador after her son was killed by gang members. Bottom: Alejandra, a transsexual and former prostitute, with her niece Gabriela

have vanished. They look away and they shrug; best to move on.

A disproportionate number of refugees are women and children, but many are also gay or transgender. Alejandra is in a women's refuge. Her exaggerated, theatrical gestures and expressions show a world-weary but amused sadness. She is transgender, has long, thin hair and a fine-boned face, etched by cigarette smoke and moulded by low expectations. She is also missing a number of teeth.

Alejandra had the most humiliatingly dangerous job in the world. As a street prostitute in terrifyingly macho San Salvador, she was threatened, spat upon, beaten, abused, raped and robbed. "The police locked me up in the dark without food or water for 15 days." She was the lowest form of human life, with no one and nothing to turn to. She waves a dramatic hand through her hair and grins, in the manner of someone practised at defusing fearful situations with submission. She is here in a refuge with her niece, Gabriela, who also used to be male. (What are the odds?)

Alejandra is 41. She says what she really wants is to make a wedding dress, one beautiful, beautiful wedding dress. For herself? "No, no, it will never be for me."

Gabriela, now 19, dressed as a girl and went to school in an act of amazing bravery. "They beat me like a piñata," she giggles behind her hands, her eyes filling with tears. "My brother beat and bullied me constantly. I tried to kill myself, then I ran away, here, with my aunt." She wants to be a cook. They pose for photographs, damaged and lost but made incandescently beautiful by their survival and self-belief.

William, a farmer of 58, has been married for 43 years. His wife was nearly 14 when they tied the knot. He stands and declaims about the farm he lost. Caught between two gangs, he took a gun into the night and fired and fired and fired until he ran out of bullets. He chants a litany of the things he used to cultivate: cucumbers, parsley, coriander, berries, hens, turkeys. He fled only because he knew his sons wouldn't leave without him. Then his strong voice shreds: "I am in hell, I want to go home, I know I will die."

None of the refugees I spoke to said their goal was to get to the United States. Almost all said they would like to go back home, to be safe. There is a passing assumption that most of these people may be refugees when they arrive at the Mexican border, but they'll be economic migrants by the time they reach Texas; that they are on a long conveyor belt, drawn to the land of the free and the fat. Many have relations in America, and certainly they would be safer there than staying here, but the odyssey, with or without coyotes, is still an Everest of hardship and danger, months fraught with anxiety.

I met boys on the road who had lost limbs under the wheels of the Beast, men sent home after years in US internment camps or prisons, who are trying to get back to the



Oldin Michele, 32, and Carlos Umberto, 38, with their sons, Dylan, 6, and Dominique, 11. The family fled extortion and violence in El Salvador



Top: a refuge centre in Oaxaca, Mexico.
Centre: the dangerous railway heading north.
Bottom: Rebeca, a transgender woman who was shot twice, and her boyfriend, Romero

States to be reunited with wives and children they haven't seen in months. And MS-13 and M-18 are spreading across the border like an invasive species. You see their tags graffitied across the walls of hostels and phone boxes. They've come to settle scores, to exact their executions. They circle like the vultures.

There is another tale that is the most extraordinary I think I've ever been told: the story of Romero and Rebeca. Romero is a young man, serious and naive, self-effacing to the point of shyness. He grew up in San Salvador; his father died when he was young. He and his elder brother were brought up by their mother. He looked up to his brother, who looked after him until becoming a local gang leader with M-18.

Romero grew friendly with the woman next door, Rebeca, who was older than him, a political activist from a centre-right party. When he was 15, they began an

illicit affair. It wasn't straightforward: Romero is gay, Rebeca is transgender. She was an activist for LGBT rights.

Then M-18 began social cleansing, killing gay and transgender people. Rebeca's boss was uneasy about her sexuality and told her to bind her chest, stop wearing make-up and dress like a man. She refused; the politician sacked her and arranged for the gang to have her cleansed. A man came to her in the night, a man she knew — it is always a man you know — and shot her twice in the stomach, missing her spine by a fraction. She didn't die, but had 45 stitches.

As soon as Rebeca could walk, she ran. She told no one, couldn't tell Romero — to protect him, and because it was too sad and for the best. But Romero's brother came and found him, and said he knew he was queer and nobody in their family could be a deviant. The boy who had been his protector and a surrogate father now held a gun to his head. He must leave for ever, never return, "never see our mother again". And then he shot him, shot his young brother through the kneecap.

An hour later, their mother returned to find her son bleeding on the floor. He told her that he was gay and heartbroken, that his love had left without a word, and his brother had shot and banished him. His mother said she knew, had always known; she loved her sons, would always love them, but he needed to leave, to flee the country, as his brother would return as good as his word. Imagine, for a moment, being that woman.

Romero fled into the dark, made his way up the most dangerous road in Latin America, to the Mexican border. He found a coyote who would take him across the river. He made his way to the little regional town of Tapachula. He begged in a municipal park, police took whatever money he gleaned, local Mexicans beat him up. He slept on a bench and, one morning, he woke and saw a figure — "a vision". He shouted. His exact words were: "Oh my love, my love it's you!" It was Rebeca. She turned and saw him.

I speak to them in the small room that is paid for by the UNHCR, by you. It is their home. She is still an assertive, dynamic, angry activist; committed, protective. He is quiet and demure. They constantly look at each other, as if to confirm the star-crossed truth of their odds-defying presence. They have a mattress, two chairs, a lot of cosmetics, some elaborate scars — and each other. "Rebeca is your first love, then?" I ask. "And my last," he says gently ■

UNHCR provides shelter, cash, assistance and legal advice to people fleeing violence in Central America. To support its Nobody Left Outside campaign, donate at unhcr.org.uk/ishelter

Ada and her three-year-old son, Brian, fled gang violence in Central America. See their story at thesundaytimes.co.uk/mexico