

Everything is Far from Here

by Cristina Henríquez
(1977 -)

On the first day, there's a sense of relief. There are other feelings, too, but relief is among them. She has arrived, at least. After three weeks. After a broken sandal strap, sunburn on her cheeks, mud in her ears, bugs in her hair, blisters around her ankles, bruises on her hips, boiled eggs, bottled water, sour berries, pickup trucks and train cars and footsteps through the dirt, sunrises and sunsets, nagging doubt and crackling hope—she has arrived.

They tell her to sleep, but that can't be right. First she has to find her son, who is supposed to be here, too. They were separated along the way, overnight, a few days ago. The man who was leading them here divided the group. Twelve people drew too much attention, he claimed. He had sectioned off the women, silencing any protest with the back of his hand, swift to the jaw. "Do you want to get there or not?" They did. "Trust me," he said.

He sent a friend to escort them. When she glanced back, she felt a shove between her shoulder blades. "It's only for a few miles," he hissed in her ear. "Walk."

By morning, the men were gone, the children gone. The friend, a man with sunglasses and a chipped front tooth, said, "I am here to take care of you." What he meant was that they were there to take care of him. Four women. Which they did. Which they were made to do.

"Where is my son?" she asks a guard who speaks Spanish. He shrugs in reply. "¿Mi hijo?" she asks anyone who will listen and many who won't. "He's five years old. He has black hair, parted on one side, and a freckle, right here, under his eye. He was wearing a Spider-Man shirt." People just shake their heads.

"There's a family unit," one woman says, pointing down the hall. "They have cribs," she adds, as if that's something.

In the family unit, which is one large room, she searches every crib. She gazes down at infants and eight-year-olds curled against the bars. She scans the faces of the children watching "Dora the Explorer" on a television set mounted to the wall.

“He’s coming,” a young mother sitting in the corner assures her. She has a child on her lap. “The same thing happened to me. The kids just take longer. They don’t walk as fast. Mine got here a whole week after I did. Everyone makes it eventually.”

She wants to believe that’s true.

The first night, she lies in a bed and listens to the noises of the women in the room with her. Dozens of them. They’re stacked neatly in bunk beds, like bodies in a morgue, and she stares at the bowing mattress above her, the straining metal coils, worried that they will not hold. She considers the possibility that the gray-haired woman who clambered up there earlier and who is snoring there now might fall through and crush her to death. She begins to laugh. What if? After everything? What if that’s how it ends? The sound of her laughter blooms in the dark. From across the room, a voice asks, “What the fuck is so funny?”

They let her store: her clothes, her broken leather sandals, a plastic comb, an elastic hair band. They let her keep: the silver wedding ring she still wears even though her husband died four years ago. They take: her pocketknife (no weapons), a sleeve of Maria cookies (no food), a tin of Vaseline (no reason).

In the morning, there’s a count. In the evening, there will be another. The guards yank the beige sheet off her bed, balloon it dramatically in the air. “Forty-eighteen, clear!” They move down the line.

It’s a warehouse, this place: cement floors, fluorescent tube lights in the ceiling, flyers taped to the painted cinder-block walls—ads for phone services, for immigration attorneys, for psychologists. She takes it all in.

After the inspection, she returns to the processing desk, near the front of the facility. Through the windows she can see a chain-link fence topped with a confection of barbed wire and, just beyond it, an open field speckled with wildflowers and long grass and a few broad trees.

“My son?” she asks the woman sitting at the desk. “Gabriel Rivas? Did he get here yet?”

The woman consults her computer. “Sorry,” she says. “No one by that name.”

She stares at the woman, unsure of what to say.

“Did you check the family area?” the woman asks.

They get one hour to eat. Hash browns and syrup for breakfast. Chicken broth and French fries for lunch. Turkey cutlets and potato dumplings for dinner. So many potatoes. It's a world made of potatoes. There is water to drink, but it tastes like chlorine, and it makes her nauseous.

They take showers in the trailers. The guards control when the water turns on and when it turns off. Soap bubbles skim across the floor.

In the bathroom, which is in a separate trailer, she wads up toilet paper and stuffs it into her underwear. A woman next to her notices.

"Talk to Esme," she says. "She'll hook you up."

She finds Esme in the dayroom, watching TV. Esme offers to sell her a tampon for a dollar, money she doesn't have.

Esme is unsympathetic. She purses her lips. "At least you got your period," she says. "Many of us don't, you know, after what they do. We get pregnant instead."

She marks the days on her arm. A small dot on the inside of her wrist becomes a trail, then a winding chain.

Periodically, new people arrive, escorted by border-patrol agents. A few every week. She watches them with their tattered backpacks, the children with stuffed animals in their arms. When the weather turns cold, people are wrapped in foil blankets as they trudge up the walk.

"Did you see a little boy?" she asks every new arrival. "A boy who looks like me?"

The people glance at her with weary, red-rimmed eyes. Some of them shake their heads. One after the other, none of them him.

What if she's forgotten what he looks like? What if she's gone crazy? What if he's here, lying in one of those cribs, and she sees him every single day without realizing he's her son? What if it's been too long? What if memory fails? What if everything fails, and getting through life is simply learning to cope with the failure? No, she scolds herself. Don't think like that. Don't let yourself give way.

A woman named Alicia arrives from El Salvador with her six-year-old daughter in tow. They sleep in the bed together. They shower together. The girl won't leave her mother's side.

“She’s nervous,” Alicia says, as if there’s a need to explain. “It was a terrible trip.”

“Yes.”

“We’re going to find her father in Minnesota.”

“But this is Texas.”

“Is it far?”

And how, she wonders, does she answer a question like that. Is it far? Everything is far from here, even if it’s only across the street.

She meets with a lawyer, a man in a stained tan sports coat. She asks him how long she’ll be here. She asks him what happens after this. “*Eso depende*” is his answer to both. Then: “Tell me everything. They’ll need to determine if you qualify for asylum, if you have credible fear.” And though she doesn’t want to relive it, she tells him about the day, a few months ago now, that the boys—boys whose mothers she knew from the neighborhood—pushed her off a moving bus and dragged her across a busy intersection, how she kept scrabbling her legs under her to try to stand, and how they kicked her to keep her down. How nobody helped her, how nobody stopped them because nobody knows how to stop boys like that. How they made her kneel in the alley behind the fruit store while they held a gun to her head and all took turns, how they put the gun in her mouth and made her suck that, too, and how when they were finished they said, “You’re in the family now, bitch,” and laughed.

“Why do you think they targeted you?” the lawyer asks.

“I was alone.”

“You’re not married?”

“Not anymore.”

“And you’re pretty.”

She narrows her eyes.

“And men—”

“They were boys.”

“Even more so. We have an expression here: Boys will be boys.”

She feels a rising anger.

“If we go back,” she says evenly, “they will do it again.”

“We?” he asks. “Is there someone else?”

“My son,” she starts, but her voice breaks. She clenches her fists. She digs her nails into her palms, determined not to cry.

At night, lying in her bunk atop the beige sheet, she imagines running back the way she came, retracing her steps through the dirt and the weeds until she finds him standing in the overgrowth somewhere, hungry and cold. She wants to gather him up, to hold him close, to smell the apricot-sweetness of his skin, to feel the fuzz of his ear against her cheek, to say I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry—for what? Had she wanted too much? Safety for herself and for him? Was that too much? It hadn’t seemed like it at the time, but if she hadn’t wanted it they never would have left, and if they had never left she never would have lost him. She wouldn’t have lost everything.

Often now, she wants to scream. Sometimes she does, and then the guards come to restrain her. They hold her arms behind her back. They drag her down the hall and put her in a room, a colorless box with spiders in the corners, until she calms down. But that’s going in the wrong direction. The scream is for help, not for hindrance. Why don’t they understand? The woman in the box next to hers is there because she threw up. To throw up is to disobey orders. You disobey, you get the box. The guards think: The smaller the box, the more we can control them. But everyone else knows: The smaller the box, the more out of control people become.

One day, when the air is damp and the sky is mottled and gray, there’s a protest. People outside hold signs that say “ILLEGAL IS A CRIME” and “SEND THEM BACK WITH BIRTH CONTROL.” People hold American flags over their shoulders like capes. Superhero Americans. She imagines them at home in their living rooms, a bowl of dog food by the door, a cup of cold tea that has steeped too long on the counter. She imagines them laying the poster board on the floor, uncapping markers, drawing the letters, coloring them in.

Esme lost her baby. She left that part out.

“She had a miscarriage a few weeks after she got here,” a woman named Marta tells her. “Gracias a Dios that she didn’t have to carry it to term. Her body released its own pain.” Marta stops and shakes her head. “They don’t take care of nobody in here, see. They don’t care who we are. It’s easier to fuck somebody than to give a fuck, you know?”

One morning, a woman in a pale-pink T-shirt approaches her in the cafeteria while she’s getting a tray.

“I heard you were looking for your son,” she says quietly.

She looks at the woman—she can’t help it—with delirious hope.

“I might know something,” the woman says.

“Like what?” Her heart pounds. She can hear the echo of it deep in her ears, even amid the clatter and scrape of silverware, the grumble of voices around them.

“Your ring,” the woman says.

For a moment, she’s confused, but then she understands. “Tell me,” she says.

The woman nods at the ring.

“Tell me first.”

A smile spreads like an oil slick across the woman’s face, but she doesn’t speak.

She keeps her eyes on the woman, her round face and her widow’s peak, as she touches the ring on her finger. It’s looser now than when she arrived. She twists it gently and slides it off. She closes her hand around it. When she gives it to the woman, she feels part of herself go numb.

“Tell me,” she says again.

The woman fits the ring over the tip of her thumb. “I heard about a boy they found on the side of the road,” she says. “They took him to a hospital in Laredo.”

“How old?”

“Ten?”

She forces herself to swallow. "No," she says weakly. "My son is younger."

"Oh, is he?"

She nods.

"Sorry," the woman says. "I thought maybe it was him."

She loses track of the dots. She loses track of herself.

Alicia and her daughter are released. Marta is sent back. She doesn't see Esme again.

And yet. Every day she waits for him by the front door. She sits on the floor, knitting her fingers in her lap.

And then—

"Gabriel!"

She scrambles to her feet. Mixed up in a tangle of people, there he is. His dark, combed hair, the freckle beneath his eye. God in Heaven! It's him! She lunges forward and wrests him from the crowd. She falls to her knees and pulls him into her arms. She's so flooded with shock and gratitude that she can hardly breathe. Her nose in his hair, the smell of him almost unbearably sweet. Her hands cupping his shoulders, those same slight shoulders, as small and breakable as eggs. "Gabriel," she whispers again and again. She can feel him shuddering. "It's O.K.," she tells him through tears.

Around her there is cheering. Or is it shouting? Why is everyone shouting? A woman's voice saying, "Don't touch my boy! Mateo!" And why does she feel hands on her now, prying her away, tugging her back as she reaches for him— isn't it him? isn't it? but it looked so much like him!—hands that carry her down the hall, hands that shove her into a room, hands that turn the key in the lock.

She crumples to the floor and blinks in the dark. From inside the box, she screams.

And then one day there are leaves on the trees, and wild-magnolia blossoms on the branches, bobbing gently in the breeze. She will stay in this place, she tells herself, until he comes. Through the window in the dayroom, she watches the white petals tremble, and, in a gust, a single blossom is torn off a branch. The petals blow apart, swirling, and drift to the ground.

She closes her eyes. Where has she gone and what has she become? The blisters have healed, the bruises have faded, the evidence has vanished—everything dissolves like sugar in water. It's easy to let that happen, so much easier to give in, to be who they want you to be: a thing that flares apart in the tumult, a thing that surrenders to the wind.