

FOREWORD BY  
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GENA THOMAS

SEPARATED  
*by the*  
BORDER

A BIRTH MOTHER,  
A FOSTER MOTHER,  
AND A MIGRANT  
CHILD'S 3,000-MILE  
JOURNEY



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## EMIGRACIÓN

### LUPE AND JULIA: 1996–2017

#### FROM ADOLESCENCE TO MOTHERHOOD

Lupe was born in a small town in Honduras in 1983, seven months before I was born in a small town in upstate New York. Not long after Lupe's birth, she was given to her paternal grandparents by her mother. Her mother moved to another city and rarely spoke to her. Her father, Pedro, was heavily involved in drugs.

"I'm going to teach you how to traffic drugs," Pedro told her when she was eight years old. "My friends will be your friends." By the time Lupe was thirteen, Pedro had been arrested and incarcerated. Lupe had to start providing for herself and her grandparents.

Lupe went searching for a good lawyer to try to get her father out of jail. She went to visit Pedro regularly, but after three months, he threatened her, saying, "If you don't get me out of here, I will kill a policeman."

She responded with her own threat: "Don't do this! If you do it, I will not come see you anymore. Or I will take my own life, and it'll be your fault!"

The next day, Lupe returned to bring Pedro lunch and found him looking for a way to fulfill his threat. He punched a policeman, and in retaliation, two policemen violently beat him up.

*I can't defend him. I'm only a child,* Lupe thought.

One of the policemen took that moment to demean her by saying, "The whole world will forget who you are." The weight of those words were palpable; the weight of her life was onerous. She could see nothing on the horizon that gave her hope.

Pedro was moved from the jail to a hospital just as a Category 3 hurricane came through Honduras. His life was nearly taken from him as Hurricane Lili killed five other Hondurans.<sup>1</sup>

Lupe, still thirteen, took her grandparents to a temporary shelter on a high hill. After she went to visit her dad in the hospital, she couldn't get to the hill where her grandparents were, because the wind was too strong. So Lupe went home alone.

One of Pedro's friends had become Lupe's "friend," and he knew she was alone. He entered her home and violently raped her. She screamed and screamed, but the wind, the lightning, and the rain drowned out her cries for help.

The next day, an older female neighbor came and helped Lupe clean up. The neighbor agreed to take lunch to Pedro in Lupe's stead. "Please," Lupe pleaded. "I don't want my father to see me like this." She never told her father what his friend had done.

The neighbor returned and told Lupe the news: Pedro was being moved to a high-security jail about two hours away. With little desire or energy, Lupe went to find a new lawyer. To free up some funds, she sold the house her family was living in. She and her grandparents lived on the streets for two months until she bought a small house from a friend.

Lupe went to see her father, hoping he'd be happy to see her and praise her for having enough money to be able to visit. But it didn't matter to him. "Buy more drugs so you can have a lot of money," he said. "And find a better lawyer." So she did.

The new lawyer told her it would take years for her father to get out of jail, and she began looking for other work to save money to get him out. But selling drugs was what she knew, and she had her grandparents to feed. At one of the parties where she sold drugs, she met a good businessman who wanted to know why she was drinking and selling drugs. She told him her story.

"Come work for me at my grocery store," he said. "You won't have to sell drugs anymore." No one had ever given her such a chance.

Years passed. At eighteen, Lupe fell in love with Jorge, a coworker at the grocery store. The two were happy and in love. She dedicated everything to the baby growing in her belly and to her loving boyfriend. It was a marvelous time in her life.

Before she told any of her family members that she was pregnant, the lawyer told her that her father would be released soon. She cried tears of joy but also tears of fear, because her father didn't know she was pregnant.

The day of Pedro's release, Lupe sent her grandmother to the jail to bring Pedro home. She stayed home to prepare food and welcome her extended family into the home for her father's return.

An hour before the party, Jorge arrived. "Where is Lupe?" he asked one of Lupe's aunts, who answered the door.

The aunt lied. "She left because she was scared of what her father would do."

Jorge left immediately and told his family. They sent him to the United States, scared of what Pedro would do to him. Lupe was heartbroken.

A few weeks after his release, Pedro said to Lupe, "Forgive me for having separated you and Jorge."

"Don't worry," Lupe replied. "I know that all my life I will suffer. You ruined my life."

One month after Pedro was released, his body was found riddled with gunshot wounds. He had died because of a drug deal gone wrong.

Lupe's dad was dead, and her unborn child's dad was thousands of miles away. Not knowing what else to do, she began selling drugs again. And she kept in contact with Jorge. When little Enrique was born, Lupe was full of joy. Not long after Enrique turned one, Jorge returned to Honduras and got involved in his son's life. But he and Lupe never married or lived together. He stayed with his mother, and Lupe rented a separate place.

Four years later, the two had another son together, Fernando. When Fernando was two, Lupe was pregnant again, with Samuel. Jorge

always helped them out, but before Samuel was born, Jorge died from alcohol poisoning.

Lupe searched for better work opportunities as she had five mouths to feed beside her own: two grandparents and three children. She found work four hours away and moved there. Every fifteen days she sent money home to her grandparents and children. Every six months, she traveled home to visit.

Lupe then met Santos and started dating him. He helped her out a lot financially, and he was good to her. Three years later, she was pregnant with Julia. “I’m pregnant,” she told Santos.

“You already have three boys,” Santos said. “I think you should get an abortion.”

Lupe cried all night, as she wasn’t expecting such a response. She prayed, “God, you’ve given me three boys, and you know what Santos said to me. Please grant me this desire: let this be a girl. I will not abort her, and I won’t abandon her.”

“Leave and go home,” responded a divine voice as clear as day. So Lupe returned home and months later gave birth to Julia—alone. She didn’t add Santos’s name to the birth certificate.

Not long after, Lupe’s grandfather fell ill with prostate cancer and lost a lot of his memory. The doctor said he needed expensive medicine, and Lupe began draining her savings to pay for it. Soon she only had about eight hundred dollars left.

Her grandfather, who went in and out of being lucid, told her several times, “Daughter, I don’t want to die.” So Lupe felt pressure to find a way to help him. One day, her cousin came to her, and Lupe said, “I need to find a way to get my grandfather the medicine.”

Her cousin replied, “I’m going to help you get to the United States so you can get a good job. But you have to bring your daughter to be able to pass through the border.”

Though Lupe didn’t want to live in the United States, she was desperate to get the medicine. This, she thought, was the only way to get it.

## A SNAPSHOT OF HONDURAS

Honduras is a large Central American country with an area of about 112,000 square kilometers (about 43,243 square miles), a bit larger than the state of Tennessee. It was a Spanish colony until 1821. The official language is Spanish, and Amerindian dialects are also spoken.<sup>2</sup> The capital and largest city is Tegucigalpa, which is in the central southern area of the country. Further north is its second-largest city, San Pedro Sula.

Tourism often brings travelers to Roatán and Útila, Honduran islands off its Caribbean coast that offer world-class diving. The country also holds the Maya site of Copán, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that displays the history of the Mayan influence in Honduras.

Honduras's population of more than nine million has many inequalities, particularly in wealth distribution. Nearly half of the population lives below the poverty line.<sup>3</sup> In 2012, \$3 billion came into Honduras through remittances, the majority from the United States.<sup>4</sup> This is an important factor, so as you read this book, keep this in mind:

For many developing countries, remittances constitute a large source of foreign income relative to other financial flows. . . . Since remittances are largely personal transactions from migrants to their friends and families, they tend to be well targeted to the needs of their recipients. Their ability to reduce poverty and to promote human development is well documented and often reported as beneficial to overall development.<sup>5</sup>

Hondurans who have family members in the States often also have remittances coming to them regularly. Honduras's gross domestic product (GDP) is 13.8 percent agriculture, mostly bananas, coffee, citrus, corn, and African palm. Industry is 28.4 percent of GDP and services are 57.8 percent.<sup>6</sup>

Digging deeper into the GDP involves taking a closer look at the agricultural crops that make up such a large portion of Honduras's

revenue. The banana industry has not only affected the country economically, it has had a spectrum of other influences over Honduran life that can't be separated from the current dependence on remittances.

The United Fruit Company was an American company that initially included Chiquita Banana, but in 1984 it became Chiquita Brands International and is now encompassed by Swiss-owned Chiquita Brands International Sàrl. For the sake of clarity, I'll refer to it here as United Fruit/Chiquita. It's also important to note that it was an American company until 2014, when it merged with two Brazilian companies.<sup>7</sup> It's one of the leading banana companies dominating the market and having had a hand in Honduran politics throughout history.

“If you think that the economy should serve the people of the country, then [United Fruit/Chiquita] has had a very negative impact [on Latin America],” wrote Adriana Gutierrez, professor at Harvard College, in an article published in the *Harvard Political Review* in 2017.<sup>8</sup> United Fruit/Chiquita has also been involved in political corruption within the Honduran government. During the 1950s, while the company worked hard to successfully overthrow Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz, it was busy in Honduras as well. “Encouraged by some social reforms, the Honduran labor movement confronted United Fruit in a process that peaked in 1954 with a strike that threatened the very existence of the Honduran government.”<sup>9</sup>

Environmental destruction, including deforestation and the use of carcinogenic pesticides, was also part of the company's repertoire. Union activities were often suppressed, and in the 1990s United Fruit/Chiquita began a home-ownership program in Honduras and two other Central American countries that tied workers' jobs to their homes. When workers were fired, they lost their homes, so many stayed under the company's poor working conditions.<sup>10</sup>

A book review in the *New York Times* on Peter Chapman's *Bananas* sums it up well:



Throughout all of this, United Fruit defined the modern multinational corporation at its most effective—and, as it turned out, its most pernicious. At home, it cultivated clubby ties with those in power and helped pioneer the modern arts of public relations and marketing. (After a midcentury makeover by the “father of public relations,” Edward Bernays, the company started pushing a cartoon character named *Señorita Chiquita Banana*.) Abroad, it coddled dictators while using a mix of paternalism and violence to control its workers. “As for repressive regimes, they were United Fruit’s best friends, with coups d’état among its specialties,” Chapman writes. “United Fruit had possibly launched more exercises in ‘regime change’ on the banana’s behalf than had even been carried out in the name of oil.”<sup>11</sup>

I include this information because it’s easy for people like me to think that the Honduran economy is where it is because workers are lazy or picky about the jobs they do. Reading through the history of what multinational corporations—many of which are American—have done in the name of capitalism to the economies of Central and South American countries must make us recognize that our complicity in maintaining the American status quo has led to creating this immigration crisis. Economic colonialism is an effective and ongoing method of our current capitalistic economy.

Sometimes Americans say that immigrants are “invaders” trying to break into our homes and steal our jobs. “We must defend what is ours” seems like a justified response. But this perspective doesn’t take into consideration that, in many ways, America has economically and politically firebombed homes and jobs, propelling people to seek refuge and safety at our borders. When we learn about the history and we hear stories of people involved, we start to see the complex reality beyond headlines and sound bites.

## PREPPING TO LEAVE HER HOMETOWN

*I want to make sure Julia will be taken care of if anything happens to me en route to the United States,* Lupe thought. *I must find a man that can serve as her guardian.* Lupe already had a friend living in the United States: Marta. Marta's brother, Carlos, was also a friend. He was still in Honduras but was planning to go to the United States too.

"Carlos, will you consider traveling with me and Julia?" Lupe asked. "Will you consider becoming Julia's legal guardian? Think about it. It's important that she has protection."

Meanwhile Lupe worked on getting other arrangements set. She talked with Raquel, her aunt—her grandfather's daughter—about keeping him while she was gone. Raquel reluctantly agreed.

"He has to take pills every day," Lupe told her.

"I know."

"But he hates to take them," Lupe added. "He will fight against taking them. I had to be creative and put them in yogurt one day and a drink the next day. If I put them in the same food, he knows and won't eat it. He also does not like taking a bath. He will fight against bathing. But you must bathe him and make sure he takes his pills."

*Will Raquel do what's necessary to keep my grandfather in good health?* Lupe wondered. She would find out much later that Raquel stopped fighting him and therefore stopped giving him his pills. Her grandfather ended up hospitalized with a constant and caring visitor: Lupe's eldest son, Enrique.

Lupe had always been able to lean on her neighbor Anita and her family. These neighbors were more closely knit with Lupe's immediate family than with any extended family. Anita's husband had lived in the United States about a decade, but was currently back home. So Lupe asked, "Would you help take care of my boys while I'm gone?"

"Of course," Anita said. She knew and understood more than she wanted to: the desperation, the separation, the economic need.

Carlos also returned with an answer: "Yes, I will be Julia's legal guardian."

They began the paperwork, paid the lawyer's fees, and waited. Then they went to the Registro Civil Municipal to add Carlos's information to the blank spaces on Julia's birth certificate: ID number, last names, first name, and nationality of the father.

Carlos officially became Julia's stepdad—according to the Honduran government and according to Lupe—and Julia's name was changed to include his last name first. Her birth certificate now bore his name and a note dated October 2017: "A legal change happened."

### **GOING THE LONG WAY**

Joining forces for the long route to the United States is not uncommon for Central American migrants. Lupe set out in the fall of 2017. In the spring of 2018, a similar group of traveling migrants made their way to the border. A journalist for Reuters interviewed a Central American builder about why he'd decided to stay with a caravan of traveling migrants in Mexico.

Salvadoran Andres Rodriguez, 51, waited with a small backpack and a gallon of water in a field sprawling with men, women and children, mulling over a document that gave him twenty days to reach any border out of the country.

Despite knowing the permit protected him, and that traveling alone would be faster, he feared if he left the caravan he would be exposed to the robbery and assault that befall many migrants on the long slog to the U.S. border.

"It's much safer," he said. "Everyone is supporting us. One person alone is much more vulnerable. Much more dangerous."<sup>12</sup>

For women, rape is a true threat. According to an Amnesty International report, "Health professionals report that as many as six in ten migrant women and girls are raped on the journey. And activists repeatedly raise concerns that abducted women and girls are vulnerable to trafficking."<sup>13</sup>

The same caravan that Rodriguez was a part of peaked at a total of 1,500 but then decreased due to anti-immigrant protesting and resistance from President Trump himself announcing that the border

was “getting more dangerous, ‘caravans’ coming,” and as a result there would be “NO MORE DACA DEAL!” . . . “Republicans must go to Nuclear Option to pass tough [immigration] laws.”

A half-hour later, the president threatened NAFTA negotiations and wrote “NEED WALL!”<sup>14</sup>

More than 80 percent of the caravan was composed of Hondurans. Organizers said that many of the marchers were women and children who ranged in age from a month old into their seventies.<sup>15</sup>

President Trump’s reputation toward immigrants preceded him. Lupe was aware of his consistent and negative words toward and about migrants. But she had no idea his policies were already reflecting his sentiments.

There are two other important factors that Lupe did not know. She knew the coyote would charge less to bring a child, but she didn’t know this:

Smugglers in Central America charge less than half the price if a minor is part of the cargo because less work is required of them. Unlike single adult migrants, who would need to be guided on a dangerous march through the deserts of Texas or Arizona, smugglers deliver families only to the U.S. border crossing and the waiting arms of U.S. immigration authorities. The smuggler does not have to enter the United States and risk arrest.<sup>16</sup>

Lupe also did not know that having Carlos’s name on Julia’s birth certificate would not automatically keep him and Julia together in the United States. If Border Patrol<sup>17</sup> used DNA tests to determine the relationship between Julia and Carlos and found they weren’t related

by blood, they could separate the two, assuming they were deterring child trafficking. And if Border Patrol required a marriage license between Carlos and Lupe to prove his stepdad status in the eyes of the US government, the two would be separated because they didn't have such documentation. Even if their paperwork passed, Border Patrol could still separate them, based on the timeframe of their arrival at the border.<sup>18</sup>

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