

A photograph of a man sitting on a wall with peeling green and white paint. He is wearing a white t-shirt, blue jeans, and a red baseball cap. The word 'ILLEGAL!' is superimposed in large, red, distressed letters across his chest. Below it, the subtitle 'LIFE AND DEATH IN ARIZONA'S IMMIGRATION WAR ZONE' is written in black, bold, sans-serif font. At the top of the wall, a sign partially reads 'MEXICAN PUEBLO'.

ILLEGAL!

LIFE AND DEATH IN ARIZONA'S IMMIGRATION WAR ZONE

TERRY GREENE STERLING

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *ILLEGAL*

“What a vivid portrayal of the Arizona immigrant underground. *Illegal* is not afraid to show the brutal decisions immigrants make along with their resilience and strength of spirit. This is the total picture, a heartbreaking one in a state that has chosen to demonize its Mexican residents.”

—Tony Ortega, editor-in-chief
Village Voice

“No one brings you into the illegal immigration underground quite like Terry Greene Sterling. Her gritty descriptions of border crossers, transvestites, and child molesters will linger in your thoughts. Her achingly beautiful accounts of everyday people and tragic situations really stick with you. From Sheriff Joe Arpaio’s bravado to a locked-up mom’s longing for her child, the stories in *Illegal* are strikingly vivid, and the author’s reporting flawless. No one should even attempt to speak on the matter of illegal immigration in Arizona without reading *Illegal* first.”

—Ashlea Deahl, editor
PHOENIX Magazine
and blogger of girlinapartyhat.com

“Arizona is ground zero in America’s immigration battles and Terry Greene Sterling writes about the struggles of the people involved with authority, passion, and compassion. Her insights and observations are detailed with nuance and substance that can’t be acquired by dropping in when the story is hot. This book and her blog, *White Woman in the Barrio*, reflect her ongoing commitment to telling stories about the people in addition to the policies that are front and center in the immigration wars. If you want to understand what is going on in Arizona now, *Illegal* is the book to read.”

—Rick Rodriguez
Carnegie and Southwest Borderlands Initiative professor
Walter Cronkite School of Journalism, Arizona State University

“With painstaking reporting, elegant writing, and a lifetime immersed in the culture, Terry Greene Sterling offers the most important lesson in the debate over illegal immigration: These are people we’re talking about, not statistics. Read this book and borders melt, as the author reminds us again and again that each immigrant has a story to tell. Greene Sterling is here to give voice. A powerful and necessary book, it should be required reading for all.”

—Amy Silverman, managing editor
Phoenix New Times

ILLEGAL

Life and Death in Arizona's Immigration War Zone

Terry Greene Sterling



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I honestly don't know when I learned Spanish. All I can say is I don't remember a time when I didn't speak Spanish, so I must have learned Spanish and English at the same time. This wasn't unusual for children growing up in rural Arizona in the 1950s and 1960s. Like many Arizona ranch kids, I grew up knowing both sides of the border. My extended family raised cattle in Arizona and Sonora, Mexico, so speaking Spanish was just part of life. It wasn't until I entered journalism in 1983 that I became a rare bird—a Spanish-speaking Anglo reporter.

In the seventeen months it took to research and write this book, I conducted scores of interviews in Spanish. I automatically translated into English as I wrote in my notebooks during the interviews. Many of the quotes in the book are my direct translations. For clarity, I removed “uhs” and “ums” from quotes. I did not change their meaning, however.

All the people in this book are real people. I did not make up characters or create composite characters.

I did change the names of most undocumented immigrants and their family members to protect their identities. I did not change the names of undocumented immigrants who were public figures or were named in famous court cases. No scene in this book was fabricated. I witnessed most of the scenes myself. In other cases, scenes and quotes were harvested from court testimony, court records, or police records. Some scenes and quotes, especially those in narratives about life in Mexico, border crossings, and early days in Phoenix were based on extensive interviews with immigrants who had these experiences first-hand.

The chapter notes at the end of this book detail my sources.

I use the term *illegal immigration* to describe unauthorized immigration into the United States. I use *illegal alien*, *illegals*, and *illegal immigrant* only when quoting sources, reporting on documents, or describing scenes.

Although this book is titled *Illegal*, in the text I refer to border crossers without papers as *unauthorized* or *undocumented*.

Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Peace Prize winner and Auschwitz survivor, is credited with first saying what good people on both sides of the nation's divisive immigration debate inherently understand: “No human being is illegal.”

PREFACE

Rodrigo, a Tehuacán transvestite, framed houses by day and seduced married men by night. Joaquín, a painter suffering from end-stage renal disease, deported himself to Mexico City in a desperate quest for a kidney transplant.

Like Rodrigo and Joaquín, most of the people you'll meet in these pages are unauthorized Mexican immigrants who lived in Phoenix during the seventeen months I researched this book. At the time of writing, some of these men and women still live in Phoenix. Others have vanished. This is not unusual.

The undocumented population is impossible to track, let alone count. What we do know for sure is that Mexicans make up the bulk of undocumented immigrants in the United States. The Department of Homeland Security *estimates* that of 10.8 million unauthorized immigrants in the United States, 6 million are Mexicans.

The geography is convenient for border crossers. Mexico and the United States share a two-thousand-mile border. Nevertheless, crossing into the United States is expensive and dangerous. The Mexicans you'll meet risked their lives to get to Phoenix for a number of reasons. Adventure. Ambition. Love. Survival.

Many had no choice but to come north. Most of the poorest Mexicans, the majority of American undocumented immigrants, were pawns in games over which they had no control.

Like free trade.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) took effect in 1994. Its purpose was to stimulate North American economies by removing trade barriers between Canada, the United States, and Mexico.

It ended up causing a mass migration of Mexicans to the United States.

Proponents of NAFTA, including President Bill Clinton, had argued that the free-trade agreement would increase American jobs by beefing up exports to Mexico and Canada, but another convincing argument for some Americans was that NAFTA would keep the Mexicans home.

Former President Gerald Ford put it this way in 1993: "We want Mexicans to stay in Mexico so they can work in their home country. We don't want a huge flow of illegal immigrants into the United States from Mexico."

In fact, NAFTA had the opposite effect.

It supercharged illegal immigration into the United States. About half of today's total of unauthorized Mexican immigrants crossed the line *after* NAFTA took effect.

The reason: Some Mexicans couldn't afford to live in post-NAFTA Mexico. Experts blamed a slew of causes, including the failure of the Mexican government to install sufficient infrastructure to reach manufacturing goals and the failure of the Mexican economy to markedly improve, as NAFTA had promised. Others blamed the United States for subsidizing American corn farmers, who then sold their subsidized corn in Mexico. The result: Mexican corn farmers couldn't compete against American-subsidized corn. Some decided to grow vegetables and berries, but many others came to the United States.

Other global forces shattered NAFTA's promise of better jobs in Mexico. China blossomed as

cheap labor source, and factories that once would have gone to Mexico ended up in China. Ditto India. As a result, some special factories in Mexico designed to create products for export closed down. (The factories, often on the border, are called *maquiladoras*.) That left a lot of Mexican factory workers without jobs, and they decided to come to the United States, right along with the corn farmers.

After the United States opened up free trade with Mexico, its immigration quotas remained antiquated and inflexible. The temporary work visa program was a shambles, and work visas for uneducated Mexicans remained scarce. Further, the American government did not readily grant visas for family unification. If you're a Mexican, you might not live long enough to get to the United States if you stand in line and wait your turn. For example, in 2008, if unmarried adult children of Mexican citizens with green cards wished to obtain a visa to join their parents in the United States, the average wait time was estimated at 192 years. The other option: Hire a smuggler and risk your life crossing the border.

Beyond NAFTA and immigration quotas, other demographic forces drive illegal immigration.

Take, for instance, the inchoate bloodbath initiated in 2006 by Felipe Calderón, the Mexican president. Since Calderón declared war on the drug cartels, or, at least, some of the cartels, nineteen thousand men, women, and children have been slaughtered. Put yourself in the place of a Mexican citizen. You know people are kidnapped, tortured, and decapitated in your country every day. But you don't know who is on what side. You don't know if the guy in the ski mask stopping your car is a Mexican soldier working for a drug cartel or a lone assassin, a kidnapper, or an honest cop.

Mexicans are not pleased with this drug war.

The United States is the biggest consumer of Mexican marijuana and cocaine in the world, and drug trafficking has long been one of Mexico's few reliable sources of cash, right along with oil and remittances from Mexicans living in the United States. Drug cartels employ tens of thousands of Mexicans in legitimate and illegitimate business enterprises.

But even cartels can't put every Mexican on the payroll.

And you just can't get away from the fact that a rich country borders a poor country. A Mexican might earn four times as much in the United States for exactly the same work he did in Mexico.

Almost everyone agrees that immigration has slowed during America's recession, but experts also agree that tens of thousands still cross illegally into Arizona from Mexico.

This, despite billions spent to keep the Mexicans out.

To curb illegal immigration, the federal government began notching up border security in the late 1990s. After 9/11, a decade of fear-based politicking on possible terrorist threats on the border has spurred a frenzy of empire building in the newly formed Department of Homeland Security. President Barack Obama chose Arizona's governor, Janet Napolitano, to head DHS. Governor Napolitano's handling of local Mexicans sparked controversy, criticism, and distrust.

Napolitano's agency includes Customs and Border Protection, which polices the nation's borders and was infused with \$11.4 billion of taxpayer funds in fiscal 2010. Most of the money went into border barriers, technology, and manpower. The Border Patrol employed more than 19,000 agents in 2010, up from 5,878 agents in 1996.

Thanks to an earlier battening down of the Texas and California border, the Grand Canyon State is now the prime portal for illegal immigration into the United States. Today, immigrants braving Arizona's borderlands must navigate ever more treacherous trails slicing through cacti, slicing through Malpais rock, slicing through searing creosote flats, slicing through mountains littered with

human bones, smugglers, kidnappers, Minutemen, and Border Patrol agents.

Their numbers may be reduced, but still, people keep crossing the line.

So, come with me.

Let's take the immigrant trails up from the border to Phoenix, ground zero for the nation's
divisive immigration war, the hunting grounds of Sheriff Joe Arpaio.

The people in the shadows have long hidden from the sheriff.

But they won't hide from you.

They want you to know their stories.

By the Time They Get To Phoenix

Drugs and people are smuggled from Sonora to Phoenix. Money and guns are smuggled from Phoenix to Sonora. The people know they are the most expendable cargoes, so they say their prayers.

Red high heels. A New York Yankees baseball cap. *Star Wars*. Figurines. Dirty diapers. Backpacks. Framed photographs. Gunnysacks. Tuna fish cans. Electrolyte solution bottles. Jackets. Hoodies. T-shirts. Hair ribbons. Human feces. Plastic water jugs. Pink thong panties.

In the years I've covered the Arizona-Mexico borderlands as a reporter for newspapers and magazines, I've come across hundreds of objects of immigrant trash strewn in the desert. The litter had always outraged and saddened me. On the one hand, it seemed disrespectful, contaminating pristine stretches of desert, and killed wildlife. On the other hand, I couldn't help but wonder about the untold story behind some migrant trash. Who abandoned that bright green hair clip beneath the acacia? Who speared those size-five Cherokee blue jeans on the angry spines of an ocotillo?

Each immigrant crossing illegally into Arizona drops an average of eight pounds of belongings during his or her journey, according to federal environmental officials. Even though illegal immigration has declined, tons of fresh trash are still strewn along Arizona's borderlands. Volunteers pick it up. Federal employees pick it up. Cowboys pick it up. Hikers pick it up. Although the trash is offensive, just about anyone who cleans up immigrant trash is moved by some of what the travelers leave behind.

Volunteers who leave water for migrants on the desert trails make shrines out of immigrant trash. I came across one such shrine near Arivaca, a tiny town that sits about twelve miles north of the border. Whoever made the shrine had arranged little stones (in the shape of a heart) around a pile of immigrant trash. A small figurine of the Virgin of Guadalupe, that beloved brown Mexican national goddess-Madonna, overlooked a choppy mound of photos, worn-out athletic shoes, T-shirts, baseball caps, plastic one-gallon water jugs, hooded sweatshirts, backpacks, blankets, and empty bottles of electrolyte solution. There was a cell phone in the shrine, a large black plastic garbage bag that had been fashioned into a makeshift raincoat, a yellow toy truck, an inhaler for an asthmatic, and a small sun-baked Spanish prayer pamphlet called *Oraciones de los Emigrantes*, which literally means *Prayers for Emigrants*.

The fragile booklet was tiny, about three inches square, designed to fit in a pocket of a jacket or backpack. The sun-brittle pages contained prayers to patron saints of travel, prayers appealing for safe passage. But one prayer, in particular, caught my eye. I scrawled a rough translation in my notebook—*Dearest Infant Lord Jesus, who accompanied by your sainted parents Mary and Joseph, knew the bitterness of leaving your homeland for Egypt, we ask you on behalf of all the children who are homeless immigrants and refugees, these children who suffer as you once suffered, we ask that their parents find work, food and a home, and that they always be received with love, that outsiders they meet treat them as brothers, and that you please keep their bodies and souls safe.*



A shrine of immigrant trash in the Arizona desert near the border.

TERRY GREENE STERLING

What would compel a border crosser to ditch the nearly weightless prayer booklet in this thorn desert? Had he or she died on the trail? Had the immigrant been robbed or raped by smugglers or border bandits who'd rifled through a backpack or a jacket, dumping the prayer booklet and everything else on the desert floor in a search for money or documents? Had the migrant lost the prayer book at night, when the smuggler led his group of men, women, and children through mesquite and oak trees and flesh-ripping acacia?

Assuming the person survived, would he or she end up in my city, Phoenix?

• • •

God help the owner of the tiny book of prayers if Phoenix was his or her final destination. The nation's fifth-largest city is also the nation's kidnapping capital, and virtually all the victims are undocumented Mexicans. Phoenix is a major transportation hub for human smugglers, drug smugglers, firearms smugglers, and money smugglers. We'll get to all that later.

You'd be hard-pressed to find an undocumented immigrant in the borderlands who hasn't heard of Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, the self-described toughest sheriff in America, whose famed "crime suppression sweeps" have terrorized Latinos. Phoenix is Sheriff Joe's home base. His fans include neo-Nazi teens, middle-aged Minutemen, an aging Anglo conservative electorate that thinks Mexicans will take over their country, and strong anti-immigrant activist groups.

Phoenix is Arizona's capital, the place where state legislators have enacted some of the harshest anti-undocumented-immigrant laws in the United States. Arizona laws deprive undocumented people of employment, health care, social services, public scholarships at universities, and driver's licenses. A 2010 law criminalizes migrants without papers and requires beat cops to enforce immigration laws.

All of this explains why Arizona in general and Phoenix in particular are at the epicenter of the nation's immigration debate. As the main portal for illegal immigration into the United States, Arizona began passing laws to control immigration in the face of the federal government's inaction over immigration reform. You can understand the initial frustration; millions crossed into Arizona after NAFTA was enacted. What you can't understand is why Arizona's laws became ever more punitive and racist as immigration declined.

Some immigrants couldn't take it in Arizona and moved to friendlier states. Others went back to Mexico. No one knows if the recession prompted them to leave or if Sheriff Joe ran them out. Whatever the case, the number of unauthorized immigrants in Arizona has recently decreased significantly, according to the Department of Homeland Security. In 2008, about 560,000 immigrants were thought to live in Arizona. In 2009, about 460,000 were estimated to live in the Grand Canyon State.

The majority of those still in Arizona are believed to reside in Phoenix.

Separated from their Anglo neighbors by language barriers, cultural differences, and the harshest anti-migrant laws in the nation, undocumented immigrants in Phoenix love, pray, play, sin, suffer, and survive in the shadows.

For migrants, Phoenix can be a living hell.

And yet, they risk their lives to get to Phoenix.

Dispatch from Nogales—about 160 miles from Phoenix

The Border Patrol calls it the “Tucson Sector.” It slices across Arizona from the edge of Yuma County to the New Mexico state line. The Tucson Sector snakes along 262 miles of international border, and more unauthorized migrants enter through it than any other Border Patrol sector that lines the United States.

Prime smuggling corridors travel up from Sonora, a state in northwestern Mexico that borders Arizona, through the Tucson Sector. Mexican drug cartels control their smuggling byways and act like traffic cops. Cartels charge human smugglers, called *coyotes*, for the use of their corridors and take them when they can move people through. Or else cartels diversify into human smuggling themselves. The human-smuggling industry brings in \$2 billion to \$3 billion per year. The drug trade brings in \$3 billion to \$35 billion per year. I got these figures from Terry Goddard, the Arizona attorney general in late 2009.

“It’s like the Underground Railroad,” Goddard said of the smuggling corridors, “and it’s very efficient.”

Which brings us to Nogales, the Tucson Sector’s largest legal port of entry into the United States. It’s also a major drug and human-smuggling center. About one out of five undocumented Mexican migrants enters through a legal port of entry, according to immigration scholar Wayne Cornelius, of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California, San Diego.

Migrants cross through the Nogales port of entry in a number of different ways. They might come hidden in secret compartments in vehicles or cross on foot using bogus or borrowed documents. Or they might travel underground. Nogales is a famous tunnel city—at least forty-seven subterranean passageways between Nogales, Sonora, and Nogales, Arizona, have been discovered since 1995.

Once, Nogales had been an Arizona tourist destination.

For years, Arizonans took out-of-town guests to Nogales for border-crossing day trips. They park at the Burger King in Nogales, Arizona, and walk across the border to Nogales, Sonora. They go to Elvira’s or the Cave and pound down margaritas and Guaymas shrimp seasoned with fresh garlic and listen to *mariachis*. After lunch, they might order handmade cowboy boots, purchase Xanax at the *farmacias*, or wander the streets, bargaining for dirt-cheap Mexican curios. Then they’d cross back over to the Burger King and drive to Phoenix.

Now the twin Nogales communities are slashed apart by a border wall. In some places, the wall consists of a series of tall metal bars that bite into the sky. In other places, the wall is a slab of solid metal splashed with white graffiti. Right in front of the taxi stand on the Sonora side, for instance, someone scrawled *FRONTERAS: CICATRICES EN LA TIERRA*. (BORDERS: SCARS IN THE LAND.) Another sign says *BOYCOTT THE UNITED STATES*. Several crosses with names of immigrants who died during their treks into Arizona are painted on the wall as well.

Many Americans have stopped visiting Nogales, scared off by drug-war carnage. No border city in Mexico has been as brutalized by the drug wars as Juárez, Chihuahua, right across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas. In 2009 alone, 3,637 people were slaughtered in Chihuahua, and most of these killings happened in Juárez. Arizona’s Mexican neighbor, Sonora, was peaceful by comparison. Only 294 people were assassinated in 2009. A lot of these killings took place in Nogales, and it wasn’t unusual for local newspapers to print front-page photos of murder victims splayed on the street with blood pooling beneath their heads. This spooked American tourists. Even more Americans were scared

away in 2009 by the swine flu. Others couldn't tolerate the long wait lines at ports of entry. Still others could no longer afford to travel in a recession.

These days, most visitors to Nogales are Mexican migrants seeking to cross into Arizona.

• • •

One winter day in 2009, I visited Nogales, Sonora. There were few American tourists on the street, and many stores and shops that once catered to Americans were shuttered. The only crowded place seemed to be the *Santuario de Guadalupe*, a shelter for migrants who are either en route to Arizona or have just been kicked out of Arizona by the United States government. A group of weary migrants stood outside the *Santuario* building talking to *coyotes*. In the shadows, street thugs called *cholos* heckled out the immigrants to see if they still owned anything worth stealing.



Alec looked at me through this Nogales fence. KATHY MCCRAINE

Right before dark, I stood in the parking lot of the Burger King in Nogales, Arizona. The few people milling around were migrants who'd successfully crossed the border and awaited rides from relatives or friends they'd summoned on cell phones.

From the Burger King, I walked a short distance to the Dennis DeConcini Port of Entry, where travelers were processed in and out of the United States. (In 2009, border officials destroyed a smuggling tunnel *right under* this particular port of entry.) A white bus with silver trim idled on the other side of the fence, returning Mexicans to Mexico. At first glance, the bus resembled the kind of

motor coach that shuttled tourists to Monument Valley or the Grand Canyon. But this bus was not designed for tourists. It was designed to transport unauthorized migrants. The windows looked as if they were locked down so no one could escape. The interior was designed so that the passengers were separated from their armed guards. The black lettering on the side of the bus indicated that it belonged to the Wackenhut Corporation, a subsidiary of a global security conglomerate known as G4. Wackenhut had recently signed a five-year, \$250 million contract with the federal government to transport migrants to detention, court hearings, and the Mexican border.

On this evening in Nogales, a weary Mexican Consulate official stood in front of the bus, holding a clipboard. An armed guard, a man in his thirties dressed in a Wackenhut gray military uniform and tall black boots, waited at the foot of the bus steps. Several Department of Homeland Security officials chatted as they stood near the tall fence that separated me from the migrants, one world from another.

A second Wackenhut guard with tightly clipped white hair remained in the bus, ushering migrants down the stairs. One by one, the migrants descended, picked up their backpacks from the luggage compartment, and walked over to the Mexican official holding the clipboard.

A young migrant in a gray-and-black-striped long-sleeved shirt came over to me and looked right into my eyes.

“Your country doesn’t want me,” he said.

His name was Alec, and he lived and worked in Phoenix. At Christmastime, Alec told me through the fence, he returned to his family home in Mexico. After the holidays, he had reentered Arizona. He told me he came through a canyon and the mountains near Arivaca. He couldn’t be specific about names, but from his description of the terrain, he likely crossed the border at Sycamore Canyon.

Sycamore Canyon fingers from Sonora through Arizona’s oak-wooded hills. It’s got steep cliffs, pools of water, endangered plants and animals, and lots of cover. Once it was a quiet, hidden spot, but now it’s an immigrant highway in the Pajarito Wilderness northwest of Nogales. Conservationists have long feared that heavy migrant traffic will destroy wild places like Sycamore Canyon and the animals that live there.

This stretch of southern Arizona is famed for its biologically diverse mountain ranges, called “sky islands,” that push up from oceans of semiarid grasslands and desert. Humans and animals have traveled on flat desert corridors in between the sky islands for hundreds of years. But ramped-up enforcement at the border has forced the travelers to abandon the natural corridors and navigate the isolated mountains themselves, through places like Sycamore Canyon.

Sycamore Canyon isn’t a place you’d want to navigate at night, but if Alec took this route, he likely traveled in the moonlight. He would have made his way through tall grasses stiffened with white frost, over large boulders and loose rocks, and through ice-cold ponds of water. If he slept during the day, he must have taken cover beneath oak trees, on dirt that smelled of molding leaves. Many had gone before him. The trail was littered with signs of other migrants—a baseball cap, a backpack, and a tennis shoe bound with silver duct tape.

Alec told me he hoped that by traveling through the backcountry, he would elude the sophisticated sound and radar tracking systems, drones, helicopters, and SUVs that belonged to *La Migra*, which is what Mexicans call the Border Patrol.

He knew that even a well-prepared traveler, toting a backpack crammed with canned tuna, electrolytes, water, sunscreen, blister kits, extra socks, a GPS device, and a cell phone, might die. A

it would take would be a moment of panic—like a dash for cover as a helicopter approached—for man to unthinkingly dump his backpack in order to run faster. He might become separated from his group and be unable to find the tossed backpack and water. In such a condition, he could die of thirst or exposure.

Nothing so terrible happened to Alec. But after hiking for many hours, he was spotted by a helicopter and apprehended by the Border Patrol.

Alec and I couldn't have chatted through the fence for more than a few minutes, but something about us—a blue-eyed gray-haired American chattering away in Spanish, through bars, with a world-weary twentysomething Mexican—had attracted the attention of the guard in the bus.

The guard stared at us, stepped forward, lost his balance, and toppled down the bus steps.

Several uniformed officials rushed over to him. The guard pulled himself up, but he'd hurt his leg and for just a second, he glared at me as though my conversation with Alec had caused his fall in the first place.

The Mexican official with the clipboard, perhaps sensing trouble, beckoned to Alec. I wasn't ready for our conversation to end. I needed a phone number, an address in Phoenix, contact information in Mexico, more of his story. I shouted: "Where are you from?"

Alec looked back over his shoulder.

"Cananea," he said.

Dispatch from Cananea—about 230 miles from Phoenix

My mother died in 2005, but I've still got her ashes in a wooden box on my dresser.

And my father's boxed ashes sit right next to hers. I know it sounds ghoulish, but let me explain. My mother had always wanted her ashes mixed with my father's and buried at the same time, in the same grave, in the family plot in Cananea, Sonora, Mexico. She wanted a Mass said. She wanted the family at the gravesite.

I keep promising myself I'll follow through with my mother's last wishes. I'll get the family down to Cananea, and we'll bury those ashes and we'll attend that Mass in the little church.

I'll do that just as soon as the human smugglers and *narcotraficantes* and kidnapers leave town.

Admittedly, I should have taken care of my funerary responsibilities in 2005, but I put it off. I had already orchestrated a formal Catholic funeral for my mother in Arizona, and I wasn't in any hurry to obtain international permissions, figure out burial permits, find grave diggers in Cananea, arrange a Mass, invite the family, host a lunch afterward.

I was lazy.

Then in May 2007, fifty or so masked gunmen roared into Cananea in SUVs and assassinated seven locals. Mexican state cops reportedly chased the gunmen into the mountains and killed sixteen of them. The official death toll was twenty-three, but Cananea residents aren't convinced that the death count is accurate. They saw bodies being loaded into trucks and whisked out of town.

A few months later, more masked men barreled into Cananea and slaughtered two more people.

Mexican law-enforcement authorities who met with me and requested anonymity (because they didn't want to put their lives in danger) blamed the Cananea violence on *Los Zetas*, ex-military thugs who served as assassins for a Mexican drug syndicate, the Gulf Cartel, and have reportedly diversified into drug smuggling themselves. According to the officials, *Los Zetas* swept into Cananea as part of the Gulf Cartel's ongoing war with the Sinaloa Cartel, which has been running drugs through Sonora and into Arizona for decades.

Sonorans call people who move drugs *burreros*, because they are like burros, or beasts of burden. For decades, the Sinaloa Cartel has smuggled pot into Arizona. In Sonora, transporting drugs is seen by many as just a way to earn a living. The fact that the Sinaloa Cartel has been doing business in Sonora for years may explain why Sonoran law-enforcement officials told me the Sinaloa Cartel was "peaceful."

The officials explained the Cananea shootings this way: The Gulf Cartel, squeezed by border drug enforcement to the east, wanted some of the Sinaloa Cartel's excellent Sonora-Arizona smuggling corridors. Since Cananea is a staging area for moving people and drugs through those prime corridors, it became a site for the bloodbath. That's the official explanation.

But border violence defies official explanations. You can't be sure who works for whom.

When I recently drove the winding road from Naco to Cananea, for instance, I saw men in military uniforms at roadside checkpoints. They waved me on, but stopped cars and buses full of immigrants en route to the border. I couldn't be sure who the uniformed officials were. They might have been *Los Zetas*. They might have been officials who secretly worked for the Sinaloa Cartel. They might have been Mexican policemen or soldiers without secret attachments. Were they robbing the migrants, or were they on bona fide law-enforcement missions, checking for ne'er-do-wells and drug smugglers?

The point is, I couldn't know for sure.

It never seemed so sinister when my parents and I drove over this same road in the 1950s.

• • •

Cananea is a town of about thirty thousand people that sits forty or so miles south of the Arizona border. For decades, its main source of cash was a copper mine developed in the early twentieth century by a controversial Gilded Age copper baron named William Cornell Greene, my grandfather.

My grandfather died thirty-eight years before I was born. And since family legend has it that my grandmother hurled all his personal papers down a well in an effort to protect his privacy, I don't have many insights into his soul. I've looked for clues in history books, and all I can tell you is that historians either demonize him as a greedy American capitalist who exploited Mexicans or they extol him as a visionary businessman who had the moxie to develop a major copper mine and a town to go with it.

I like to think my grandparents were drawn to each other by the similarities of their waifs' childhoods. My grandmother's father hailed from the American Midwest; her mother was a Mexican. My grandmother, Maria Benedict, was orphaned early and adopted by an Anglo family that looked down on her as a half-breed.

My grandfather came from a poor family. His own father died when he was young, so he supported himself from the time he was a kid. As a young man, he migrated from New York to the American West.

After his first wife died, he married my grandmother. He had staked copper claims in Sonora, and he'd persuaded New York millionaires to invest in his mining company. When he was on top of his game, he was reportedly worth \$50 million. He and my grandmother split their time between a penthouse at the Waldorf Astoria and Cananea.

They could see the copper mine gnaw away at a mountain from the porch of their big house in Cananea. The mine was a major copper producer and employed hundreds of Mexicans and Americans. Only, the Americans got paid more for the same work. In 1906, the Mexican miners went on strike. Among other things, they wanted equal pay for equal work.

My grandfather called in the Arizona Rangers and other gunmen from Arizona to subdue the strikers. Several people were killed, most of them Mexicans.

Historians say that event helped bring on the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

My grandfather was so despised by many in Mexico that for years I kept my genealogy to myself. Honestly, I was ashamed by it.

I'm not ashamed anymore. I'm still troubled by the wage discrepancy, but proud that my grandfather built an entire town and had the vision to start an industry that paid Mexicans a steady wage for decades.

In any case, he didn't keep the copper mine long.

He lost it in a corporate takeover. Other companies ran the mine.

Until his death in 1911, my grandfather focused on his Sonora ranch. After he died, the family stayed in Cananea. When my grandmother was alive, several of her six adult children lived in Cananea, working in family businesses.

My parents lived stateside, on a family cattle ranch in northern Arizona. Coming from the isolated Arizona spread, I found 1950s-era Cananea a dizzyingly exciting place.

Crossing from Mexico into the United States and back again was as natural as breathing for us. The border region was its own fusion of Mexican and American culture. We'd cross at a tiny border town called Naco and drive an hour or so on a rutted dirt road through the grasslands. I'd be hot and carsick by the time we arrived at my grandmother's house, known as *La Casa Greene* or "The Big House" and everyone would make a big fuss over me. I loved Cananea.

Life for the Greene clan in Cananea was good when my grandmother was alive. But everything changed after her death. The Greene properties in Mexico were sold for very little for reasons that were never explained to me but had to do with the fact that we were Americans, and Americans couldn't own property in Mexico.

The living Greenes left Cananea.

The dead remained.

In Mexico, families tend graves. And some families have long been reluctant to return to bullet-riddled, economically depressed Cananea to clean up graves. Locals in Cananea proposed building a columbarium inside the church so that families wouldn't have to clean the gravesites each year in October, before the Day of the Dead, when families lay marigolds on the headstones of their ancestors.

My cousins and I considered the columbarium, but that would have entailed expensive and distasteful disinterment and cremation of our grandparents' remains. We mulled over what else to do with their bones and couldn't come up with a consensus. So as it stands, when we can't find anyone to clean up the graves, our dead grandparents lie beneath litter and waist-high weeds.

The Greene plot is big enough for a small house. A few drought-hardy juniper bushes poke up from the dirt, along with a peach tree that sprouted up on its own. The words *El Fundador de Cananea*, which means "The Founder of Cananea," are carved on my grandfather's giant marble tombstone. One of these days, perhaps, my parents will have a tombstone next to his.

Right now, I can't imagine burying my parents' ashes in such a depressing, violent place. Unemployment is rampant; the copper mine shut down after a long strike and a dip in copper prices. The hospital closed. Drinking water supplies are no longer reliable. In the winter of 2010, there was no gas for heaters. The church, schools, and all the quirky frontier-style office buildings are shabby and unpainted. My grandparents' house still stands; sometimes astronomers who work at a nearby observatory bunk there.

The main industry these days in Cananea is the smuggling of drugs and people, and such professions carry their own deadly risks.

Can you blame Alec for seeking honest employment in Phoenix?

Dispatch from Altar—about 200 miles from Phoenix

One winter morning, my friend John Ochoa guided his Dodge Ram down the main street of Sasabe, Arizona. It felt as though we were gliding through an abandoned Western movie set instead of a tiny border town. Only about twenty people lived in Sasabe, a cluster of adobe buildings lining a wide street that led to Mexico. The Hilltop Bar was closed. The ochre-yellow Sasabe Store, with its bilingual signs hawking ice, lottery tickets, firewood, and gasoline, hadn't yet opened for the day. Once the Sasabe Store had been a thriving enterprise; Mexicans bought Coca-Cola and cigarettes and hiking boots and canned tuna fish there. Now they had all but disappeared, fearful of being apprehended at the beginning of their long journey into Arizona.



Immigrants in Altar Plaza. KATHY MCCRAINE

John, my photographer, Kathy McCraine, and I were on our way to Altar, Sonora, the large staging area for immigrants traveling north through the Arizona border.

Altar is a rough smuggling town. It sits about sixty miles south of the border, and few Americans ever go there. I didn't want to visit Altar alone. I'd begged John, who owns a Tucson construction business and a Sonora cattle ranch, to drive me to Altar.

John's Basque ancestors came to America in the eighteenth century to work in the Spanish silver mines. On this trip, John referred constantly to an old Spanish map, pointing out the routes Spanish explorers, and probably his ancestors, traveled from the Sea of Cortez into Sonora.

"This Sasabe Wash is an old migration corridor. The Spaniards used it. The Indians used it. S

does everyone else,” John said as we crossed over an angry dry gully that slashes through Sasabe, Sonora, on the other side of the line from Sasabe, Arizona.

The bumpy road wound past shrines to the Virgin of Guadalupe, past half-constructed block houses, past taco stands and tiny grocery stores, past the *Cafetería Disney* and the town plaza, past guest houses for immigrants and big houses for smugglers. Once a sleepy cattle-crossing town, Sasabe was now into the human-smuggling business.

Outside of Sasabe, the road dipped steeply and then vanished behind a bluff. John braked at the top of a hill, pulled out his binoculars, and glassed the area, looking for possible ambushes. We pulled our money and identification out of our wallets, just in case we had to hand over wallets to highway robbers.

There was no ambush awaiting us at the bottom of the hill, and we drove on. The country was the Sonoran desert—tall saguaros with arms reaching every which way, chollas with needles that grabbed at the flesh, and clustered mesquite trees. We passed a jackrabbit, several hawks on fence posts, a cowboy with a white hat and a lariat on his saddle, a large truck with what was certainly a load of marijuana covered by a blue tarp.

We drove through picturesque towns built on the routes of Spanish missionaries and soldiers traveling up from the Gulf of California. Sáric was my favorite, with buildings painted in different hues of yellow, and lemon trees and date palms.

At one point John thought a truck might be following us; we pulled off the road and parked behind a mesquite thicket until the truck roared past.

Then we got to Altar.

The Spaniards had settled it as a military outpost. Then it became a cattle ranching center. Commerce switched from beef to human smuggling when the Tucson Sector became the major gateway for illegal immigration. It's easy to see why Altar's economy changed. A major Mexican highway connects it to the rest of Mexico. Tour buses from the interior of Mexico deliver migrants to Altar. Passenger vans zoom through the creosote-bush flats, churning up contrails of dust as they shuttle migrants from Altar to the Arizona border.

Altar's population was hard for us to figure. Enrique Celaya, a human-rights activist who lives in Altar, told us the population of about eight thousand had swollen to sixteen thousand due to the immigrant trade. Before the recession, about two thousand to four thousand immigrants came to Altar each day, he said. Now, during bad times, about three hundred immigrants came into Altar each day. By his estimates, that would be twenty-one hundred potential border crossers each week.

Celaya believed that border enforcement was not a deterrent. Rather, he believed, illegal immigration expands and shrinks depending on the American economy. If the American economy is good, thousands of immigrants pass through Altar; if the American economy is bad, some of those immigrants stay home.

On the day we visited, it seemed as if every business in town was connected to illegal immigration. Dozens of entrepreneurs sold trail supplies—backpacks, water, sunscreen, boots, hats, food—from makeshift storefronts on the street. Shuttle vans were parked in practically every backyard. Homes were converted to hostels, where *coyotes* sometimes confined or kidnapped immigrants before amassing enough to make a profitable trip north. At the *Hospedaje La Pasadita*, which rented rooms for about \$2 a day, a mural on the outside wall portrayed Baboquivari Peak, a landmark on the immigrant trails stretching north into Arizona through Sasabe and the Altar Valley.

The mural made the trail seem carefree and easy.

It's not.

Immigrants have several options when they cross into Arizona. The traditional path, the Altar Valley, a swath of high-desert grassland that extends almost to Tucson, is heavily patrolled, so many migrants choose to cross through the treacherous but more remote Tohono O'odham Indian reservation. Or they might travel farther west, risking their lives to cross the Barry M. Goldwater Range, hundreds of acres of desert that Air Force and Marine pilots use for target practice. Other migrants choose to travel through the mountains near Arivaca. Sometimes, they hike for four or five days before reaching a highway where they can be picked up and shuttled to Phoenix.

On all the Arizona trails stretching north from Altar, immigrants risk being assaulted, raped, robbed, kidnapped, and murdered. Even though volunteers from organizations like Humane Borders and No More Deaths leave water on migrant trails, many travelers die of thirst and heat. In the winter, a few die of the cold. Others die and are never found.

Once the walking is over, migrants are crammed like tinned fish in vans and trucks, and march head to Phoenix. En route, they sometimes die in high-speed chases between their *coyote* chauffeurs and law-enforcement authorities. A few have even drowned in irrigation canals as a result of those high-speed chases.

From 2000 to 2009, the Border Patrol reported finding nearly 1,200 bodies in the deadly Tucson Sector. Even though fewer migrants crossed over Arizona's southern border in 2009, a greater percentage of migrants died on the trails, according to the *Arizona Daily Star*, a Tucson newspaper that tracks the deaths.

The reason: Increased border enforcement squeezed border crossers into more treacherous terrain where death comes easily and unexpectedly.

There's a disturbing mural near the church in Altar that warns migrants of the dangers ahead in Arizona. In the mural, the Virgin of Guadalupe prays over a band of half-dead migrants stranded in the sand near a cluster of human skulls and slithering, entwined snakes.



A mural in Altar depicts dangers to migrants in Arizona's desert. KATHY MCCRAINE

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