

Train of Death: Sonia Nazario



from On the Record Curriculum

1 Sonia Nazario planned to research her story by living like a migrant child. But she knew
her limitations. She couldn't trail one boy for the entire route. There was no way she
could keep up with a teenager on such a dangerous journey.

2 Instead, Nazario searched for someone who already made the trip. She called
churches and shelters that harbored lost boys. She went to immigration detention
centers. Kids at the detention centers had been arrested on the way to the United
States. They were waiting to be sent back to their home countries.

3 As she interviewed children, Nazario was stunned by their stories. One 11-year-old
boy had seen a band of gangsters hop a train, high on crack. The thugs snatched a
young girl and threw her off the train, killing her.

4 Despite the horrors of the journey, many of the kids refused to give up. In a Mexican
detention center, Nazario met a boy who had tried to reach the U.S. 27 times. He had
been robbed and beaten. His girlfriend had been raped. "Tomorrow," he said, "they will
send me back to Guatemala. And the next day, I will start on attempt number 28."

5 Finally, Nazario received a call from a nun in Nuevo Laredo, a Mexican town near
the Texas border. "I have a boy here," she said. "I'll put him on the line."

6 Enrique got on the phone and began to tell his story.

7 He grew up in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. His mother, Lourdes, had
almost no income. She couldn't even afford pencils for her children to take to school.

8 Lourdes left home when Enrique was five. She promised to send for him once she
had settled in the U.S. But Enrique was devastated. He wondered what he had done
wrong to drive his mother off. Every day he asked his grandmother when Lourdes
would come home.

9 "¿Dónde está mi mami?" he cried, over and over. "Where is my mom?"

10 In Lourdes's absence, Enrique grew into a troubled teen. He skipped school and got
into fights. He hung out with gang members. He sniffed glue to get high.

11 At night, he'd sit on his grandmother's porch with his girlfriend, Maria Isabel. He'd
look up at the stars and tell her about his dream. He wanted to go to America and find
his mother.

12 At 16, Enrique resolved to make the journey. The only information he had was
Lourdes's phone number, which he wrote on the waistband of a pair of blue jeans.

13 Over the next year, he set out seven times. Once, he stayed on the road for 31 days
and covered about 1,000 miles. On his sixth trip he made it all the way to the U.S.
border in just five days.

14 Each of Enrique's attempts ended in failure. On one trip he was stopped by *la*

migra—the immigration police. The officers stole everything he had—a few crackers, some coins, and some dried-out tortillas. Another time a gang of thugs trapped him on the top of a freight car. They beat him nearly to death before he escaped.

15 The police caught Enrique several times and deported him to Guatemala. But he refused to give up. On his eighth try he made it all the way to the U.S. border. He was broke but determined to complete his journey.

16 In May 2000, Nazario went to meet Enrique in Nuevo Laredo. She hung out with him while he begged for money on the streets. She spent two weeks watching him search for a way across the border. Finally she left him to complete his journey by himself. She returned to California to plan her own trip.

17 Nazario knew what she was getting herself into. The director of the detention center in Texas told her, “For you to do this, you are either stupid or you have a death wish.”

18 Nazario prepared as well as she could. She filled a small backpack with a cell phone, a credit card, toilet paper, cash, and a tape recorder. She also packed a letter from the office of the Mexican president. The letter explained what she was doing. She called it her *carta del oro*, or “golden letter.” Its purpose was to keep her out of jail.

19 When she set out for Tegucigalpa, her husband asked her to make one promise: “Don’t jump off moving trains.”

20 Nazario arrived in Tegucigalpa hungry for details about Enrique’s life. She talked to Maria Isabel. She found the porch where Enrique had revealed his dreams under the stars. And she tried to understand Lourdes’s decision to leave home. “When I started this journey, I was judgmental,” Nazario admits. “I thought, ‘What kind of mother walks away from her children?’”

21 Tegucigalpa gave her the answer. She watched women pick through garbage to find food for their children. The smell was so bad that she could barely breathe. “Can you imagine knowing that the only way to feed your children—to give them hope for a future—is to walk away from them?” she says.

22 Nazario left Tegucigalpa the way Enrique did. She rode rickety busses north through Honduras and Guatemala. After 400 miles on the road, she reached the border of Mexico.

23 She boarded the Train of Death in Chiapas, Mexico’s southernmost state. This lawless region is so dangerous that the boys call it *la bestia*, or “the Beast.” Drug gangs rule much of Chiapas. Gangsters and thieves beat up defenseless migrants and steal their meager belongings. Corrupt police officers look the other way. Sometimes the police rob the migrants before sending them back across the border.

24 In Chiapas, Nazario rode with 300 to 400 people crowded on top of the train cars. Many of the riders were kids, some as young as seven. She watched them jump on and off the train to avoid immigration officials. She kept an eye out for gang members and thieves.

25 For part of her journey, Nazario traveled with a Mexican migrants’ rights group. They carried shotguns and AK-47s to fight off the gangsters. Even they protested that the journey was too dangerous for Nazario.

26 When she traveled alone, Nazario was particularly vulnerable. “Women [on the
trains] have an almost 100 percent chance of being raped,” she says.

27 On one occasion, a gangster chased Nazario through the train cars. She escaped by
locking herself in a bathroom, crawling out a window, and climbing to the top of the
train. “That was probably the scariest moment I faced,” she says.

28 Nazario’s most agonizing encounters had little to do with her own safety. She hated
to watch children in danger—and always wondered whether she should intervene. As
a journalist, Nazario felt her role was to observe. She didn’t want to influence the story
she was reporting.

29 Still, how could she stand by while kids begged for food or slept in the weeds? She
remembered watching Enrique beg on the streets of Nuevo Laredo when she first
met him. He had lost his mother’s phone number. His grandmother knew the number,
but Enrique couldn’t afford to call her. “I could have given him my cell phone to call
home,” Nazario recalls. “But that would have changed their story. It was a very difficult
decision. But that’s not what a reporter does.”

30 In the end, Nazario decided she would only act if a child’s life was in immediate
danger. That happened once in Chiapas, when she met a sobbing 12-year-old boy. He
had been separated from his friends and arrested. The police were about to deport him
to a lawless town. “His odds of being killed were not small,” she says. Nazario lent the
boy her cell phone to call an uncle for help.

31 As Nazario rode north from Chiapas, she realized that the dangers of the trip were
only part of the story. Enrique and the other migrant kids had a support system to help
protect them. On the cars, one teen often stood lookout while the others slept. Boys
risked their own safety to pull new riders aboard. Poor villagers along the way chased
the train with gifts of food and water.

32 Acts of kindness like these had kept Enrique alive on his eighth trip. By the time he
reached the U.S. border, he told Nazario, he was confident he would make it. He had
begun to think of the Train of Death as his “Iron Hope.”