

thedreamer

story and photographs by g. morty ortega



The white flakes falling on Interstate 70 in Colorado have turned into big, burdened blobs of snow gathering on the windshield and hood of Marco's silver Suzuki. In front of him, the highway is a two-wheel trail barely visible under the flurries. *KUH-CHUNK!* His car plows into a clump of fallen snow that has flown off a semi-truck. His trip to Denver is turning into a dead end. White-knuckled and wary, Marco pulls off into the tiny town of Stratton and books himself into a hotel.

"It looks like Snowstorm Virgil will continue for another 48 hours..." On the TV, a Weather Channel meteorologist is droning on about the storm. Marco Malagón is slumped on top of the queen-size bed, his head propped up on pillows. He's still dressed in his blue jeans and pistachio-colored T-shirt. It's 10:30 on a Friday night, too early to be in bed. But he can't do anything about it. After 10 hours of driving from Dallas, crossing Oklahoma and Kansas, he's stuck. He had hoped to be in Denver, speaking alongside immigration activists such as Marco Saavedra, a young undocumented immigrant who made headlines last year for getting detained at protests against Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Just two measly hours east of Denver and Marco knows he won't be able to make it there. He squints between the TV and his smart-

with other activists. "We bonded so well during the strike," he remembers. "We felt we were brothers and sisters."

Marco has almost no time for friends outside of the movement, much less for a girlfriend. "I'd like to start a family someday, but I don't have time for a relationship right now," he says, shrugging. His family is split between the U.S., where three of his brothers live, and Mexico, where his mother, three sisters and a brother reside in Apaseo el Alto – a rural town in central Mexico that is increasingly dangerous because of *narcotráficantes*.

On any other night, Marco would be at an IHOP in Dallas with a dozen friends until 2 or 3 in the morning. They would be discussing the immigration reforms being debated in Washington. He remembers the first time he went to Washington to confront legislators, hoping they would pass laws that could change his life. He had been feeling down for weeks. Hadn't sleep well. His short, jet-black hair was falling out. He was only 28 and he felt like his life was going nowhere. "I was falling into depression," he says, his eyes glazing over. That was three years ago and he's still stuck.

MARCO IS A DREAMER. He hopes one day to work legally. Since he waded illegally across the Rio Grande one starlit night more than a decade ago, he has worked 18-hour days and

introduced it in 2001. Public sentiment has moved on — newspapers have even dumped the demeaning term "illegal immigrants" — but Congress is stuck. A year ago, President Barack Obama gave hope to young undocumented workers — DREAMers — with a chance to apply for temporary, renewable work permits.

Marco is a man now, no longer the shy college student who set off from Dallas for a protest march in Washington in 2010, at the beginning of his activist days. He remembers feeling lost and intimidated that day as fellow college students gathered around a 10-passenger van for the 22-hour-long trip.

MARCO VOLUNTEERS to take the first shift driving. As the hours and miles go by, he smiles but participates little in the word games that enliven the van's passengers. The group stops only to fuel up and go through drive-thrus for fast food. Two days after leaving Dallas, the van is near the Virginia border. Jennifer, one of the leaders, gives a rundown of how they'll lobby Congress to pass the DREAM Act, which would give green cards to immigrants who arrived in the United States as minors, have lived in the country for at least five years and graduate from U.S. high schools. About half of the students in the van would qualify.

Hearing the plans, Marco suddenly jolts awake from the fatigue of the trip. *Lobby*

You have to make the decision between going back

to your country or staying to fight.

phone, checking for updates on the blizzard, but he's more focused on YouTube videos showing how things work: how to change the oil sensor on a Ford Taurus or how industrial bolts are cast. He's given up hope of speaking at the 2013 meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology. *So much for that dream.*

Marco's brow furrows with thoughts of what he could be doing. Like getting back to his family's used car dealership that he left in the care of his 20-year-old brother Luis. He doesn't often have time to just sit and think. "I'm always up by 7 and go to bed at 1 or 2," he says. Besides helping out at the dealership where two of his younger brothers work, Marco constantly bounces from meeting to meeting. He is president of the North Texas Dream Team, an organization fighting for the rights of undocumented students. Since 2010, they have led protests, letter-writing campaigns and trips to lobby lawmakers in Washington, D.C. Marco even went on a three-day hunger strike

finished high school. At the industrial design firm where he worked while taking college classes, he rose from a lowly job on quality control to a high-tech job apprenticing for engineers and working on AutoCAD design software. He has reached the height of what is possible in the U.S. with a falsified Social Security card and no work permit. He had no plans to stay here for 13 grueling years, fighting for the rights of undocumented students like himself. "I've always wanted to be a doctor," he says. "That was my ultimate goal." He's been taking biology classes toward a medical degree at The University of Texas at Dallas. But without papers, Marco will never be a doctor. He's realistic. He also takes business classes.

For more than a decade, Congress has been debating the DREAM Act. It's been kicked around so long, people have forgotten the name once stood for something: the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act. A Republican, Senator Orin Hatch,

Congress? he thinks, trying not to panic. *There will be checkpoints. The CIA and FBI and Secret Service will be there.* He came for the protest march, not to join an activist cause — especially one that puts him in danger. He knows full well that by stepping into the Capitol, he is risking discovery and deportation.

"I was already in the van and couldn't leave," he recalls. "If they deported me, so be it. I didn't care."

In D.C. the next day, the group dress in business attire and push their way into the offices of legislators. They split into two-person teams and tell lawmakers their stories about living as undocumented students, about the hardships of families broken up by deportations, about how their lives would change with the DREAM Act. It's the first time Marco's heard the term DREAMers: *I'm a DREAMer, too,* he realizes. He doesn't feel so alone anymore.

Two days later, Marco joins the crowd of over 200,000 on the National Mall chanting





"Si se puede! Si se puede! Yes we can! Yes we can!" He is in awe as he looks out over the sea of people, many with faces like his: a strong aquiline nose, dark eyes and the earthy skin tones from the combination of Spanish and indigenous Mexican blood. He had never felt so much a part of a movement. The marchers carry U.S. flags and giant signs with slogans such as "Full rights for all immigrants" and "Keep our families together." Marco loses his voice screaming out the stress and frustration of living a clandestine life for years. "It was the biggest release in my life," he grins, his eyes alight. "I had a mini atomic bomb go off in my chest."

Hours later, soaked in sweat from a day of stomping and shouting, Marco steps into the van with his new friends. No one sleeps on the way home. The van is abuzz with planning and projects. Marco becomes one of the founders of the North Texas Dream Team. The trip is a success except for one detail: Marco doesn't qualify for the DREAM Act if it passes. He was 17 when he arrived. The age limit is 16. "I thought I would go to the U.S. for a year or two, work, save up some money and go back home," says Marco.

Back to Apaseo el Alto, where his journey began.

HE PACES IN THE DARK, with no moon to betray him as he waits by the Rio Grande near Nuevo Laredo with a group of 15. He is 17, crossing the river illegally to join two older brothers in Texas. Marco vividly remembers the day he crossed: February 10, 1999 – five days after he turned 17. His mother made him wait until his birthday, as if magically turning 17 made it safer for him to cross.

The group around Marco whispers – a sound so low it disappears in the chirps of crickets and frogs. They wait for hours. Marco's eyes dart back and forth at the slightest new sound, trying to not think about getting caught.

"It seemed like forever," he says, recalling his anxiety.



DREAMS IN ACTION (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) Marco never stops, whether he's participating in marches or preparing for a presentation by hanging a sheet for a projection screen.

Marco hugs Lisette Moreno at a North Texas Dream Team committee meeting.

On the road to Colorado, Marco listens to country music on the radio.

Marco leads protesters in chants at an immigration march in Dallas.

Marco speaks to parents and children about the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program.



The ones who've crossed the Rio Grande before know what to expect: The U.S. Border Patrol agents leering at them through binoculars, daring them to cross. The icky pea soup water. The rocky, slimy riverbed. The unspeakable pieces of sludge and thick algae that will grab them underwater. Then, if they make it across, the five-hour march through parched desert in the dark, with cacti pricking their clothes and piercing their shoes. And finally, their destination – the Laredo train yard, where agents patrol with dogs trained to whiff out the slightest scent in the night.

After an agonizing wait at the river, the *coyote* smuggling them across pulls out a bamboo pole, strips down to white briefs and walks straight into the river. Poking and prodding the riverbed with the pole, he checks for holes that could trip the group. Marco stares, fascinated by the ingenuity of the man. The *coyote* crisscrosses several times, searching for the best place to traverse. Then the lead *coyote* says, "Take off your clothes and put them in here" while handing out small plastic trash bags.

The men and women strip down to nothing, place their few belongings in bags and follow the *coyote's* voice. He tells them to hold hands and form a human chain as they hesitantly tread into the river. Marco stumbles along the slippery riverbed, his chest submerged in water, some 5 feet deep. The muck in the dirty river rubs against his bare body. Once across, he scrambles up the steep slope of the riverbank, grabbing at bamboo stalks. He and the others dress again as the *coyote* snarls at them, "Hurry! Hurry! *Vamos!* Let's go!" The group creeps past the bamboo, then lurches forward through the desert. Hours later, exhausted, they reach the train yards where new danger awaits them.

A handful of men and dogs are walking down the road, coming toward them, flashlight beams scouring the bare landscape. Marco's heart pounds in his ears and he almost stops breathing. The *coyote* whispers, "Don't move. Stay close to the ground." Marco freezes, hugging the earth and silently praying to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Then, the *coyote* motions the group onward. They hear the yelps and barks of dogs on the other side of the yard as Border Patrol agents catch an unlucky group of migrants. Marco remembers his mother's advice: *Stay close to the coyote. Don't pay attention to anyone else.* Marco follows him from train to train, seeking cover in the shadows as flashlights play across the railroad tracks.

For an hour, the migrants circle around. Finally, the *coyote* waves the 15 migrants on board a freight trailer, which carries pickup trucks – trucks made ironically in Mexican factories. *La migra* finishes its rounds and the game of hide-and-seek ends. Marco shakes from the adrenaline rush. Someone asks if they can go outside to pee. The *coyote* says they must wait until they get off the train in San Antonio. He knows from experience that the dogs could easily pick up the human scent.

MARCO GREW UP in his grandmother's three-room, dirt-floored home with his mother, 10 siblings, cousins and an aunt. His mother eked out a living, hawking utensils and housewares, walking long hours in towns near and far as a saleswoman. His first memories are of fighting hunger pangs at the age of 5 while younger siblings wailed for food. "It was painful to know that we didn't have anything," he says, his voice almost cracking. "Those memories haunt me wherever I go."

Once, he wandered around the neighborhood looking for food until a girl gave him *Lunetas*, small M&M-like chocolates, to take back to his brothers and sisters. "On a good day, breakfast was a piece of bread and some water with *canela* – cinnamon," says Marco, "And when I say a piece of bread, I mean a *small* piece of bread." Lunch would be some beans and rice and chile peppers. For dinner, the beans, rice and chiles might be

wrapped up in a yellow corn tortilla. At school, the meager lunch he took from home wasn't enough. His stomach gurgled and growled as he fought to subtract and divide or remember the dates of the Mexican Revolution.

Business eventually picked up enough for his mother to buy a plot of land and begin construction on a house for the 11 children. Eight-year-old Marco and his siblings shoveled and brought down truckloads of gravel from the nearby hills to make cement. As he grew older, he began to work as a roving salesman, leaving the house before dawn, riding a bus for two hours with his bike, then cruising the streets of nearby cities, peddling the pots, pans, blankets and housewares that his family sold.

Life did get better. The family's crowning achievement was the purchase of three delivery trucks. But after 1994, once the North American Free Trade Agreement passed, business sputtered. Goods purchased from wholesalers couldn't be sold for a profit. They lost money. Marco and his siblings started to think about life under a different economy. "*Vamos pa'l norte, no hay nada aquí,*" he said. "Let's go north, there's nothing here."

Once across the border, the train from Laredo takes them east. Near the outskirts of Houston, fearing a police checkpoint, the *coyote* instructs them to jump off the train as it rolls fast through yellowing prairie grasses. As a youth, Marco hitched rides by jumping on and off vehicles in Mexico. But he worries that some of the older folks won't do so well. Some roll on impact like gymnasts while others clumsily flop off. Under a scorching Texan sun, they walk to the nearest highway and wait for the *coyote* to return. Marco lies on the parched earth and closes his eyes from exhaustion, hunger and thirst. He blacks out into sleep. Hours later, the *coyote* comes back and they catch a Greyhound bus to Marco's new home. His brother will be there. Like dust behind the departing bus, his fear of the Border Patrol dissipates. Everything is new to him. People around him are babbling in a language he doesn't yet understand.

NOW 31, MARCO WORKS on moving the monumental machinery required to pass immigration reform. If it becomes law, an estimated 11.5 million people in the U.S. could step into the light with legalized work and benefits. In the past year, most of Marco's team received work papers thanks to Obama's decision to create the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program in 2012. The program gives qualified undocumented youth a way to get a work permit and a Social Security number. But Marco's life remains in the shadows. He still can't get papers.

For eight years, Marco took college classes while working – until 2012, when a coworker saw him on the TV news and joked about his immigration status. Marco resigned, fearing the trouble he would bring his boss. He left with no goodbyes. He stopped going to classes, too. "I was tired and didn't feel motivated to keep studying," he says. "I'd been taking classes for 11 years. Besides, immigration reform was on the table."

Universities in Texas don't require citizenship or a Social Security number; even a driver's license is not necessary. But pursuing a medical degree and a career without being a legal resident or citizen is akin to strapping on waxed-feather wings and flying for the sun. Without papers, even a degree from the best medical school would be useless. "Sometimes it just feels like your dreams go dark and you hit a wall," he sighs.

"You get to this mental exhaustion. You're getting exhausted by your dreams dying out. Your passion for going to school goes away. You just become this robot that goes to school, wakes up, goes to work, goes to school. You become," Marco pauses, "depressed. You get to the point where you're going to make a decision and go back to your country or you stay and fight."



MARCHING IN DALLAS
Though he can't benefit from current programs, Marco (holding a U.S. flag high) works to help others.

Marco has decided to fight for those like himself who live without papers. He is a charismatic speaker, so different from the shy student who boarded a bus to Washington two years ago. He speaks in public frequently, talking to activist groups at hole-in-the-wall Mexican restaurants in Dallas, helping those without papers at small gatherings in West Texas, Skyping with coalition leaders in Washington.

Late one afternoon, he settles down at Mi Fondita Restaurant in south Dallas to prepare for a presentation about networking among groups that work with undocumented immigrants. The restaurant's gaudy interior is decorated with paintings of Mexican *campesinos*, horses and cattle, Zapata and other revolutionaries. Marco balances work on his computer with a lunch of *caldo de pollo*, a stew of chicken, potatoes, squash, carrots and rice. He runs his hands through his rich black hair and stares intently at the computer. He wears his usual attire for business, a white dress shirt and blue jeans with black dress shoes. He will tell his audience of mostly women in their 40s that dressing well is important. "When your elected officials meet with you, they take you more seriously if you dress for success," he says.

At another table, a vivacious bunch of students who have already benefited from Obama's program call a meeting for the Action Committee of the North Texas Dream Team (NTDT). Marco, as president, has made sure the group offers free legal clinics, pairing undocumented students with local immigration attorneys who work on a volunteer basis. He has run into surprisingly little opposition from those opposed to loosening the immigration rules. But it's not easy work: They may drive all night as they did for a spring clinic in Lubbock to help applicants through the tricky DACA process, yet only help a few people. "Don't feel bad if this didn't work like we wanted," Marco had to tell his group. "This is brand new territory we're opening."

Marco worries about his mother, his three sisters and a brother with Down syndrome back home in Mexico. His mother, now in her mid-50s,

lives decently, but her sons in the States would love to send her money all the time. They can't out of fear of the local *narcotraficantes*, who might find out and hold her hostage – or worse. For now, Marco and his brothers send money only when she has big expenses like medical bills. They even limit their communication with her, just in case the cartels discover she has sons in the U.S. All the stress over his family and the long hours of organizing his Dream Team show in the bags under Marco's eyes. Yet he never gives up. He may have no hope of applying for the Obama program, but he is determined to keep fighting for immigration reform.

IN 2013, CONGRESS is debating immigration reform yet again. In the heart of downtown Dallas, a river of thousands march peacefully with blue and red signs that read, "Justice and dignity for all U.S. Immigrants." Policemen line the route. Walking backward, Marco squints in the hot midday sun, taking in all the signs, the families and the American flags. He grins as he lifts a plastic yellow cone to his mouth. "Today we march, tomorrow we vote!" he belts out, his voice cracking.

Nicole Añonuevo, another of the Dream Team's founding members, marches beside him. Her voice doesn't carry as far as Marco's hoarse bark. She wonders how Marco does it. Of the five founding members, he's the only one who hasn't taken a year off to rest from the sleepless nights of activism.

The day is too hot for Marco's trademark black blazer, white dress shirt and faded blue jeans. His voice is gruff, his chants hard to understand. But he doesn't stop. He digs out his smartphone to snap a picture for Facebook and tweets, "#cantstopwontstop."

He passes his toy megaphone to a young boy and teaches him to yell, "*Obama! Escucha! Estamos en la lucha!*" *Obama! Listen up! We are in the fight!* Marco marches on, slowly disappearing into the crowd of protesters. His worn-out voice can barely be heard. But in his hand, the flag waves on. 🇺🇸