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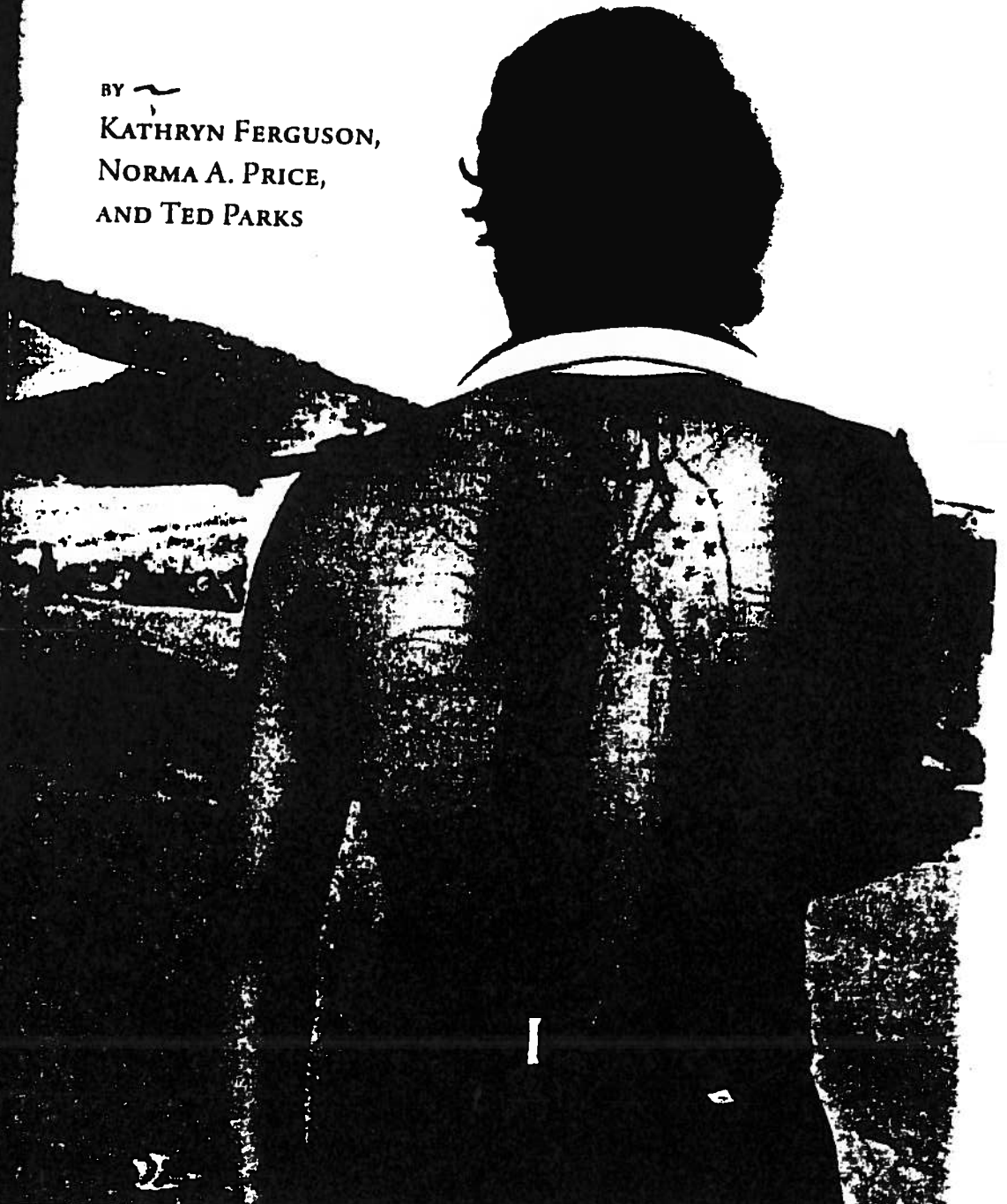
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2010

ing with the Virgin
FROM THE MIGRANT TRAIL

BY ~
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NORMA A. PRICE,
AND TED PARKS



Story Twenty-four

Rain and snow came to the desert in the form of a fast-moving storm that originated way up in the northern climes. It is brutal in its cold swiftness. On Sunday morning the newspapers report that four migrants are dead from hypothermia or exposure, and scores have been sent to the hospital.

The mountains surrounding Tucson are beautiful when the snow level drops, and that morning all the major ranges had a dusting of snow down to six thousand feet. They sparkle in the morning sunlight, and from the warm environs of the house they beckon my granddaughter to ask her Tito if he will take her to the snow so she can play.

For a person walking through the night in the desert with clothes that are wet and temperatures dropping to the upper thirties along with winds in the twenty to thirty miles per hour range, the weather is deadly. Fatigue, exhaustion, dehydration, and hunger, the bane of migrants who have been traveling in the desert, will cause them to succumb more readily when exposed to the cold. The core temperature of the body drops. The muscles spasm uncontrollably, creating friction and therefore heat. As the inside of the body cools, this shivering may stop, and the arms and legs no longer have blood moving through them. The body begins to shut down, conserving precious heat. A person will exhibit poor speech, nausea, dizziness, poor judgment, apathy, and then finally stupor to unconsciousness in severe hypothermia. The blood pressure and respiratory rate fall, and the heart will try and pump the cold blood to someplace warm. The heartbeat flutters and then stops.

Treatment is basic and straightforward: remove the wet clothing and warm the body. Do not massage the extremities, since this may cause the heart to start beating wildly as small pools of warm blood where you have rubbed begin to push cold blood into and through the heart.

On Friday and Saturday in southern Arizona, those unfortunate souls who had no Weather Channel, no radio or daily news, just the clothes on their backs, some water in a gallon jug, and a few personal belongings in a backpack were walking north as the storm clouds gathered, temperatures dropped, and the cold hard rain came without warning. By the time my little granddaughter asked me to take her to the snow, those who would die were dead. There were four known. There were the unknown, never to be discovered, who lost their lives looking for a job.

A good friend constantly reminds me that all work has dignity, whether it's digging a ditch or teaching algebra. I wonder if a country that forces its laborers to cross its border on life-threatening journeys for a job has any dignity left.

Our borders have continually been used as a gate to keep out those of a lower status. Allow enough of them in to keep the labor pool cheap and expendable but not too many as to put a drain on social services or anger those who are afraid of people of color.

I received a call from a fellow Samaritan late Sunday afternoon asking if I would be willing to travel early Monday morning. I agreed. I awoke before dawn to find all the cars in my neighborhood covered with a thick frost. I met him at the church. Two women from out of town were to accompany us. They seemed pleasant enough. We drove out to the desert the usual way and saw nothing but Border Patrol zooming by at high speed on the two-lane blacktop road. The rain was welcome in this desert. The fine dust was packed tight with moisture so that old footprints were obliterated and the ground was too hard to take new ones, at least that the untrained eye could see.

We walked a trail in Brown Canyon and saw many signs of people having camped under mesquite trees whose branches were bent low. I worried what we might find in these camps, but thankfully no bodies lay dead upon the desert floor.

Later on the blacktop we saw a big Homeland Security bus on the side of the road. A young woman standing solo, waiting to be boarded, looked lost and forlorn. The agents would not let us give her food and water, and we could not tell if there were others inside. Farther south, more men squatted by the road, waiting for the big bus.

We traveled through Arivaca and came upon three men on the side of the road resting in the now warm sun. They were tired and hungry, having been walking since Sunday morning after the rain and snow had stopped. They had crossed the border on their own without a coyote to guide them.

We talked about the options for them, let them know how far they still had to walk, and told them where they were in relation to Tucson and Phoenix.

They discussed their situation and then asked me to call Border Patrol. Their English was very good. As we waited for the Border Patrol I asked them their story. Neto told me they were all from the state of Guanajuato in Mexico. He had a wife and five children living in Los Angeles and had returned to Mexico because his father was very ill; he wanted to see him before he died. He now wanted to be reunited with his wife and kids. Jorge had returned to his village after working in the Denver area for three years so he could see his children and wife. There was no work in Guanajuato; so he was on his way back to Denver. Francisco had returned because he had not seen his wife and kids in ten years. He has been living and working in the Denver area like Jorge and now needed to find work, for there was none in Mexico.

The Border Patrol came to pick them up in a little van. The officer was as brown as these usual suspects. I wondered how the officer and his family came to be here. I wondered about the American Indian who was outnumbered and eventually conquered and subjected to rule by a horde of European illegal aliens. And I wondered if one day the white man would be overrun and subjected to rule by these hard-working people from the south and if this was why in the current paradigm white people were so paranoid.

We shook their hands and wished them good luck, then headed back to Tucson, the sun warming the desert.

In Green Valley, a retirement community south of Tucson, a large group of migrants were in custody on the frontage road by the side of the freeway. They were too many to count. It was next to a golf course with houses all over the place. I imagine some terrified citizen saw them hiding and called the Border Patrol, not realizing these people were the ones who cooked in the club house, mowed the fairways, trimmed the weeds, and would repair the roofs of the houses that lined the golf course in the years to come.

and the Virgin was
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Story Two

- KATHRYN

We crossed the border from Sonoyta, Sonora, Mexico, onto American soil. A friend and I were driving along the dark Arizona highway at midnight when suddenly lights blinded us. Big stadium lights so bright we had to lower the windshield visors. It was a Border Patrol checkpoint, rigid-faced uniformed men with guns telling us to stop.

It took me back to Germany years ago. Late one night, I climbed on a platform high above the guard station, Checkpoint Charlie, in Berlin, days before the wall fell. I could look over to the other side of the Berlin Wall. Searing white lights, soldiers, guns. A no-man's-land full of buried land mines. On this Arizona highway, I had to remind myself that this was my country; I was not in foreign occupied territory.

The Border Patrol lights pooled around saguaros and creosote bushes. In the light, nothing moved but agents and the U.S. vehicles they were searching. At the edge of the circle of light was an unclaimed and absolute darkness.

A few miles after leaving the checkpoint, we drove off the road and got out of the car to take a break. We leaned against the car in a desert full of rumors and shadows. Not far away, in complete silence, we saw a flashlight flicker on and off. A few minutes later and a few yards farther, again light flickered.

We drove deeper into the night along the Tohono O'odham Indian Nation. We passed two trucks sitting side by side in a wash, headlights off, only the wink of a cigarette lighter.

A half hour later, the shapes of two men in black with backpacks trudged along the highway, ducking into shadow as our headlights lit up their eyes.

On we drove into the darkness toward Tucson.