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Essays from the  
U.S.-Mexico  
Border



Irma's Story: The Life  
of An Illegal Alien



All afternoon the Spanish radio newscaster rattled on about the raid at the Chicago & North Western station at Armitage and Ashland. The arrested passengers were heading up to places like Highland Park, to polish the silver and trim the lawns.

"Shit," I thought, "she's going to have to find some other way to get there if she ever goes job hunting again."

Not that she would, probably. Not after the luck we had with that \$32 "Situation Wanted" ad we put in the Northern Suburbs-targeted classified section of the *Chicago Tribune*. "Listen," I'd told her, "if there's anyone with enough room and money to hire a live-in with two kids, they'll be up there. So we'll write this ad fancy, elegant...we won't even use abbreviations."

Even the Trib ad-taker lady was impressed with the language: "sterling character, hardworking to a fault, impeccable references" — it sounded like the third floor at *Upstairs Downstairs*.

The sad thing was that it was all true. We got two calls: one from a Jewish art dealer who only liked German housekeepers, the other from a gentleman who said he was masturbating in the shower.

We wouldn't have gotten even those if we'd told the Trib ad lady to insert "wetback."

My friend — I'll call her Irma — didn't swim a river to get here — she flew in from Colombia on a jet, carrying a six-month tourist

visa. Circumstances, though, have conspired to transform her into an honorary Mexican.

Irma looks like your generic south-of-the-border poor immigrant woman: stocky body; wide, Indian face; the kind of luxuriant coarse black hair that doesn't take kindly to home permanents. When she visits me she sits on the sofa with her baby and looks stolid and ordinary and unobtrusive. Ditto for her conversation. "A simple woman," says my friend from the Illinois Job Service. "A real employment problem with those two kids," she adds with a seasoned Job Service eye. "But at least she's clean."

To really know Irma, you'd have to hang around her long enough to catch her without shoes or slacks or support stockings. Then you'd see her feet swollen and twisted with bunions, her calves shot with varicose veins that make your eyes throb looking at them. These are the limbs of a woman who's spent the better part of her life on her feet, serving other people's meals, doing other people's laundry, other people's floors and ironing, making other people's beds, washing other people's dishes, caring for other people's babies.

That she does all these things marvelously is no sign of how much her life's work depresses her. She calls me up late at night sometimes, when all the work is done, and tells me how she despairs that her life will never change for the better. When she's really down, she says she's going to walk into the Immigration and Naturalization Service offices, turn herself in, and beg for mercy.

I calm her down and tell her if she'd come over on a boat instead of a plane, in some other century, she'd be one of the heroines of American history — the upwardly striving indentured servant woman, the female factory operatives who struggled and made it into the middle class and beyond.

Small comfort. Now she's hounded by the threat of joblessness and the INS, living in constant fear of destitution and deportation. These days, she's scum, floating uselessly at the top of whatever it is they used to call the melting pot.

She says that's pretty much the way it's been most of her life, starting with childhood, which was spent in a straw hut with eight other kids in the Colombian countryside. Her father went to the mountains every day to burn wood into charcoal. Her mother carried chickens and eggs to the nearest city, and traded them for cast-off clothes for the children. Her father beat her mother unmercifully. He

was just slightly gentler with her.

At age 14, she left home to escape him, and went to a nearby city to work as a domestic servant. At first she didn't take criticism well — she used to quit her job whenever the master or mistress screamed at her. But she found a boss who didn't scream much, and stayed for two years until she found herself bored and thinking of big-city life. But her boss wouldn't accept her resignation, and upped her salary. Her mother was pleased and ordered her to stay.

She had a boyfriend — a guy she enjoyed talking with — but the boss was strict and didn't allow it. So they said they were getting married, and the boss smiled as she spoke to her fiancé. The credulous boyfriend even set a wedding date in a faraway city. They eloped to there, leaving mother and boss far behind.

She promptly told the boyfriend to get lost.

"I'd never get married," Irma tells me, "not after seeing how my father beat my mother the way he did."

So she was 16, working at a rooming house inhabited by young male college students. She did all their washing, ironing, cooking, and cleaning; they spied on her in the bathroom and in the shower and when she got undressed at night. She stayed there for years and it began to bother her that she'd never been to school and was illiterate. When she was about 22, she learned to read, and to write in a slow, halting way. She could do this, but at the age of 27 she was still making the beds of the young male college students.

She was, by Latin standards, a spinster, yet she loved children and looked longingly at women with their babies.

One of the roomers, an electrical engineering student, was 19 years old and wild. He used to chase her around and expose himself, laughing and beckoning. She said he was like an animal and used to rip her clothes off; when she got pregnant he was terrified and said she must get an abortion or his parents would no longer pay for his studies. She didn't get an abortion and didn't tell anybody who the father was, and had to live the entire time of her pregnancy in the rooming house with him around without anybody knowing what was going on; and he still ripped her clothes off her into her eighth month. She walked around pregnant feeling like the walking dead, like her life was over from the shame of it. She walked to the hospital by herself one day and had the baby with little pain.

"But I wouldn't have married that boy," she says, "even if he'd of-

ferred to. For one thing, I was considered his social inferior. And he repudiated his child — I said, 'To hell with you, the baby won't have your last name, don't worry, and I wouldn't lower myself to take a penny from you.'"

Later she earned her living bathing and dressing and giving medicine to an old man who was dying. Then the son of the dead man took ill himself. He'd left his job as a journalist, sold his gentleman's farm and his wife's portrait photography business to join cousins in the United State and seek greater fortune. He'd found nothing better than a job in a metal factory, returned disappointed to Colombia, and later developed fatal cancer in his nose, which everybody said came from working in the metal factory. His wife decided to take him back to the United States for the best medical treatment. They asked Irma to come along and be the nurse. She did, but after a few months, the man died.

Irma's six-month tourist visa expired. Meanwhile, having spent the family fortune on doctors, the deceased's wife got a job in a factory. Her teenage son began working in an Uptown roller rink, adopting the manners, dress, and speech of Puerto Ricans, who are U.S. citizens. One of these days, he'll probably marry a Puerto Rican girl who will love him and not charge him the \$1,500 black market rate that Puerto Ricans command for marrying illegal Latin aliens whom they don't love.

Irma's services were no longer needed.

On the door of a Spanish grocery, she saw an ad placed by an Anglo couple with two children. The parents both worked and the wife was out of the house full-time. They hired her to be the housekeeper, one day a week off, room and board for herself and her little girl, \$60 a week.

At first she considered herself lucky.

Though there were plenty of Spanish-speaking neighbors, the area was still too sparsely settled by them to attract the attention of the INS agents. The husband and wife (let's call them Kristin and Greg) she always addressed respectfully as Doña Kristi and Don Gregorio. The Don and Doña were *simpático* — they had adopted a Mexican infant, they lived modestly but comfortably, had a house full of fresh fruits and vegetables, books in Spanish, and mail from organizations like the Southern Poverty Law Center and Amnesty International. Doña Kristi had once run an English-language store-

front school in Pilsen for illegal aliens. Her tuition had been so sympathetically low that the school quickly folded.

Whenever Doña Kristi needed a maid, she would put out the word on Hispanic grocery store bulletin boards or through the inchoate immigrant grapevine. That's how she got her previous maid, Tomasa, an illegal Mexican who eventually found a Puerto Rican to marry and sponsor her for permanent residency and freedom from the life of a domestic. Doña Kristi had all sorts of ideas for Irma. She sent Irma's daughter, by now five years old, to the same expensive private school that her older son attended. Doña Kristi had a degree in child psychology and spent time with the older son, helping him pore over thick coffee-table tomes while he memorized the paintings of the great masters and various styles of French provincial and Chippendale antiques. She criticized Irma for not allowing her little girl to play in the streets, for teaching her housework. She encouraged Irma to read the original Spanish version of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* instead of magazines like *Cosmopolitan*. She didn't allow Irma to speak any English in her house, since her own children were to become bilingual through domestic immersion.

At night, after 12 hours of housekeeping and babysitting, Irma was usually too tired to listen to her English-language cassette tapes. And on her one day a week off, she took to socializing with Guillermo, a Mexican who lived right across the street.

Guillermo said he was legal, but who knows? He said he'd made a marriage of convenience to the niece of Patry, his 60-year-old Chicana landlady, who was from El Paso and whose entire family was secure in its U.S. citizenship. Well, sometimes he said he was divorced, and he talked to Irma about marriage. But he was perpetually red faced from drink, perpetually propositioning even Irma's closest women confidantes. He would introduce her to his male pals with, "This is Irma. She's everybody's friend." And he used say her little girl was too aggressive, too undisciplined, too Americanized. That Irma should beat her.

She wanted to tell him to go to hell. But then, what would she have to fall back on? Laundry, cooking, diapers, 6 a.m. to 9 at night. The contrast between that and Guillermo's Saturdays at the movies and his evening caresses equaled something she tried to tell herself was love.

The first time Irma got pregnant by Guillermo, Doña Kristi and

Don Gregorio found an abortion clinic in the Loop, a place she'd never been before because she was terrified of INS agents roaming the streets of unknown places. The abortion was arranged and executed so quickly that Guillermo didn't find out until afterward.

For months, Irma said she thought about how she'd killed a little soul. She felt suicidal and prayed to God and the Virgin for forgiveness. One day she was walking and a man, Bill, from Cicero, called out to her from his car and invited her for a drive that night. They went to the park and she valiantly conducted the entire date in English. Bill saw her into the house, held her little girl in his lap, left, and was never heard from again.

Doña Kristi said Irma would never get a citizen to marry her and give her residency papers because she acted sullen with men, turned them off. She should seek therapy, Doña Kristi said.

The second time she got pregnant Guillermo said, "I confess. I'm living with my landlady. So get rid of it."

Doña Kristi and Don Gregorio assumed that's just what she'd do, especially after they told her they couldn't afford to keep a housekeeper with two kids. For weeks it grew inside her and she struggled with Yellow Pages listings and listened to all the Spanish radio public service announcements. On the final day preceding her appointment at the abortion clinic, she found an organization that hooked her up with a Mexican woman in Little Village. The woman said she'd take in a pregnant woman and a six-year-old girl.

"It was an act of God," said Irma.

Doña Kristi cried.

At the prenatal clinic, they asked her how old she was. She said she didn't know because she'd been born in a hut and her birth had never been registered. "Could you be about 40?" asked the nurse. Irma shrugged and they arranged for high-risk, older-mother amniocentesis. ("You're not a day over 35," I protested. "But I feel so old," she shrugged.)

The amniocentesis indicated the baby was a boy. "That's good," Irma said. "Because if it were a girl, I'd abort her."

"But what about her little soul?" I asked.

"Life here is hell for women anyway," she answered.

She named the baby an impossibly Anglo-Saxon name, something like Scott. He is an American citizen, but that doesn't help much, since American-born children can't sponsor permanent resi-

dency for their foreign families until they reach majority.

Things were hard in Little Village. The woman Irma lived with, Beatriz, had been here legally for ten years, and her two girls were born in Chicago. Beatriz and her husband were doing pretty well. She supplemented his factory job with her own, making \$6.80 an hour plus overtime assembling some obscure gadget used in the innards of automobiles. But then Beatriz's husband divorced her and ran off to Mexico, leaving behind thousands of dollars in unpaid bills.

Beatriz couldn't really afford the \$50 a week she was paying Irma to watch her two kids while she worked. There were weeks when she didn't have any overtime and had to borrow grocery money from her coworkers to feed seven mouths: hers, Irma's, the four kids', and Sofia's.

Beatriz found Sofia crying on 26th Street. Sofia's boss, a restaurant owner on 18th Street, had sent her one-way fare from Mexico, promising her \$100 a week to care for his children. When she arrived, he refused to pay her anything and threatened to turn her in to Immigration if she complained.

Beatriz took Sofia in and let her sleep in the tiny bedroom with her two daughters. Irma, her son, and her daughter occupied another room so small that in a better side of town it would house nothing more than a personal library or an ironing board.

For months Irma looked for steady work; she redoubled her efforts after Guillermo gave her a parting gift of a phony green card. It's not really green, but that's what everyone calls the permanent residency document that employers ask for when you apply for a job and you're a foreigner. Guillermo had a friend who got it for him for \$50 — that's \$30 less than the going price on the street. As for her counterfeit Social Security card, Irma paid \$40 to a woman she used to chat with at the grocery store.

Once she took the green card to a hotel near O'Hare, and Personnel asked her to sign a release permitting them to cross-check her registration number with the INS. It was damned if she did and damned if she didn't. So she did.

She left the house at 5:30 AM each day and caught a bus, then an el, then another bus, and got to work at 7:30. At 3:30 she went the other way around, two hours' worth. At work she had to clean one hotel suite every 30 minutes, and if she pushed the cleaning cart too slowly or left a dust mote on a night table, the black supervisors

screamed at her. For 60 hours commuting and working per week, she took home \$166 net. The old-timer maids, out-and-out illegal aliens, sneered. "You couldn't possibly be legal," they said. "Or why would you take such a shitty job?"

She was happy, though.

A month later, Personnel called her in and told her they'd been informed she was undocumented and that they regretted they couldn't take on any new illegals, what with all the old ones they already had. This was a large-scale enterprise, you see, and they didn't want to get in trouble should Congress pass the Simpson-Mazzoli immigration bill, which would make it a crime for an employer to hire illegals.

A storefront lawyer advised Irma to leave her house immediately and hide for a few days. Beatriz took all the names off the mailbox and told the kids not to answer the door to anybody they didn't know.

After that, when walking down the street or riding a bus, Irma started looking carefully at everybody, trying to figure out if they could be INS agents. It was hopeless though — the agents work in plainclothes.

Then the House of Representatives passed Simpson-Mazzoli, which Irma and her friends knew simply as *La Amnistía*. The day after the vote, she and Beatriz were sitting around the kitchen table waiting to hear the upcoming news about what the Senate would decide. Meanwhile, a Spanish radio commentator was discussing the ins and outs of the law.

He said the Senate and House were arguing — possibly without resolution — about whether to grant amnesty in this country to 1.5 to 3 million illegal aliens (of a total of 3 to 15 million living here). They couldn't agree, either, on how long you'd have to have lived here to get amnesty: since 1982? 1980? Or as early as 1978? In any case, the House said, to get in under the wire, immigrants would have to know American history, civics, and English. Irma wondered if she'd have to take a test. If so, would she know the answers? She wondered if this new law might just be a trick to get her to register with INS and then deport her. She thought maybe it would be less trouble for her to just go back home. Except that in Colombia, kids like hers wouldn't be of the social class that could afford to drink milk.

"How are your varicose veins doing?" asked Beatriz.

"Not so well," Irma said. "You know, that operation I once had to fix them was the most frightening thing that's ever happened to me. They gave me anesthesia and I dreamed that Death came to me in the form of a choice. I was supposed to pick only one word, which I would have to say over and over for all eternity. I chose the word, but it was the wrong one. So wrong! But then I had to repeat this monstrously ugly sound over and over. Over and over. Forever! Just remembering that dream terrifies me!"

"Was it in English or Spanish?" asked Beatriz.

"Don't even make me think about it," said Irma.

"Where am I going to get money for groceries next week?" said Beatriz. "Dios mío, if I end up having to sell this house, where will you all go?"

The radio was playing a maudlin ranchero.

"Yeah...things are hard," added Beatriz. "*Duro, duro.*"

"*Duro, duro!*" wailed the song.

"Did you hear that?" said Irma.

They looked at each other and burst out laughing. Then they waited for the news to come on.

## Epilogue

Two years after this was written, Congress passed the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act — "*La Amnistía*" that Irma was hoping for. The cut-off date was 1982, which meant Irma and her daughter qualified. But David didn't. He was Irma's new Mexican boyfriend. David had been a teacher in Mexico; now he eked out a living teaching Spanish part-time at a Chicago community center, and selling cotton candy at flea markets.

David was illegal, but he was gentle with the children, never got drunk and never beat Irma. They had a daughter and got married, without knowing whether he would ever be able to live openly in the U.S. Later, though, amnesty was extended to the illegal spouses of people like Irma. She and David then had a second daughter; at this writing there are four children. Irma is still cleaning houses and finding life very difficult. By law, she, David, and her oldest daughter still don't qualify for benefits, like food stamps, that make things easier for