



# CHRISTMAS, UNDOCUMENTED

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By David R. Henson

# Preface

Every Christmas, Christians around the world retell the story of the birth of Jesus. Many set up illuminated lawn ornaments of Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. Some dust off the Nativity mantlepieces. Others, to remember the reason for the season, defend the virtues of Christmas. Then there is the yearly attempt to make the Christmas story relevant to teenagers, as demonstrated in this years offering, [“A Social Network Christmas.”](#) With all the noise and lights, it can be difficult to remember just how jarring the birth of Jesus should be. A few writers, like [Kurt Willems](#) and [John Dominic Crossan](#), have reminded us of just how confrontational or unexpected it was for Jesus to be born in the way that he was. Often, we Christians will call the birth of Jesus a humble one, when in reality it was a humiliating one. Giving birth in a barn is not quaint. It is an affront. Giving birth among the beasts is not, I would imagine, a joyful experience, but a [degrading](#) one. Giving birth as a member of an occupied nation, an oppressed people is not exactly what we think of as a history-changing event.

It got me to thinking about just where and under what circumstances Jesus would be born today. What might jar us into rethinking the Christmas narratives we have grown so accustomed to that they almost have lost their dramatic, surprising punch. Jesus would have to be born to a minority people, an oppressed, exploited and mistreated people. Jesus would have to be born in deprivation, in humiliation. Jesus would have to be born in the context of kenosis, of self-emptying. Jesus would have to be born in circumstances that would deprive him of his basic rights, his dignity. Jesus would have to be born in the most powerful Empire in the world, but in a way that would have been ignored by everyone who held power and important positions in our world. Jesus’ birth would have been undocumented and gallingly political.

Taking this socioeconomic and cultural profile into consideration, I fixated on the idea that Jesus, were he to be born in our times, would have come as the son of an undocumented immigrant. The result is “Christmas, Undocumented,” a two-part short story, a dramatic, jarring and discomfiting re-telling of the birth of Jesus in our times. In it, you’ll find all the familiar characters and scenes — the Annunciation with Mary and the angel, Elizabeth, the birth, the wise men — but reworked and turned upside-down. My hope is that readers will find a renewed meaning in the well-worn stories of Jesus’ birth and recapture even a small ember of the searing affront that was the birth of Christ.

This story — more midrash than fiction — is meant as my way as a writer of offering my deepest thanks to the friends, new and old, who have supported, shared and found meaning in the words I put to page. I cannot express how much your support has meant to me over the past five years on this adventure and romance with the written word. And for all you theology nerds, I hope you enjoy all the Easter eggs I have hidden in this story.

Peace,  
David



The coyote, dressed only in pink bathrobe, polishes a pair of heavy-duty black work boots in her mildewed bedroom. The single incandescent bulb lighting the room dangles from a twisted wire and makes the already small room seem to shrink. Her hands begin to shake and she steadies them against the claustrophobia only by focusing on the meticulous cadence of a stiff brush scuffing over her boots' steel toes. Few things she fears more than being confined, but every time she picks up a job, she gambles with her fears, knowing she could end up in a cinderblock cell much worse than the one she calls home. But she can't help it. She is good at what she does, and with her pixieish figure, her long raven black hair and deep brown eyes, the border guards are rarely suspicious of her. And when they are, all it usually takes is a casual flutter of her lashes or a suggestive hand on an arm before the guards let her pass.

Still, the thought of prison sends a shiver down her bare spine, despite the desert heat. Restless, the coyote stands, allowing the bathrobe to drop to the floor in a damp heap, revealing a pair of intricate wings tattooed on her slender back. The ink begins at her shoulder blades and curves down her back to the outside of

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each thigh. She picks up a crumpled pack of Camel menthols from the dresser, fishes out a bent

cigarette and pushes it between two chapped lips. A flame flickers to life and the cigarette glows as she pulls in the first, biting, beautiful smoke into her lungs.

She puts the cigarette to the wick of a red candle. It sputters and flares, revealing a faded icon of St. Christopher propped against the wall behind the candle. The image is of a bearded man, walking staff in his hand, a child on his back, traveling. It has always brought her comfort. She replaces the menthol to her lips, sucks and closes her eyes. She has made the trip across the border between Mexico and the United States hundreds of times, and her prayer never changes: that this trip would be no different than the last one, wholly uneventful.

The coyote opens her eyes, exhales the smoke, and embraces the urgency creeping through her body. She quickly dresses, lightweight beige cargo pants and a simple blue-checked button down shirt. She packs a small knapsack with a change of clothes, a water bottle, iodine tablets, hearty snacks and a light blanket. She grabs a wad of cash, separated into five

different bundles by paper clips, and shoves it into her cargo pants. It is enough, with a little leftover for incidentals, to pay the local gangs and police officers in hopes they will be left alone on the Mexican side of the border. She has two hours, plenty of time to make the bribes and meet her cargo a few miles from the border in an empty field.

Seven men and two women are waiting for her when she arrives in the field, late. They are dressed as they always are, in sweatpants or tattered jeans and ill-fitting shirts with the names of American sports teams splashed across the fronts. Each has a knapsack — an old backpack, a pillowcase, an oversized purse — slung over a shoulder or resting by feet. They are startled to see the coyote approaching them; their grips on their knapsacks tighten and the coyote can tell the fight-or-flight instinct has kicked in.

“Who are you and where did you come from?” a young man in his 20s calls out.

“Don’t be afraid. I’m with you,” she replies. “I’m your coyote.”

“But you just appeared,” the man continues, puzzled. “I didn’t hear a car approaching and I certainly didn’t see you walking up, and there’s nowhere to hide out here.”

The man gestures at the expansive plains, covered with little more than a few mesquite trees and scrawny grasses that stretch from horizon to horizon.

“You would be surprised exactly what can be hidden out here,” the coyote replies. She stops in front of the small group,

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assesses them and calculates about how long she thinks the trip will take. Everyone looks fit, even the women, and she hopes they can manage the crossing in a week, maybe less with a little luck, she thinks, rubbing the St. Christopher medallion that hangs on a silver chain from her neck.

“We were expecting a man,” a teenager says, his voice sullen.

“You’re welcome to leave, then,” the coyote shoots back icily, pulling her long hair back into tail. “For the rest of you, my name is Gabby and I’m the best coyote by half around here, and that’s all you need to know about me. The trip will take us somewhere between 7 and 10 days if we don’t run into trouble or get lost or have to stop to rest too often.

“I’m here because I want to help you get across the border and, with all the increased border patrols on the other side, you can’t do it alone any more. I’m here because I know that after the trade agreement happened, jobs quit paying enough to put food on a family table. I will not leave you or forsake you in the desert. Either we all make it or we all get sent back. The trip is hard. You will suffer. You will want to go

back. But we will go on together. We will make it. Listen to me. Do what I say, when I say, and we should all be fine. Any questions?”

The small group of men and women shuffle and glance at their feet, at each other and finally at Gabby. They have lots of questions, but none that Gabby could answer. Would they encounter armed ranchers looking for target practice? Rattlesnakes? Angry wild boar? Would there be a place to refill their water bottles with water that wouldn’t make them all sick? How can it be that they would really be able to cross under her lead? But no one could manage to ask any of those questions, as if to ask them would make the reality of the task in front of them more real.

Instead, a soft voice spoke, one of the women. “Thank you, Gabby, for helping us. Let it be just as you said. We will follow you.”

The days that follow blur together like the land around them, into seamless streak of bleakness. The group walks in the dark, stumbling over rocks and into each other, their movements barely enough to keep them warm in the chilled desert nights. During the day, with the oppressive heat, they seek cover to keep them hidden and shade under knobbly, stumpy mesquite trees to keep them cool.

After two days, the group’s water bottles begin to run dry and several have eaten through too much of the dried beef and fruit they had brought with them. The rations of food left out by well-intentioned groups have been spoiled by local guards, the skins

of water, slashed and drained. So, some of the men hunt during breaks from walking with slingshots for small game. On the third night of travel, thirsty and hungry, Gabby leads them to a pump and trough for cattle.

“We’ll have to use this. It’s our only choice. There won’t be another chance for water until we make it across the border and several miles into America,” she announces. “Rest and refill. It will be your last chance to do both until we are safely across.”

One of the men pumps the handle and dirty, foul-smelling water spews out into the trough. [Thirst, though, overcomes the natural revulsion and the group refills their bottles with the muddy, brackish water.](#)

Gabby pulls aside one of the young women, the one who thanked her when they began their trek.

“Ave?” she says. “Ave. That’s your name, right?”

The woman smiles and nods. She has long black hair, demure porcelain features and a creamy complexion rouged from the hard travel. “Yes. Have I done something wrong?”

“Put these in your water,” Gabby says, placing two small iodine tablets into Ave’s free hand. “There’s no choice but to drink that putrid mess, but, at least, don’t drink it untreated.”

Relief washes over the young girl’s face. She drops the small white tablets into her bottle. “Thank you, Gabby, thank you,” Ave says, eyes and lashes moist. “You’re an angel.”

“They will all have diarrhea by tonight. It’s not safe to drink straight from the pump, especially for someone in your condition,” Gabby says, taking Ave’s bottle from her. “Here, shake it like this and it will help the tablets dissolve more quickly. I’d rather the rest of them not know I gave these to you.”

Gabby hands the bottle back to Ave, who immediately takes a drink.

“What do you mean ‘my condition?’” Ave asks, capping the bottle.

Gabby raises a thin eyebrow and gives Ave an appraising look. The young girl, in response, withers, in shame or fear Gabby cannot tell. Staring at the ground, Ave begins to shrink away.

“No, no, Ave, don’t be afraid. It’s

okay,” Gabby says, reaching out a steadying arm onto the girl’s shoulder. “I know you’re pregnant.”

Ave stutters; her thin, rose lips quiver. She glances around and whispers urgently, “How do you know that? I haven’t told anyone yet. Not even my boyfriend.”

Gabby shrugs. “I can tell these things, Ave. Everything will be okay. I promise. I will get you through this journey. Ave, how old are you?”

“I’m 19,” Ave replies, forcing herself to stand taller.

Gabby stifles a laugh. “If you’re 19, then I’m ancient. How old are you really?”

“I’m almost 14,” Ave replies, bowing her head again. “But please don’t send me home. I’m sorry I lied about my age, but I had to cross and I couldn’t do it alone.”

Gabby shakes her head. “No, I’m not going to send you home, but why would you come on such a strenuous trek and take a chance with your health and the health of that baby?”

Tears begin to crest over Ave’s long black lashes. “I had no choice. My boyfriend, José, made the trip last month, and I still haven’t heard from him. He doesn’t know I’m pregnant, and I don’t have anyone back home who would understand. Even my parents would think I was slut if I told them, which I haven’t.”

“So you’re a runaway?” Gabby interrupts.

Ave nods. “You don’t understand, though. If they found out, they would kick me out, and José’s family won’t believe its their son’s baby since he’s been gone for a month.”

“So where are you going, then?”

“To my cousin Isabella’s house,” Mary replies. “She lives in the hill country outside San Antonio. She’s the only one who will understand what’s going on. I have a phone card in my pack and I’ll call her when we get across to come pick me up.”

“Does she know you’re coming?”

Ave shakes her head. “But I can stay with her until I can find a way over to Alabama. I have friends there who work in some factories. José said he was hoping to make it there, so maybe I will find him there.”

“Transporting a undocumented

“You say the trip is dangerous, but is is no more so than staying behind in my village, alone, poor and dying.”

crosser is dangerous business for you and for your cousin. Why not just get a job back home and raise the baby in safety and security?"

"Safety? Security?" Ave snorts in derision. "The *maquiladoras* won't hire a pregnant woman. Even if they do, when they find out I'm with child, they'll just fire me. Pregnancies cost too much for them.

"Besides, I want to see my baby grow up. Most of the women there can't have babies any more and if they can, then they are born dead. The women start coughing, get sick. All so we can put together televisions bigger than you for a few *pesos*. You say the trip across the border is dangerous, but it is no more so than staying behind in my village, alone, poor and dying."

Ave is weeping into her dirty hands now, and the other crossers are beginning to notice. Gabby closes around her with strong arms and shushes her. "Don't be

"God is watching over us, Ave, and if he's not, or gets distracted, well, then we'll just have to look out for each other."

afraid, Ave. We will get you across. And when you get to Alabama, be careful. It's a dangerous place. If you can avoid it, do. But, look, okay, calm down. It's okay. Here, take this and wear it. It will keep you safe. God will be with you when you have it on."

Gabby lifts the St. Christopher medallion from around her neck and places it around Ave's long, slender neck. "Do you really think God will be with me?" Ave responds, the innocence of hope reviving her.

The coyote places a hand on Ave's belly. "I think God already is with you. This child is a miracle and he has a saint for a mother. God is with you and so am I. So are all of us. God is watching over us, Ave, and if he's not, or gets distracted, well, then we'll just have to look out for each other. So don't be afraid."

Ave nods. "Let it be so, then."

"With any luck, we'll be in America in 24 hours. The river is not far from here."

Terror and fear run the next few days together. She remembers stripping naked with the rest of the group and crossing the muddy river in the shivering dark into America with her clothes and knapsack wrapped in plastic and held high over her head. There were Gabby's warnings about sensors buried on the riverbanks to detect their passing, and there was the hole clipped in the fence. There were the flashes of light from the sky when routine patrols searched for border crossers. The pursuit of border guards, the hiding, the running from snarling dogs, the walking and stumbling through dense brambles of agave and prickly pear that tore at her clothes, her flesh and her will to

keep going. There were blisters, cracked, bleeding and painful on her feet and lips. Freezing at night, yet walking on. Sweating during the day, exhaustion overcoming even the heat and fear to bring on sleep.

At last, the bedraggled group arrives at their destination, the town of Uvalde.

"This is as far as I go with you," Gabby says on the outskirts of town. "The town is to the north and east. Just follow the power lines and you'll find it. If you don't wander off, you won't find any hostile citizens, no border patrols and no more checkpoints to dodge. It's a straight shot."

The group sloughs off their packs and sits in the dusty grass, exhausted, hurting and tired. Gabby sits down, too, next to Ave.

"What are you writing?" she asks, pointing to Ave's palm-sized pink notebook, its spiral binding unrolling at the ends.

Ave shuts the book and places a nervous hand over the top to keep it closed. "It's nothing. Just a bit of writing."

"May I see? What kind of writing? Like a journal?"

Ave shakes her head. "I like poetry, but I don't let anyone read it."

"A poet?" Gabby muses. "I'm sure you are wonderful writer."

An uneasy silence hangs between the two women. Unable to find a tactful way to ask the question in her mind, Gabby decides simply to be frank.

"Have you miscarried?" Gabby asks, turning her body to face Ave's. "I have worried about this since we began. It is such a long, difficult journey."

Ave shakes her head. "I don't think so," she says, placing a hand

on her womb. “Maybe I’m crazy, but I feel like I know he’s in there and he’s happy.

“A son,” Gabby says, more affirmation of fact than question.

Ave nods. “A son. And he survived. We survived. We made it, just like you said we would.”

Gabby smiles, rising from her seat. “A miracle then. God was indeed with you.”

Ave pondered Gabby’s final words as she remembered the hardships of her journey. Then she remembered the St. Christopher medallion hanging from a chain around her neck. She rises, slowly and painfully, intending to return the necklace to its owner. But when she looks around for Gabby, however, the coyote has vanished into the desert as mysteriously as she had originally appeared.

She turns the medallion over in her hand. There is a scuffed inscription on the back, and it looks older than the earth. It reads, “Call him Jesus.” Puzzled, Ave wonders what it means. She puts the necklace back on, says goodbye to the rest of the group and heads toward Uvalde, occasionally looking around to see if she can spot Gabby ahead of her in the desert.

When she arrives in town, Ave finds a pay phone, digs her phone card from her bag and dials her cousin’s number. Her call is answered after two rings, but no one says hello on the other end.

“Hello? Hello? Isabella? Is that you?” Ave shouts into the receiver. “Can you hear me? Hello?”

Suddenly, fear consumes her again. She had not consider that Isabella might not want to help her, might not want to speak with her. What if she didn’t have a place to go here in this foreign country full of suspicious eyes toward immigrants. Ave removes the phone from her ear and is about to replace it in its cradle when she hear’s a woman’s voice shouting on the other end.

“Hello! Wait, wait! Don’t hang up! Hello? Who’s there?” Relief exhales through her body as she recognizes her cousin’s voice. “Zach, if you’re going to pick up the phone, at least grunt or something to let them know you’re there. Or, better yet, say hello!”

Ave smiles. Isabella has not changed. “Tia, it’s Ave. I need your help. I’m pregnant, I’m in Uvalde and I’m illegal.”

Ave jerks the phone back from her hear as Isabella erupts in shouts. There is the loud clatter of a receiver falling to the floor and the hasty scuffling sound of Isabella retrieving it. “I’m so sorry dear girl, I could not help but leap the moment I heard your voice and your news! God be with you dear child. I’m coming now. I’ll see you in an hour.”

“So you don’t mind?”

“Mind? Dear child, no!” Isabella says. “I’m lonely here. I could use the company. And I have news for you, as well. I’m pregnant, too! At my age! Can you believe it?”

Ave smiles again. She is in America, undetected by the border patrol. Her baby has survived, despite the arduous journey. Soon, she would be in the safety of her cousin’s home and filled with good food, tamales and salsa. So, yes, at this point, she would believe just about anything.

**Coming  
Wednesday:  
Nochebuena**