



Ave remains with Isabella for three months, until her cousin gives birth to her son and settles into her new life as a mother.

In her time in America, Ave has managed to find enough work — paid only in cash — to purchase a few incidentals and a bus ticket to a small town in Alabama where a job in a factory and a few friends await her. Despite her best efforts, she's not managed to find any more information on her boyfriend. She has tried all the names and aliases he might be using — José Mann, José David, José David Mann — but all her leads turn into dead ends. Maybe once she makes it to Alabama, her search will get easier, but she fears the worst, death or detention.

Ave is sitting at the breakfast table worrying over her boyfriend's fate when Isabella offers her a plate of eggs, beans and corn grits.

"Eat, your baby needs it even if you don't feel like it," Isabella says, sitting down next to her. "I wish you'd reconsider this trip. You can stay here as long as you like. I could use the extra hands. And my baby could use a little brother to grow up with"

By David R. Henson

Ave shakes her head. "No, no. You have been kind enough. I have a job waiting for me and friends. And maybe José will be there and I can

tell him about the baby. Don't worry, Isabella. I'll be fine in Alabama."

Isabella clucks her tongue. "It's different there than here is all I'm saying. They don't like us over there, not one bit. Don't give them any excuse to talk to you. You've got that baby to think about."

Both women fall silent as they run through various worst-case scenarios better left unsaid.

"I leave tomorrow," Ave reminds her. "I can't thank you and Zach enough for all your help and generosity. I would have been lost without you both."

Isabella grins. "I know. Well, let's get you packed. We'll go up to the store and get you a few things for your trip."

"Thank you, Tia," Ave says, leaning over to kiss her cousin on the forehead. "I think I hear baby Juan crying. He must be awake. Would you like me to rock him back to sleep?"

Relieved, Isabella replies, "You wouldn't mind?"

“Not at all,” Ave says. “I want all the time I can get with him before I leave.”

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There is more Spanish than English in the San Antonio bus terminal which reassures Ave after Isabella and Juan leave her on her own. Her belly has begun to show now that she is four months with child. The baby growing inside her is strong, loves to kick and wakes her up at all hours. The trip on the bus won't be the most enjoyable, but she has been in more uncomfortable traveling arrangements before, she thinks, remembering the 12 days she spent crossing the border.

Her trip and arrival in Alabama are blessedly uneventful. Her job in the factory is tiring and monotonous but the pay is better than back home. More to the point, they actually hired her in the first place, even though she was clearly pregnant. In fact, her belly might have helped her get the job as her lie about her age seemed more believable to the hiring boss. For the next four months, her life falls into a pleasant routine unlike she has ever known and she comes to think of the tiny Alabama town as her home.

She rooms with three other women, all from her state in Mexico, and they all commute together to work. None of them are in the country legally, but each has managed to obtain forged papers. Every so often rumors of immigration raids on the factory ripple through the ranks, but nothing ever pans out, so eventually, the edge that comes

with the warnings diminish, replaced by a generalized anxiety that becomes easy to ignore.

One morning, Ave announces to her roommates that she is leaving the factory floor.

“Today is my last day,” Ave says on their way to work. “I'm eight months pregnant, my back is killing me, feet are swollen and my hands are so puffy I can hardly work the machines any more.”

It doesn't surprise her friends. They have been urging her to stop working, but Ave has insisted, explaining that every little bit of extra cash will help with all the baby expenses soon to come, especially with José nowhere to be found and unable to offer any financial support. The last anyone had heard of him, he had gone two counties over to pick a harvest of peaches. He had never

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returned. No one knew any more of his whereabouts, and her greatest fears about him — his death or detention — seemed more likely the longer no one heard from him.

“Well, it's about time,” says the oldest woman in the group, Anna, a woman the rest consider a kind of surrogate mother in America. She cooks, fusses and reminds them to go to worship every Saturday night instead of out dancing. “You've been needing to get off your feet for a month now at least. It will be nice to have a little baby around the house again. Mine are all grown and gone and scattered throughout the Southeast.”

“Let's throw her a party,” one of the girls suggests from the backseat. And for the remainder of the commute, the talk is all of streamers, and baby shower games and cakes and presents. Ave smiles.

On the factory floor, the day thrums along as it always does. The factory break room at lunch is filled with smells of home mixed with the aroma of greasy fast food, reheated. The afternoon churns on, until about 2 p.m., when the factory doors burst open and black-armored men, guns drawn and chests emblazoned with the letters I-C-E, flood into the cavernous room like ants scurrying from a caved-in hill. The clatter of chairs falling to the floor, shrieks of fear and deep, gravelly shouts to halt echo in a nightmarish cacophony.

Ave feels her breath grow shallow and then her body sinks on weak knees. When she wakes,

her head is throbbing but she cannot reach her hand to feel the knot on her forehead. Her hands are in plastic cuffs behind her back, and she is slumped on her side against a wall with the other factory women. She hears them crying, sobbing about the children who will return from school to homes without mothers, and perhaps fathers, about the thousands of miles that will soon separate them from their sons and daughters.

Reality begins to sink in for Ave as one of the ICE agents lifts her to her feet and helps her to one of the buses in the parking lot that will take her and the other workers to the immigration detention center. The bus ride to the detention center takes an hour. Some of the women whisper. Some sleep. Many weep.

“I just can’t believe my luck,” Ave whispers to no one in particular. “Today was my last day at the factory. My last day and ICE shows up. If only I’d just stayed at home.”

Across the aisle, an older woman, her gray hair wrapped in bun on top of her head, replies, “It’s got nothing to do with luck, *niña*. It’s not a matter of if but when you get sent back to Mexico when you live in Alabama. If they didn’t get you today, they would’ve found you in a couple of weeks when the census takers come out knocking on doors.”

After an uncomfortable hour on the bus, it arrives at the [detention center](#), a massive, lifeless gray building with slits for windows like narrowed, suspicious eyes. A female guard boards the bus to greet them.

“Welcome to the Stable, my *vacas*,” the scrawny-haired guard shouts. “Hope y’all enjoy your stay here on your way back to whatever rotten country you came from. Showers are mandatory. I don’t want to smell you heifers any more than I have to. Now, off the bus for processing!”

The detainees file into the detention center in a single column. When the door closes behind them, shutting out the sunlight, the detainees stare dumbly at empty walls. Everything in the room is drained of life, sterilized from color with stark white paint and buzzing fluorescent lights.

Ave and the other women are marched into an enclosed room and ordered to remove their clothes to be searched. Ave kicks off her shoes, unwilling to bend over to do it with her hands. She then peels off the oversized elastic waistband covering her belly and takes off her jeans, followed by her billowy shirt. Her protruding belly cannot be missed, its navel inverted and skin stretched by the pregnancy.

The room is cold. Ave and the other women shiver in bras and panties, unwilling to remove the last bit of dignity until forced to do so.

“Remove all your clothes,” barks the scrawny-haired officer.

“But we didn’t commit any crimes, ma’am. We just work here in America and eat here. None of us are drug dealers ...”

“But we didn’t commit any crimes, ma’am,” one lady ventures from the back. “We just work here in America and eat here. None of us are drug dealers or gang members. I mean, look at her. She’s pregnant. Does she really have to take off her clothes? The only thing she’s hiding is a baby and not very well at that.”

“No exceptions, spic,” the prison guard shouts. “Strip! It’s how we do it here in the Stable. Everyone strips and gets searched. You wetbacks are wily ones. Never know where you might be hiding something.”

Ave draws a deep breath of air, hoping the filtered, recycled air will calm her nerves as she removes the rest of her clothes and stands naked in the cold room.

“Against the wall,” the guard says. “Arms and legs out.”

The guard’s hands are cold and invasive on Ave’s body. She jerks

instinctively as the guard’s hands travel up her legs. She tries to hold the image of her cousin Isabella in her mind, and then when that fails to keep her mind from the guard’s hands, she ponders her baby, wondering what he will look like, what his laugh will sound like. Her stomach cramps when the search is finished.

After all the guard finishes with all the women, the detainees are issued identical prison uniforms to wear, but Ave’s belly makes it difficult to cinch the tie on the pants. So, as Ave walks down a long hall of cells,

she waddles, using both hands to keep her new pants from slipping to her ankles.

She is led to a cramped cell like every other she has passed. Her bed, like the rest, is made up with a gray blanket and a stiff white pillow. She shuffles to the open bunk and lies down on her side. She stuffs the pillow between her knees for comfort and uses the crook of her elbow tucked under her head as a pillow.

“Here,” a tired voice says from across the cell. “Take mine.”

Ave opens her eyes to see an elderly woman standing over her, tucking an extra pillow under Ave’s head. “You’ll need it more than I will.”

“Gracias,” Ave says. “Como se llama?”

The old lady smiles. “I’m sorry child. I don’t speak your language. I’m from a different world. My name is Hakima and I come from Iran.”

“I’m sorry. I just assumed. My name is Ave and I come from Mexico.”

“It is nice to meet you,” Hakima replies. “I don’t think you’ll be in here long, though. You are in early labor, as far as I can tell. And I can always tell.”

Hakima winks and touches the side of her face where her graying hair meets her forehead.

“I’m eight months, though,” Ave replies.

“I imagine you had a stressful day?” Hakima inquires, and Ave nods. “From the bruise on your head, you fell, probably from fainting. You were stripped and then cavity searched? And now, I’m guessing from the hand on

your belly and the way you were grimacing when you walked in, you’re getting some cramping?” Ave nods in response to each question. “As I thought, then. You are going to have that baby sooner rather than later.”

Hakima’s prediction proves true. The next day, Ave’s labor begins, and Hakima shouts for the guards.

“This woman needs to be in a hospital,” Hakima says when the two guards finally appear. “She is having contractions and is going to have this baby tonight.”

The guards peer into the cell. “What her? The girl lying on the bed? She doesn’t look like she’s in labor. She looks like she’s sleeping.”

Hakima huffs. “She is between contractions and resting, saving her strength for when she will need it.”

As Hakima is speaking, a contraction grips Ave, who grunts and breathes through it as best she can.

“She’s faking,” one of the guards says. “I’ve had a baby and it wasn’t like that. She just wants out of here.”

The guards leave, unperturbed. As Ave’s contractions grow closer together and more powerful, Hakima summons the guards again. This time, there is no doubt Ave is in labor.

“Let’s get her to the hospital,” the guard says, no longer skeptical. “And fast.”

Hakima shakes her head. “It’s too late for that. She will have this baby within the hour. She is dilated at 8 centimeters and her contractions are only 3 minutes

apart. Take her to the infirmary. And quick.”

The guard stutters. “But the doctor has gone home for the day.”

Hakima disregards her protests. “Take me with you. I was a midwife in my country. I have delivered more babies than you could count.”

After a moment of hesitation, the guard acquiesces and takes both women to the guard outside the holding cells. “Take them to the infirmary,” she tells him. Without a word, the guard yanks his pants over his paunch and beckons the two women to follow him. They walk to a small building separated from the main center by a small concrete courtyard. When they enter, Hakima notices that meager medical supplies and decides she might need more help than she bargained for if Ave’s labor grows difficult.

“Call an ambulance and get the paramedics here as soon as possible. We’ll need them for the afterbirth,” Hakima says, but the guard does not move. “Did you hear me? Go call the paramedics!”

Unaccustomed to being bossed around by an elderly prisoner, the guard’s demeanor darkens. “I cannot leave the detainee unattended or unsecured,” he says. “I’ll have to remain in the room. I’ll radio for someone else to call them.”

Without a word, the guard shoves Hakima aside and secures Ave to the bed with [wrist cuffs](#).

“What are you doing to her? She is about to give birth. She will

need to move around, stand up if she likes. It is the natural way for women to birth their babies,” Hakima protests.

“Security protocol. This detainee is considered criminal, in possession of forged papers, so she has to be restrained,” the guard replies flatly, moving toward Ave’s feet. “She can give birth on her back and without her hands.

“If you are going to force her to lie down, then you cannot strap her legs down, too. The baby will not be able to come out if you do,” Hakima says, exasperated.

“Fine,” the guard retorts, pulling a pair of ankle shackles from his belt. He [shackles](#) her feet together, the long chain drooping below the infirmary bed.

“Are you quite finished?” Hakima asks, sneering. “She’s in labor. It’s not like she is a flight risk right now.”

Ave’s labors quickens. The new contractions begin almost as soon as the previous one ends, and Ave struggles to catch her breath as she begins to push new life into the world. The guard standing at the head of Ave’s bed places a hand on her forehead, as a lover would, leans his head toward her ear and whispers to her.

“Come on, push, push, push this baby out,” the guard says. “Push the baby out. The sooner the baby comes the sooner you can go back home to your family in Mexico.”

Ave’s face darkens and she hisses between gasping breaths, “Don’t touch me. You are not my husband. Step away from me.”

The guard raises his hands in a gesture of an accused innocent. “Just trying to help.”

Before an hour in the infirmary building is up, Ave births a son, and for just a moment, there is nothing but mother and son. Hakima gently places the baby boy on her mother’s chest, as the child cries softly and roots for food. Ave laughs.

“Can we remove her restraints at least, to let her hold her son unfettered?” Hakima whispers to the guard, who obliges.

“Congratulations,” the guard says, unbuckling the restraints. “You have given birth to a healthy American citizen. You’ll have 36 hours with him, and

then child services will take him to a relative of your choosing.”

The silent night cracks, and all that is calm and bright fractures. “I’m sorry?”

“After 36 hours, we’ll take your child to one of your relatives while you await deportation,” the guard says. “We can’t accommodate an infant in this facility.”

A pain unlike any she has ever felt grips her chest, as if her heart is exploding in a searing fire, like seven daggers are piercing her. She gasps, unable to catch her breath. At last, a wail erupts from Ave, a deep mournful blast announcing the end of faith, hope, love, of everything good she has dreamed of in this promised land of America. Tears stream from her eyes, mixing with her labor’s sweat, dripping onto her chest, falling onto her infant son’s fluffy black hair. She holds him closely to her lips, kissing his head over and over again, weeping. In a moment’s time, she has gone from a pregnant girl to the mother of all sorrows, her cries joining with countless others who have experienced a similar crushing end to the birth of new life.

Ave tries to avoid sleep for the next 36 hours. The time is too precious to let it unravel in a dream. She

breathes in her son’s smell, tries to memorize each feature on his tiny face, features she knows will be gone the next time she sees him. The roll of fat that creases his shoulder. The way his drowsy almond eyes close, clasped with long lashes, after she feeds him. The snuffling sound he makes when he eats. The cry of need for comfort from Ave, for food from her body. She tries to burn the image of him into her mind with tears, with love, with anger.

An hour before her time is up, Ave begins to hum to her child, softly at first. As she gazes adoringly at the tiny boy, scarcely a day old, her voice grows stronger, more alive, rhythmed with passion. A pulsing warmth fills her aching chest and emanates throughout the room. A curious glow fills the room and, to her astonishment, she finds herself singing, in a loud, clarion soprano.

Her voice carries through the infirmary and the detention center. It penetrates the gray cinderblock walls, perforates the Stable with a stinging, visionary

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indictment, piercing the hearts of inmate and guard alike to share in her sorrow.

She sings,

“Look at the lowliness of this handmaiden, and find reason for favor, to call me blessed. The Mighty One has done great things for me, but the mighty ones have stolen them from me. Show then the strength of your arm and scatter these proud in the thoughts of their haughty hearts, bring down the powerful from their thrones and offices and lift up the lowly, the trampled and the oppressed. Fill the hungry with good things and send away the rich empty. Help this handmaiden remember the mercy of God.”

A curious thrumming lingers in the room after Ave finishes her song.

A moment later, it disappears when there is a knock at the door. The infirmary janitor, a Latino woman, pokes her head into Ave’s room.

“I’m sorry to intrude on your last hour, *señora*, but I heard you singing. Magnificent. Just magnificent. You have said what we all feel,” she says. “I know it’s not much, but I thought you might like a picture.”

The woman holds up a Polaroid instant camera. Ave nods, afraid that if she speaks she will lose control and begin to weep again.

The woman motions for them to snuggle together and snaps the picture. The camera whirs and spits out an image that slowly

begins to materialize as the air hits it.

“Thank you,” Ave manages to say. “It’s the perfect gift. What’s your name so that I can repay you one day, if I can.”

“I’m Sofia,” the janitor says. “Sofía Reyes, but you don’t need to repay me. It’s enough to see you light up. You have a very special boy there with a very special mother. Anyone can see you love him very much.”

Ave holds back a cry. “I have to love him enough now forever, in case I don’t see him again.”

Sofia brushes Ave’s hair back. “You’ll see him again. I know you will.”

Looking back, Ave cannot remember them taking her son away. She remembers telling them his name was Jesus, son of José Mann, and she can recall asking that he be given to her cousin Isabella in San Antonio. But she cannot remember the moment they took him from her. All she can remember is two strong hands helping her walk through the concrete courtyard back to the main building, the Stable. But really, she can barely remember that either. All she recall with any certainty is that it was raining and that the bright fluorescent spotlight shining down on her looked like the brightest star she’d ever seen.

Hakima greets her in the cell with a long embrace and helps Ave to bed.

“Some of the others heard what happened,” Hakima says. “One of

the women, Farzenah, came by and brought you all she had, a phone card and 30 American dollars, as a gift for you. She said she hoped you would be able to use it to call your cousin to check on the baby while you are here.”

“And how long will I be here?” Ave asks, exhausted. “How long, Hakima?”

“Only God knows, and I’m not even sure God knows,” Hakima responds, her voice firm but compassionate. “It could be two months or two years.”

“How long have you been here, Hakima?”

“Three years.”

Ave begins to weep again, sobs wracking her body.

“Here, child, and this is my gift to you,” Hakima says, pulling a small pill from underneath the mattress. “It will help you sleep, and sleep, I think, is the only thing that can console you right now.”

Hakima places the pill in Ave’s mouth and helps her sip it down with water. “Now, what is it they say in your language? [Noche buena](#)?”

Ave shakes her head and says weakly, “Buenas noches.”

Hakima waves her hands dismissively. “Yes, that. Buenas noches, then my dear Ave, buenas noches.”

The sedative takes Ave away into the succor of sleep. Hakima holds the young mother’s head in her lap, stroking Ave’s long black hair, deep into the good night.

Connect with David on [Facebook](#) and share your thoughts on *Christmas, Undocumented*. If there is enough interest, this project will be expanded to *Christ, Undocumented* and re-imagine the Gospel stories within this context.