

Two Backpacks

He walked into the Center with two muddy backpacks, one hanging loosely on his slumped, tired back and one clenched in his hand, straps dragging on the floor. He lowered himself into a chair next to the others and said nothing—just stared off into the distance with glassy eyes and set his backpacks gently on the ground next to him.

We rushed right past him, responding to questions and helping everyone settle in around the Center, offering them coffee, food and the information they craved to calm their uneasiness. Where are we? Can we sleep here? Have you seen my brother?

But he said nothing.

Things settled around him, and for hours he remained still with the exception of a few cell phone calls which he took with his face buried in his hand, rubbing his eyes and his forehead as if to bring himself back to the present, to wake himself up.

Hours passed before he said anything. He dragged himself to the back of the Migrant Center, stood in front of me at the desk, and mumbled something unintelligible.

“I’m sorry, sir, but you’ll have to speak a little louder,” I urged, wondering if he was in fact a migrant or someone who’d wandered in and who’d had a *little* too much to drink that morning.

“What’s your name?”

“Silvestre.”

“Ok, Silvestre. How can I help you?”

“I.I...” he rasped, not meeting my eyes, “I need...I’m supposed to call. About my wife. I need to call the consulate. I’m supposed to call the consulate...my wife...”

“Ok Silvestre. Don’t worry, I’m sure she’ll be released soon,” putting on my best *nobody-panic-you’ll-be-fine* voice, “but because it’s Sunday, we can’t call the consulate today. Where did you last see her?”

“No,” he said, tears springing to his already puffy eyes, “she’s dead. My wife died in Naco last night.”

The words hit us both with equal weight, as if speaking them dragged him back to the present, to the inescapable tragedy of having left home with his partner, destined for a dangerous and somewhat humiliating “criminal” passage towards a promising future. The tragedy of watching his wife die, then being detained and processed like a criminal and spit out—penniless—into a city far from home. The tragedy of knowing that “home” is

no longer the same, because she was his home, and now her absence defines every place, every conversation, everything.

He landed in the present. Awareness washed over him with his own words. He cried, I cried. As strangers, we cried together—accepting the unchangeable loss, the sorrow, the painful process of waking up.

I don't know how many minutes passed before he finally stood up from the chair into which he'd collapsed. He excused himself and stepped outside, continuing to grieve in private.

For several hours I checked on him, bringing a chair, more water, more tissues, and finally a burrito—the first thing he'd eaten since losing her. Silvestre shared little by little what had happened.

He shared how he and Elsa had come from the state of Mexico to the border, looking for passage into the U.S. to earn better wages and support their aging parents back home. They also had older children from previous relationships who needed more financial support for school.

He shared how they jumped over the high border fence in Naco, Sonora to Naco, Arizona with the help of information being fed to them through a cell phone from their guide. In climbing the fence, Elsa fell very far, but seemed to be fine.

It was raining and dark as they moved quickly from the fence in the direction they'd been told by their guide. But in a matter of minutes, Elsa began to feel weak. She told Silvestre her shoes were too heavy, her pants too tight, that she couldn't continue. She began to try to undress herself, freeing herself from the weight of her clothing.

Silvestre could tell something was very wrong. He called the guide, who told him that if Elsa was *really* sick, they should turn themselves in to the Border Patrol.

Silvestre helped his wife lie down on the ground, placing her backpack under her head, and ran for help.

By the time he returned with the Border Patrol, Elsa was unconscious and medical help was slow to arrive. When they did, they pronounced her dead, cause of death undetermined.

Was it the fall? Was she already sick? Would they have been able to help her if we were closer to a hospital? If someone responded sooner?

Of all the questions that Silvestre worried about that first day after her death, none was as haunting as one:

Was this my fault? I knew I shouldn't have brought her.

Silvestre passed the day in private mourning. When night fell, I asked him if he wanted me to call for a ride to the shelter.

“No, gracias. I will walk. I need to walk a little. But just one thing first...”

He walked back to the entrance of the center and returned with his two backpacks, placing the muddy black one on the desk.

“You should keep her things.”

I opened the bag ceremoniously, slowly removing each item and placing it on the desk. Her jeans, her jacket, her bag of makeup, her hair barrettes—all still damp from last night’s rain. I searched the pockets, and took in the size and style of each item, recreating Elsa in my mind. I found a damp, ripped picture of the Virgin de Guadalupe in the side pocket of her bag and gently handed it to Silvestre.

“Thank you,” he whispered. Silvestre had finished crying for the day. He picked up his own backpack and slid it over his shoulders, placed the picture in his pocket, and left everything else behind.

“Silvestre, you can come back tomorrow,” I offered, not sure what else to say. He accepted with a weak smile and left.

Silvestre did come back. For one week he passed his days in the Migrant Resource Center and his nights in the men’s shelter. We spread the word throughout our volunteer community so that each person received him with extra gentleness and walked beside him during this difficult time as he waited for news from the coroner’s office in Tucson.

On Tuesday afternoon, I brought one blank wooden cross to the center.

“Silvestre, we hold this weekly vigil in Douglas,” I explained to him, gently handing him the cross, “we remember and honor all those who’ve died around here in the desert. If it’s alright with you, I would like to make a cross for Elsa.”

He looked at me, eyes brimming with tears and watched my hands as I pulled a marker out of the drawer.

“*Gracias*,” he said emphatically, placing his hand on my hand, looking into my eyes with conviction, “*gracias*.”

He grasped the marker and carefully etched her name in all capital letters. We added her birthday. Her death day. The words, “Mother, Sister, Daughter, Wife, Friend.” I wrapped her carefully in my arms and carried her out of the center.

I crossed through the port of entry on foot, handing over my passport without saying a single word or being asked a single question, all the while clutching her to my chest.

We crossed to the U.S. in less than thirty seconds. A journey she died making in less than thirty seconds.

Carrying her with me, I couldn't shake the one haunting question:

Was this my fault?

Did I do this? Did *we* do this? Are we responsible for what happened to Elsa?

We can't take complete responsibility—just like I told Silvestre, there are choices and factors here that are beyond us.

But I for one can't claim complete innocence. I can't deny that my country's policies add to the pain and suffering of women like Elsa, their families, and their communities. I can't claim that their choices to migrate are independent of me and what I buy, who I vote for and what I do or don't say to my legislators about immigration reform.

I'm involved. And when I work for positive reform, it will be for Elsa and the countless others who experience the same suffering. It will be remembering the families who receive no news or bad news about their loved ones.

It will be remembering the image of Silvestre with two backpacks. Silvestre etching Elsa's name on a cross.

I dutifully carried her to the vigil that day and placed her alongside the hundreds of others. One more cross, one more name, one more life ending a little too early in the desert. That Tuesday we prayed for Elsa and her family, just like I'd told Silvestre we'd do. And we'll continue for countless Tuesdays to come.

Please pray with us. Please work for justice for Elsa. For everyone.