[Snap Judgment]

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** The United States' southern border, it's almost 2000 miles long. It's one of the most varied terrain on earth. It's become big news. See, some folks, they want to build a wall, an actual 2000-mile-long wall to keep "unwanted people" on the other side. Others suggest locking children in cages to teach their parents a lesson. Others, they applaud the firing of tear gas. Other those that advocate United States actually fire bullets. It's a scary situation that keeps getting scarier.

So, today on Snap Judgment, we're going to tell a border story. But this story starts far, far, far away from the border. We're going to call it The Border Hack. Instead of telling you several stories, we're going to tell you just one.

My name is Glynn Washington. Look around, look around. People are never who you think they are, when you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

Now, Snappers, if you listen regularly to this show, you may know that I've somehow been maligned occasionally as having nerd tendencies with *Star Trek*, the comics, superheroes. But when it comes to working on computers, this guy, he's the real nerd. Meet Axel. He's a self-taught hacker from Long Island.

[electro music]

**Axel:** Hacking is a gift. Hacking, you're born with it, I believe. It's like you can see numbers, you can see things that for anybody else wouldn't have make sense. It's a language, a world. Oh, [beep] it's a passion.

**Adizah:** Axel's pretty amazing with a computer. He can breach defenses and exploit weaknesses. He's used hacking to get on the good side of some pretty powerful people. But way before all of that, before he was hacking his way in and out of danger, Axel was just a nerdy Afro-Latino kid who liked messing with computers.

**Axel:** My first hacking job, like my first offensive attack, if you want to call it like that, was against this dude, man, called Carlos.

**Adizah:** Carlos was the cool guy at their high school.

**Axel:** It was this dude, man, who had it all, who had a car, who had money, had everything.

**Adizah:** One night at a party, Carlos picked a fight with Axel. It was stupid high school stuff. He thought Axel was hitting on his girl. The two boys started punching each other and they went at it for a minute but then--

**Axel:** Carlos went into his car and grabbed his BB gun. I thought it was a real gun. I just started like zigzagging, all acting all stupid crazy, you know what I'm saying? Trying to run away from there.

**Adizah:** Axel ran away from the party, but he decided to pay Carlos back the best way he knew how. He hit up his nerd friends. They called themselves The Jeek Squad.

**Axel:** The Jeek Squad. Yeah.

**Adizah:** They were a crew of teenage hackers.

**Axel:** I told my friends, "Look, this is what happened to me. What would we do?"

**Adizah:** Axel and The Jeek Squad stayed up all night hacking Carlos. They started with his AOL account.

**Axel:** [unintelligible [00:04:36] AOL, right? Remember AOL? Michelle gets the IP address for me. All you had to do was just break down the firewall from the modem router, and we got a reply from the computer, like saying, "I'm here."

**Adizah:** This is when Axel realized that his hacking skills could fight evil.

**Axel:** -we went through all the files, we went through all his porno [beep]. We went through all his family pictures and everything.

**Adizah:** They even hacked into his bank account.

**Axel:** We got a hold of all this information, and we thought about, "Okay. So, he's got $6,000 in the bank. What do we do with it?" So, we started stealing all his money. [chuckles]

**Adizah:** Actually, they stole half, $3,000.

**Axel:** We got out of there and went to the beach, to Atlantic City. We were chilling at the side of the beach. We were just drinking Coke. Cherry Coke. Michelle got like herself sneakers. I got myself some clothes.

**Adizah:** After high school, the rest of the Jeek Squad left Long Island. They went to college or moved to California. But Axel stayed. He couldn't get a job as a programmer or developer or an IT guy at some fancy new startup because Axel was undocumented. He moved to the US from Guatemala when he was a year old, and he never gained legal status. Even though Axel was super talented, he got a job at a yacht club, cleaning boats and tinkering with broken navigation systems. He tried to create a stable life for himself. He met a woman, and they had a baby boy.

**Axel:** First time I saw my baby boy, man, that was crazy. It is hard to explain how you will feel if you see your own kid crying, kicking, opening up his hands, his little hands.

**Adizah:** They had a little girl a few years later, and Axel spent all his free time with his two kids. They'd play soccer and he'd shuttle them to and from school. But every time he left the house, Axel had to be extremely careful. Something as simple as running an errand could become dangerous depending where he was.

**Axel:** I was dropping Christopher [exhales] to elementary school.

**Adizah:** It was snowing, and a woman hit Axel from behind. For a lot of people, this would have been a minor accident.

**Axel:** Of course, I didn't have a valid driver's license. I had a fake one. I could easily run the hell away from the accident. But my son was in the back seat, and she called the cops on me.

**Adizah:** The cops arrested Axel, and when Axel got to the police station, the cops called immigration.

**Axel:** And here I am. I'm like, "Listen, man, I've been in the country. Where is Barack Obama's form?" I mean, there is a law that will cover you if you have kids in the state.

**Adizah:** Axel was born two years too early to qualify for DACA. That's the immigration policy that allows people who are brought to the States as children to legally work and live in the US for a couple of years.

**Axel:** I got deported. I just got kicked out. I just got kicked out like, if I wasn't paid. It's messed up, man. It is messed up. They chain you up in the seat while you're traveling in the plane. I was thinking about my kids. I mean, the first thing I thought was, "Would I ever see them again?"

**Adizah:** The plane landed in Guatemala, the country Axel left when he was just a baby. As soon as he arrived in Guatemala City, Axel put all his energy into finding work and making enough cash to get back to his kids. He had no idea how long he would stay. He was going to take some time to try and figure it out. He worked under the table selling fish at a local market, and at night, he slept outside in the city's main plaza.

**Axel:** I decided to go ahead and say, "[beep] it. I'm out of here."

**Adizah:** He used the last of his money on a bus ticket and headed north to the Guatemala-Mexico border.

**Reporter:** Mexico's president recently announced plans to crack down on the illegal flow of people into his country.

**Adizah:** Axel arrived at the border at a dangerous time.

**Reporter:** US has expanded its own border enforcement efforts.

**Adizah:** The Mexican government was on the lookout for migrants just like Axel who were coming from Central America.

**Reporter:** [Spanish Language]

**Adizah:** The US was paying Mexico over $100 million a year to find these Central American migrants in Mexico and deport them.

**Axel:** I was afraid too, but I knew I needed go and head north, right? I didn't even know where to go.

**Adizah:** Axel roamed through southern Mexico, unsure if he was heading in the right direction. But the journey was too complicated for him to make by himself. So, Axel started looking for a computer and a group of people he could travel with.

**Axel:** I found these three kids, Jimmy, Charlie, Memé. I introduced myself and I was like, "Look, man, I have no idea where to go if I don't have a computer and I don't have a dime. Is there any way you guys can support me with that and we can go ahead and make magic blow?"

**Adizah:** Jimmy, Charlie, and Memé scraped together some money and took Axel to a cybercafe in town. As soon as Axel walked into the cafe, he was at home. He found a desktop, cleaned up all the viruses, downloaded Google Earth, and then used the satellite images to plot a path through the jungle for the four of them.

**Axel:** Of course, I told them, "Look, we're not going to take the same route that everybody's taking. We're going to go ahead and go deep down in the jungle." And it was extremely hardcore. I mean, in the jungle, all you see is mosquitoes busting into your whole entire body, branches, trees, and mud. Look at it this way. A guy who was racing New York City since he was born, shows up in the middle of nowhere at the age of 35. Jimmy was the one to make the magic happen. I mean, Jimmy was the one that taught us how to look at the stars and be like, "We're going in the right way." You got to keep going. No water? The hell with the water. Just keep going. You see what I'm saying? If you're starving, if you're thirsty, grab some leaves, bite them out, keep on going, nonstop.

There's one specific tree that is called Hokote. Jimmy knew it, and we ate the whole branch of it, man. We even cut some branches and took them with us because it was delicious. It was just salty, and it was eatable.

**Adizah:** The four of them wandered through the rainforest of Chiapas till they ran out of water or got too tired. Then, they would use Axel's printed out maps to find the nearest town. From there, they'd hit up one of the Catholic shelters for a bed and a warm meal.

**Axel:** When we got out in one small little town, we kind of spoke to this lady, and she was like-- yeah, man, I mean, there's--

**Adizah:** The lady sked them if they were part of the migrant caravan marching north.

**Axel:** I was like, "Wait, what did you just say? What do you mean about this march? How many people did you saw? Where were they heading? How long ago was this?" She was like, "It's been two days ago. They went through this town." So, I told Jimmy, "Jimmy, we got two days to go ahead and catch up to them. Let's go ahead and do day and night of non-freaking-stopping. Grab all the freaking 2-liter bottles of Coke that we found empty. Man, let's get it on." We didn't stop for like about three days, running, running, running, running, running, walking, running, doing the same thing over and over and over because one of the things that they told us was they're going through the checkpoints wide open. I was like, "Oh, my God." We're going to be in the middle of the asphalt on the streets, safe with a whole bunch of group.

I remember that we were extremely tired. We had blisters. Shoes were barely hanging. When we caught up to that town, it was late night, almost early in the morning, about 01:00 AM. This was [unintelligible [00:14:00].

[crowd chanting in Spanish]

**Adizah:** Axel finally caught up with the Viacrucis migrante. It was a migrant caravan that left Hidalgo Chiapas a few months earlier in the spring of 2015.

**Axel:** Everybody was there. I have no idea how many people, like 300, 400. It was crowded, it was packed. Everybody was just sleeping on the ground right next to each other with whatever was handy. Everybody was just in there like cows. You know what I'm saying?

**Adizah:** Caravans like these have been traveling through Mexico for over a decade, increasing in size over the years. The idea behind the caravans is that their strength in numbers. It is a lot harder to stop 300 people going through a checkpoint than it is to stop 3.

**Axel:** When you see more people like you, you feel encouraged. You feel accepted. You feel [pause] like you mean something to somebody else.

[crowd cheering]

I went out, and I was standing out there. I saw this white dude looking all messed up. Like, extremely messed up, not well fed, all burned by the sun, kind of long hair with a beard on it. I was like, "Man, it's got to be a joke."

[upbeat music]

**Levi:** I was walking down this dusty street in this little, tiny, like, one-horse town, and from behind me, I just hear, "What are you doing here?"

**Axel:** "Dude, what are you doing here, boy?" You know what I'm saying?

**Levi:** I hadn't heard English in like two months. I turned around, and I was like, "What is going on?" This kind of scrawny, like he had a polo shirt tucked into dad jeans and, these clunky white sneakers. He looked like, I don't know, like an It guy that had been dropped in the jungle or something.

**Axel:** What is this cracker doing here? You know what I'm saying? I told him that, "Yo, what are you doing here, boy? You're about to get killed."

**Levi:** I'm Levi Vonk. I'm anthropologist. In 2015, I got a research grant to go down to Mexico, and what I was going to look at is Central American migration through Mexico, and I just needed to figure out who this guy was.

**Adizah:** Levi had been documenting migrant stories from the caravan, and he had tons of questions for Axel. So, when they got back to the shelter, Levi pulled out his tape recorder, and Axel started from the beginning.

**Axel:** Everything we spoke about was just about how hard it was, my situation. I gave him all I had. I was telling him about what I witnessed, what I was going through, what I was feeling. I'm going to be honest with you, man. Look, I'm from New York. I see this guy who's got it all, struggling in the middle of the nowhere doing all these right things, walking with us, going through hell with us, and acting like one of us. When I saw that, I was like, "This has got to be a joke." And then, things started getting all up [beep] complicated. We started hearing rumors about immigration being in certain spots, making plans to stop us. I was like, "God, there's got to be a snitch in between this." I look at him, and I was like, "[beep] I doubt you." [laughs] That's why I decided to go ahead and hack his ass. [laughs] I hack him in a very simple way. I keylog his computer, his Mac computer, and I was like, "Let me see if it's true."

**Levi:** Yes, Axel hacked me.

**Axel:** I started reading all the stuff that he was telling me was true. By the time I knew that, all I told him was, "I'm sorry, man. I didn't believe in you. But now I do." And I started protecting him too. You know what I'm saying?

**Adizah:** Axel and Levi marched with the caravan up to 16 hours a day in over 110-degree heat. Sometimes Levi would record along the way.

**Axel:** My intentions are this. I don't want to go down deep the hole, because if I know too much and up here and I say, no, [beep] my tacos up, man. I thought this was guacamole.

**Levi:** I didn't-- we trade.

**Axel:** Don't worry about-- [beep]

**Levi:** It's right here. Look, I didn't put any on this.

**Axel:** Don't worry, man. I'll take it like a man. [beep] Oh.

**Adizah:** Along the way, Levi learned more and more about Axel's life. His mother fled the Guatemalan Civil War when he was just a baby, and Axel shared how he didn't know he was undocumented until he was a teenager. After his mom told him, Axel fled his house and ran to the roller rink.

They marched over 70 miles until they arrived in Ixtepec, Oaxaca, at the shelter of Father Solalinde, a priest who helped organize the caravan. It was Easter Sunday, and after days on the road, the migrants celebrated mass. The next day, Axel noticed something happening right outside the gates.

**Axel:** I was standing by the door, and then this car parks right in front of the shelter.

**Adizah:** From the door, Axel could see a few men holding machine guns and a lot of official looking trucks.

**Axel:** Then, he goes, "Padre, we got to lock the whole place down."

**Adizah:** Over 100 immigration agents and federal police surrounded the shelter. They were ready to deport everyone inside. The migrants didn't have toilets or running water. Father Solalinde, Axel and Levi tried to call their friends and family for help, but something was wrong.

**Levi:** I couldn't call anyone. I couldn't message anyone on Facebook, and no one could. And we're going, "What is going on?"

**Axel:** Everybody was just trying to make phone calls. Calls were not going out. Everybody was just trying to use the WiFi. WiFi wasn't working.

**Levi:** And Axel was like, "Wait." He looked in the distance, and he was like, "That truck has an antenna on it. I think they're trying to jam the signal."

**Axel:** They surrounded the whole thing, and they had one of those cars with one weird-looking antenna pointing to the shelter. I opened Kali Linux, broke into the DOS system and then I started hacking the neighbor's-- logged into the router's-- Noticed it was all blocked. All you had to do is-- unlock the whole thing, replace the whole password, and get it up and running. And that's all I did. It was so simple.

**Levi:** I was just sitting there, and I was twiddling my thumbs, and I was like, "I really hope this works." I was checking my cell phone every five minutes to try to see if the connection was up. It wasn't up. It wasn't up. It wasn't up. And then, all of a sudden, boom. Like, a little bit of signal. Just a little bit. It wasn't a lot, but I was like, "Okay," sent one message out to my family I'm okay. And then Axel comes back, and he's like, "They made the call and got it through. I don't know how long I can keep it running. But Father Solalinde has contacted his people in Mexico City, and they say they're on their way."

**Adizah:** Within a couple of days, human rights observers arrived in support of the caravan. They were ready to raise hell if the police detained any of the migrants. So, the police decided to let the Viacrucis go. Father Solalinde offered Axel job to stay at the shelter and be his IT guy.

**Axel:** Everything has been about my kids, everything. I wanted to go ahead and get back quick, as quick as possible. I was like, "I'm going to the US. So, thank you, but not."

**Adizah:** Axel headed toward Mexico City along with the other migrants. He took Levi's number and said he would call if he needed anything.

[intriguing music]

**Glynn:** Stay with us, Snappers. Axel's story is about to take a turn you do not expect. Snap Judgment.

[intriguing music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment. When last we left Axel, he had just found the migrant caravan and was headed north towards the US-Mexico border.

[intriguing music]

**Adizah:** Axel headed toward Mexico City along with the other migrants. He took Levi's number and said he would call if he needed anything.

**Axel:** I was in my living room when the phone rang, it was actually late at night, and I was like, "This is really strange." I think it was, like, 1:00 in the morning.

**Levi:** Can you hear me?

**Axel:** Yeah, man, I can hear you. How you doing?

**Adizah:** Axel actually made it to the US, but he never made it to his kids. He explained to Levi that he was detained in Texas by Border Patrol and deported all the way back to Guatemala City. That meant he had to start his journey to New York all over again from the beginning, walking from the Guatemala-Mexico border through the jungle. But as he made his way through the thick branches, he tripped and busted his knee.

**Axel:** You know what I'm saying? Exactly. It was just hot. Now if I try to move my knee, the knee makes a terrible sound, and it feels like something's feeling like--[voice fade away]

**Adizah:** Axel managed to make it to a town called Chapitas. He slept in an abandoned shack and hobbled into town each day to fix cell phones in exchange for rent. But immigration agents patrolled that same town every day, and Axel was an easy target. He needed to find some way out of Chapitas as soon as possible.

**Axel:** I call so many other people. I tried my mom, but I never got a reply. I never got a reply from nobody. The very first minute that I got in touch with Levi, he was right there.

**Levi:** When he called, I could hear in his voice, he was really scared and in pain. What really worried me was Axel is cool as a cucumber most of the time. He's like, "Yeah, man, don't worry. I got this. We'll make it through."

**Adizah:** But this time, Axel didn't have any tricks or workarounds.

**Levi:** It wasn't just Axel is going to outsmart immigration anymore because he couldn't move. Our roles kind of switched. He was kind of freaking out, and I was like, "Okay, no, let's make a plan. Let's figure it out. I'm not going to just let you be stuck there."

**Adizah:** I'm curious, at that point, if you felt like you were crossing the line?

**Levi:** Yeah. [pauses] A lot of anthropologists would say that when you're working with people in really vulnerable, dangerous situations, getting involved sometimes can actually only make the situation worse. I was aware of that, and I really care about this person, and I want to figure out how to help him in some way if I can.

**Adizah:** Levi picked up the phone and he started calling around.

**Levi:** Because you basically have to ask people who you don't really know very well, "Do you know anybody who can smuggle someone through immigration checkpoints? I just need to find somebody to help my friend get up to here. Do you know anyone who might aid him in this situation?" People are like, "What are you talking about?"

**Adizah:** Finally, he got what seemed like answer. A friend put him in touch with a guy named Don [beep].

**Levi:** I didn't know much about him, but I knew that he said that he worked with immigrants and that he ran a shelter. So, I thought, "Wow, if I can get Axel all the way there, wow, that would be really good."

**Adizah:** Levi thought the shelter would be similar to Father Solalinde's place in Oaxaca. So, he arranged the whole thing without leaving his apartment in Mexico City. He called up the shelter, and they agreed to pick up Axel and take him in.

**Levi:** Very quickly, we realized things were not what they seemed. [ringing] Axel?

Axel called me up, and he was like, "Hey, man, are you there?"

**Axel:** Yeah, I'm here.

**Levi:** Hey, dude.

**Axel:** What about now? How are you doing?

**Levi:** I can hear you. I can hear you good. How are you doing?

**Axel:** Oh, man. We're pretty much like the dogs take care of everything here. That's how I see it. Like, we are the [beep] dogs.

**Levi:** Were you allowed to leave the shop or are you locked in?

**Axel:** No, they told us to go ahead and stay in here. They locked us there.

**Speaker:** He's a clever guy. He's just somebody who uses immigrants to benefit and profit out of them.

**Adizah:** At the time Axel called Levi, he was broke and severely injured. It might seem like he and Levi took a gamble by putting their faith in Don [beep], but he offered food, he offered clothing and a place to stay for free. The problem was at the shelter, it was an open-air garage where Axel says he and twelve other migrants were forced to work on cars all day.

**Axel:** Oh, it was huge. Think about a junk garage anywhere in the States. The worst junk garage you could ever thought of, where you will see vehicles that are been there for quite a bit. I'm talking about 70s, 80s one of those big Volkswagen, rusty, with no rugs in the inside, but just the metal stuff.

**Adizah:** The migrants slept in the rusty old cars at night. Each day, Axel would call or text Levi to let him know that things were getting worse. The food sucked and they weren't getting much to eat. Axel said that every time the gates were unlocked to move the cars, he thought about breaking out.

**Axel:** We tried so many times, but then they used to scare us. They used to be like, "[beep] if you leave this place, you're not going to walk too far away. And immigration is all over the place." We had no money. We have no knowledge of how to get on a bus. We couldn't even get a ticket because you need an ID. It's not as easy as it looks.

**Adizah:** But one day while they were working on the cars, Axel picked up one of the janky laptops that was laying around the shop.

**Axel:** I tell him, "Look, man, I noticed this. If you let me do this, I will fix them." "Are you serious?" I was like, "Well, let me show you." And so, I got them all fixed and he was like, "Oh, well, well, well, well. Look what we have. Here, I want to show you something," he said, "I want to talk to you in private." He was like, "How good are you with computers, honestly?" I was like, "Ah, I know everything about computers. I mean, you tell me what you want me to do." And then, he goes, "I want you to hack somebody. Can you do it? And I'll give you some extra food. I'll make sure that everybody eats more, but we need to do this so we can get more food for everybody." "Okay, so what is it that you need?" I was forced to hack people from the government. Very important people for this guy, telling then that he was given donations, accepting money. I felt scared. I felt afraid. I was scared of my life.

**Levi:** So, it became clear that we needed to get Axel out of that auto shop.

[intriguing music]

**Glynn:** Axel's amazing story continues in just a moment. Stay tuned.

[intriguing music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, The Border Hack episode. My name is Glynn Washington. The last we left Axel, it looked like his dream of returning to America was fast slipping away. But his buddy, Levi, promised to try anything he could to break Axel out. Snap Judgment.

**Levi:** It became clear that we needed to get Axel out of that auto shop. I called Don [beep] up, and I was super nervous, like my hands were shaking. I think I dialed the wrong number like a couple of times. I was going to play up like this anthropologist who works with migrants. I called him up and I said, "Hey, I've heard great things about your shelter, and I would just love to come and see what you're doing, like what you got going on." I thought for sure he was just going to be like, "No." But he was like, "Yeah, why not? In fact, I'm in Mexico City tomorrow. I'll pick you up myself."

**Adizah:** The next afternoon, he picked Levi up in his little white VW Bug.

**Levi:** Don is just super casual. He's got his window rolled down, one arm outside the white Bug and another arm hand on the steering wheel, just cruising. He's leaned back. I don't even think he really speaks English that much, but he just was really into country music. So, we were just cruising down the road listening to Tim McGraw for two and a half hours. It was twilight, and we get out of the car, Don [beeps] unlocks the gate, and hands me my backpack, closes the gate, and I hear the lock click. And I thought, "Okay, I'm in." [laughs]

The shelter, it was little bit bigger than I had imagined it to be. It had like these 10- to 12-foot chain link fences, barbed wire on top. Everything was locked. There's no way in or out. There's so many broken-down cars and auto parts everywhere. It was greasy, there's all this oil on the floor and just like sludge.

I work my way back and it's dark, there's no lights. I'm like, "Axel, Axel, are you in here?" I see the silhouette of a head like pop out from a doorway. And he's like, "Bro, what's up? You made it." And we had this moment.

**Axel:** Man, I'm telling you. That's more than my friend, that's my brother. I give him a big hug and I started crying, telling him, "Dude, man, we got to get out of here." Think about this. In the worst moments, man, of this situation, the only thing you want to see is somebody friendly.

**Levi:** It went from being really scared and just trying to figure out, like, "What am I going to do in this situation?" just to seeing Axel and being like, "Ah, we're together and we can figure this out." I'm like, "Dude, where are we going to sleep?" Axel is like, "You're going to sleep in my van. What do you think?" It's like this 1960s old VW hippy van that's painted bright yellow, but it's up on cinderblocks. It doesn't work. Axel slides open the side door, and inside he's made a little bed. Like, he's folded the seat down, he's put some blankets on, and he's like, "Welcome to the crib. This is where I crash."

[rain pouring]

**Axel:** Right now, we're here inside a van where we're pretty much asleep with Levi, and it's raining like crazy, and we're going to be stuck here for hours.

[rain pouring]

**Levi:** Tell me about this van. Tell me what it's like inside.

**Axel:** All right, let me go ahead and give you--

It's colder. What we used do is we used to sleep three in the van, the same van, to go ahead and kind of get some body heat.

It's really cold. It leaks. There's water on the [beep] floor.

**Levi:** It smells bad in here. Did you just fart?

**Axel:** No, I didn’t. [crosstalk] There is, it's the van.

**Levi:** Yeah. A spray.

**Axel:** Spray that [beep] all over me, that’s what I've been--[crosstalk]

**Levi:** All right, close your eyes, I'm about to spray.

[spraying]

**Axel:** It kind of helped us to relieve some pain by having him and joke around and have fun.

**Levi:** All week long, I was in the shop, and I was trying to figure out with Axel, "Okay, what are the weak points? Where are we going to go?" There's a dozen people in this shop, and so how are we going to get a dozen people out of this shop? It seemed like every single day we were under constant surveillance. The only time that we were unsupervised was when everyone was asleep.

**Adizah:** You were just in this garage, but you could leave at any time?

**Levi:** During the day, Don [beep] would lock the gate, and I was stuck in there for, like, I don't know, 12 hours until he came back. If I had asked him, if I could leave, he would have let me go. I wasn't going to leave without Axel.

**Adizah:** There was one person who would open the gates and leave them unlocked for enough time, and that was the son of the man who ran the shelter.

**Levi:** He would come into the shop almost every night and ask if I wanted to come up to his apartment. He had alcohol, he had coke, he had girls. Would I like to come up and party? "No, I'm good. I'm doing my anthropology thing. I've got to document."

**Adizah:** Levi realized if he agreed to party with Junior, he could distract him and Axel and the others could sneak out. But they couldn't just escape the shop. They had to get out of town too. For that, Levi needed to get them bus tickets. Levi came up with his own little plan to fool Junior.

**Levi:** I was like, "Great, listen, man. I've been stuck in the shop all week. I don't have any good clothes. How about this? Tomorrow morning, I'll go to Mexico City. I'll get cleaned up, I'll wear some nice clothes and then I'll meet you back here on Saturday." He was like, "That sounds great, man. I'm super pumped. Let's do it." "Okay, cool."

**Adizah:** The night before Levi left to get the bus tickets, neither he nor Axel could sleep. They lay in the glow of their cell phone lights, try not to think about the impending escape.

**Axel:** Have you ever thought about what's going to be live for you when you go back to the States, Levi? Because in one way or another, probably you're going to end up missing this country, right?

**Levi:** Yeah, I think so. Why do you ask?

**Axel:** Because, look, I mean, I don't know, probably I'm just exaggerating. But if I was you and I had all the benefits that you have, I could probably miss this country.

**Levi:** Do you think that you'll miss Mexico at all when you get back to the States?

**Axel:** Well, I have to tell you something, man. That is a no. A biggest [beep] no.

**Levi:** Why is that?

**Axel:** Because I'd been almost killed. I'm not going to miss it. I live. Yeah. But I can tell you one thing. If I have to cross this country again, man, [beep] yeah, I'm going. I don't think I'm going to be capable of doing it anymore.

**Levi:** Yeah, this is the last time.

**Axel:** Yeah, this is the last time, Levi. The last time I'm [beep] putting myself in danger.

**Adizah:** Levi left the garage under the guise that he was going to get cleaned up for the party. Then, he bought 12 bus tickets.

**Levi:** I had the 12 tickets in my hand, and I was like, "Don't lose these." Putting them in my pocket and just taking a couple of deep breaths.

**Adizah:** He texted Axel to get ready.

**Axel:** All of us were alert. All I could ever thought was, "I got to man up. My kids are waiting for me." I know this is intense, but I needed to get out, you know what I'm saying? My kids were the one that gave me this strength to go ahead and do things that I didn't think that I could have ever done.

**Levi:** If this plan fails, it really fails. Don [beep] was already threatening, and he said, "If you try to break out, I can call immigration on you. We're going to find you immediately." I was really, really worried that if this breakout didn't work, I was going to get all 12 people deported from the shop. We just can make it five blocks back here to the bus station. Hop on the bus, it's going to be okay. I was just collecting myself and then walked over. It was one of the longest walks of my life.

**Adizah:** Levi returned to the garage with the tickets hidden in his pocket. As soon as he arrived, Axel and the other migrants grabbed their backpacks and changed behind the doors of their rusty cars.

**Levi:** He's like, "Junior will be back soon. I think he's at soccer practice. He'll be back in a little bit." I'm like, "You have a good night now." And he's like, "Oh, yeah, you too. You too have a fun time." He slides the gate close and locks it and walks back to his house. I'm like, [exhales] and I turn around, and Axel is just standing there, like, "Are we good? Are we good?" We had made the plan beforehand, and everyone should try to wear their fanciest clothes that they have, because immigration agents will sometimes board buses, and they'll just profile people.

**Axel:** I feel extremely excited, and I feel afraid. I feel adrenaline rushing through my veins and worry and confusion, I don't know, you name it. It was a whole new level of emotions.

**Adizah:** Lalito threw on a collared shirt. Rosie slipped into a dress. Then, Junior came in. He opened the gate and told Levi to wait a few minutes while he showered.

**Levi:** He walks up the stairs, and I've noticed the gate is still unlocked. And I'm like, "Oh, my God. Yes, this is it." He's walking, and he's walking, and I'm just praying, "Please do not turn around and look at this gate." He opens his door. He closes it. We see the bathroom light flick on, and the shower turns on. And I'm like, "Yes."

**Axel:** That's when he said, "You know what? Now." And we flew out of there.

**Levi:** "Go, go, go, go." Everybody's got their bag. Everybody's put a backpack on their back.

**Adizah:** They arrived at the station just as a bus was pulling up. Levi hopped on the first one. He would scout for any signs of immigration checkpoints on the road. Axel and the others were 15 minutes behind on the next bus.

**Axel:** Kind of took a deep breath in, man. I jumped on the bus. We went all the way to the back.

**Adizah:** Two hours later, they pulled into the bus station in Mexico City.

**Axel:** We were extremely overwhelmed. So, we went out. I touched the ground, went on my knees, and kissed the [beep] ground. I told [beep] "We is free. Let's get the fuck out of here." [chuckles]

**Adizah:** I got a call. He's like, "We just got out of the bus station. We're here. We made it." And we went and found each other. We're like, "Yes." Running through the streets, super happy. It was just a really, really great moment.

**Axel:** In this situation when you are worth for nothing, you don't mean nothing to nobody, I don't know nothing about my kids, he's been there when I've been struggling, trying to think to kill myself, because loneliness is so [beep] hard. So, if you ask me, is he your friend? No, he's more than my friend. He's my brother. He's my brother.

**Adizah:** After he reached Mexico City, Axel tried again to call the mother of his children, but he could never get through. Then, he heard some gossip from an old neighbor.

**Axel:** She had another man. She left me for another person. So, you best believe it hasn't been easy. It hasn't been easy.

**Adizah:** Without a home base in the States or a way to get in touch with his kids, Axel decided to stay in Mexico City for a while. It hasn't been easy, but he figures it's best to wait it out until he can get back in touch with his kids. Sometimes late at night when he can't sleep, Axel flips on a computer and pulls up Google Earth. This time, he's scanning the US-Mexico border.

**Axel:** Just to stare at the whole border and see if I can find any weak points. Look, man, I got to go back. I know it's taken a while. I left a little baby girl. Now, my baby girl has become a little child. There is no single day that I don't think about them. Imagine this, not having the chance to see my little girl do her homework, get dressed, probably even speak because at the time she didn't spoke a word. I haven't been there. What can I do about it? There's nothing I can do.

[ominous music]

**Glynn:** Big love to you, Axel, from all of us here at Snap. Thanks so much for sharing your story with our program. That original, hour-long score, that music masterpiece you just heard was done by Renzo Gorrio. The story itself was produced by Adizah Eghan and Levi Vonk.

[upbeat music]

If you missed even a moment of Axel's amazing story, do yourself a favor and listen to the entire thing right now. Just get the Snap Judgment storytelling podcast, we've got hours of incredible stories by the most interesting, powerful, sexy, musical, daring, dashedly people in all the land. Wherever you get your podcasts, get this one, *snapjustment.org*.

Snap was produced by the team that never locks anyone out. Please give some love to the uber producer, Mr. Mark Ristich. Pat Mesiti-Miller, Anna Sussman, Adizah Eghan, Renzo Gorrio, and Eliza Smith, they like chocolate. Teo Ducot, Nancy López, Liz Mak, Shaina Shealy, Leon Morimoto, they demand vanilla. But Jazmín Aguilar insists that butterscotch is the only way to go.

[upbeat music]

You might have been on the inside track and discovered early on that this is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, you could hack a self-flying helicopter to spirit your way to safety, only to discover at 3000ft, that self-flying helicopter really hasn't been perfected quite yet. And you would still, still not be as far away from the news as this is. But this is PRX.

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