

American Dirt: a novel

(a summary by Pat Evert)

The whole family is in Abuela's backyard. Today is Saturday, April 7, Luca's cousin Yénifer's quinceañera, her fifteenth birthday party. She's wearing a long white dress. Her father and mother are there, Tío Alex and Tía Yemi, and Yénifer's younger brother, Adrián, who, because he already turned nine, likes to say he's a year older than Luca, even though they're really only four months apart. Luca goes to the bathroom and in that moment three men with AK-47's spray the party with bullets. Mami who was waiting outside the bathroom, rushes in and hides with Luca in the shower. After the men leave sixteen are dead. The kids of Acapulco, rich, poor, middle-class, have all seen bodies in the streets. Casual murder. And they know from talking to one another that there's a hierarchy of danger, that some families are at greater risk than others.



Acapulco is a dangerous city. The people take precautions here, especially in nice neighborhoods like this one. When they arrive, the police pull yellow escena del crimen tape across both ends of the block to discourage traffic and make room for the macabre motorcade of emergency vehicles. There are a lot of officers, a whole army of them. But, the police aren't there to help. The target was Lydia's husband, Sebastián Pérez Delgado, the reporter? The cartels had told him to stop writing about the cartels. Of the more than two dozen law enforcement and medical personnel moving around Abuela's home and patio this very moment, marking the locations of shell casings, examining footprints, analyzing blood splatter, taking pictures, checking for pulses, making the sign of the cross over the corpses of Lydia's family, seven receive regular money from the local cartel. The illicit payment is three times more than what they earn from the government. In fact, one has already texted el jefe to report Lydia's and Luca's survival. **The unsolved-crime rate in Mexico is well north of 90 percent. The costumed existence of la policía provides the necessary counterillusion to the fact of the cartel's actual impunity.** There's only one possible perpetrator for a bloodbath of this magnitude in Acapulco, and everyone knows who that man is. Javier Crespo Fuentes. Los sicarios left a sign on Sebastian's chest that said: TODA MI FAMILIA ESTÁ MUERTA POR MI CULPA (My whole family is dead because of me). Lydia and Luca could not go home. They must disappear.

She needs to be quick, to get Luca out of here. They begin to walk, away from the reporters, away from Abuela's house, their annihilated life. They must avoid drawing the attention of the bus drivers, who've been known to act as halcones, lookouts for the cartel. She withdraws from her bank 219,803 pesos, or about \$12,500, almost all of it an inheritance from Sebastián's godfather. She watches everyone as they walk, other pedestrians, drivers in passing cars, even skinny boys on their skateboards, because **she knows halcones are everywhere**. Downstairs in the lobby, the front desk clerk excuses himself from his post and heads for the employee break room. In the second stall of the bathroom, he removes the burner phone from his interior suit jacket pocket and sends the following text: Two special guests just checked in to the Hotel Duquesa Imperial.

Lydia had owned this bookstore for almost ten years, and she'd stocked it with both books she loved and books she wasn't crazy about but knew would sell. So when Javier approached Lydia as she stood behind the register perusing catalogs, when she lifted his selections from the counter to ring them up, she was astonished to find not one, but two of her secret treasures among them: *Heart, You Bully, You Punk* by Leah Hager Cohen and *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* by Sebastian Barry. In the months that followed their friendship grew. They discovered, that both of their fathers had died young from cancer. She endured his intense flattery, and he, in turn, accepted, perhaps even relished, her wholesale rejection of his flirtation. He spoke frequently of his only child, a sixteen-year-old daughter who was at boarding school in Barcelona. "I joke about my many loves, but in truth, there is only one." He smiled at Lydia. "Marta. Es mi cielo, mi luna, y todas mis estrellas." A new cartel that called itself Los Jardineros had unseated and buried their rivals. Tourism had always been the lifeblood of Acapulco, and the violence had scared most of those tourists away. But now the cartels murdered a Mexican journalist every few weeks. Lydia's husband, Sebastian, was a journalist with a passion to uncover such violence. One evening in conversation with Sebastian she learned that her friend Javier is the head of the Jardineros, "La Lechuza," the owl.

In the morning a package is awaiting Lydia. An English-language copy of *Love in the Time of Cholera*. A book she once discussed with Javier, one of their many shared favorites. She knew this man. She knew him. And yet she'd failed to appreciate the danger he presented; she'd failed to protect her family. With it a note:

There is blood on your hands as well. I'm sorry for your pain and mine. Now we are bound forever in this grief. I never imagined this chapter for us. But do not worry, Queen of my Soul—your suffering will be brief. Javier

Early that morning they board a bus to Mexico City. Everything devolved so rapidly in recent years. Acapulco always had a heart for extravagance, but the cartels painted the town red. Lydia was reminded of roadblocks. They are manned by gangs or narcotraficantes or police (who may also be narcotraficantes). In character, the roadblocks range from inconvenient to life threatening. It's because of the existence of the more serious ones that Lydia and Sebastián stopped traveling regularly to the capital shortly after Luca was born. Lydia knows that every road between here and

Mexico City will have at least one roadblock occupied by Los Jardineros. They get off the bus at Chilpancingo. She feels both relieved and disheartened to be off the bus. They seek to find Sebastian's friend, Carlos. Carlos married young, and they made it their life's work to preserve a link between Chilpancingo and her Indiana church community. Right now there are fourteen Indiana missionaries visiting here for spring break. They fly home to Estados Unidos Wednesday. Lydia says, "We'd be safe getting through the roadblocks, if we were on the church shuttle." But Carlos' wife argues the risk of danger they are putting the missionaries in.

Carlos will get them as far as Mexico City, but what then? La Bestia because that journey is a mission of terror in every way imaginable, only the poorest and most destitute of people attempt to travel this way. On the way to Mexico City they were stopped at a jardinero's roadblock. They made it through the inquisition paying the mordida.

Lydia has determined that the least harrowing of their options is to fly. But to get Luca on the plane she needs a birth certificate or some documentation to verify legal custody, and to get a copy of Luca's birth certificate, they have to go to the registration office in the state where he was born. Lydia begins to see herself and Luca are actual migrants. That is what they are. **That these people would leave their homes, their cultures, their families, even their languages, and venture into tremendous peril, risking their very lives, all for the chance to get to the dream of some faraway country that doesn't even want them.** Because despite everything she's just seen, she also knows that, like all criminal enterprises in Mexico, La Bestia is controlled by the cartels. Javier is not the jefe on the trains. So her choice, then, is whether to escape one monster by running into the den of another. No one will be looking for them on La Bestia. So it comes down to this: her fears of La Bestia, the prevalence of violence, kidnapping, death, those fears feel theoretical. They don't measure up against her new blood-cold fear of Javier, the memory of her mother's green-tiled shower, that sicario eating Sebastián's chicken drumsticks as he stepped among the corpses of her family. They set out to find the commuter train to Lechería.

"The trains that run north from here are only for cargo," Mami says. "Not for people." "They climb on top," she says. "Can you imagine that?" The authorities have fenced off the tracks for about a mile in each of the cities. Once you are past the fences the train is already picking up speed. So you have to jump on while it's moving. It's been two days since the last train, and the men have grown weary of waiting. Lydia and Luca just watch the first time to see what they are up against.

They spend a night in the Casa Del Migrante in Huehuetoca. That night Lydia wakes to the sound of raised voices in the corridor. Luca recognizes the young man as a migrant who arrived late that afternoon, before dinner. Luca also notes the shape of a sickle tattoo with three blood-red droplets on the blade jutting out from the man's sock. It's carved into the calf muscle of his right leg. It had been heard that he was a sicario.

Sebastián shouted it from his headlines: CARTELS EXHIBIT BRUTAL SURGE IN VIOLENCE, TERROR AND IMPUNITY: CARTELS GET AWAY WITH MURDER. ACAPULCO FALLS.

Lydia had wanted to say, that it was asinine of him to write this stuff, that he was turning himself into a target, that she wanted no part of his righteous campaign of truth. That was more than a year and a half before she'd met Javier. And not only Sebastián, but Mamá, too, and Yemi and her beautiful children, and none of them had chosen to marry Sebastián, or to take on the risks of his profession as their own. Only she had done that, and now her family had paid for her choice.

A couple hours' walk northwest of the migrant shelter, Luca and Mami encounter two teenage sisters. Both girls are very beautiful, but the slightly older one is dangerously so. The girl is so beautiful she seems almost to glow. The girls share some aids to train hopping that they had learned. The train always slows down for a curve and it is easier jump from an overhead crossing. The girls are fifteen and fourteen years old, and they've traveled over a thousand miles so far. When the moment came, Lydia heard Sebastián's voice, cutting through all the external and internal noise. The voice, then, when she opens her mouth and screams into Luca's ear, is almost not her own. "Go, Luca! Jump!" **She sees all of him, the very bigness of his soul**, in the moment when his body leaves the safety of the overpass and flies, just momentarily, upward because of the effort of his exertion, until gravity catches him and he descends toward the top of La Bestia. "I did it, Mami!" he screams. "Mami! Jump!" Without a thought in her head except Luca, she jumps. When riding on top of la Bestia Lydia secured Luca and herself to the grating with a belt. Also they did not ride the trains after dark.

The year before Sebastián's murder, Mexico was the deadliest country in the world to be a journalist, no safer than an active war zone. No one in Acapulco felt secure. Acapulco's murder rate was the highest in Mexico and one of the highest in the world. The very essence of Acapulco had changed; its people were permanently altered. Entire neighborhoods were abandoned as people fled the rubble of their lives and headed north. For those who left, el norte was the only destination. If a tourist mecca like Acapulco could fall, then nowhere in Mexico was safe.

The girls were Indian, from Honduras. Their people were Ch'orti. Soledad had accidentally gotten an unwanted boyfriend who turned out to be the palabrero of the local clicca of an international gang. He was, therefore, just violent and powerful enough to do whatever he liked to her without fear of reprisal. Iván showed Soledad a picture of the hotel where her father worked. He said her father's name to her, and then gave her a cell phone and instructed her to answer it whenever it rang or beeped, no matter what she was doing. Rebeca barely saw her at all. When Iván called, Soledad stopped whatever she was doing, as instructed, and she went to him. She left her shopping basket in the middle of the aisle, or got out of the line where she waited for the bus, or lifted herself out of the chair in the middle of her reading class, and she moved across the city to him like a zombie magnet. Soledad endured him until he instructed her to

come back in the morning and bring her sister, she went home, packed her backpack, took all the little bit of money Papi had managed to save, and then sat down at the table to wait for Rebeca to get home. She wrote Papi a note. Luca now starts to understand that this is the one thing all migrants have in common, though they all come from different places and different circumstances, each of them carries some story of suffering on top of that train and into el norte beyond.

For both Lydia and the sisters, there's a constant tug-of-war between the gruesome feeling that something's chasing them, that they must move quickly away, and a physical hesitation, a reluctance to move blindly toward whatever unknown demons may loom in the road ahead. The Casa del Migrante they find in Celaya is a respite from that tug-of-war, and as such, after a sleepless night outdoors for Lydia. Soledad confides to Lydia that she's pregnant. As they leave the shelter, the Padre gives a speech, "If it's possible for you to turn back, do so now. This path is only for people who have no choice, no other option, only violence and misery behind you. Many will die. Many, many of you will be kidnapped, tortured, trafficked, or ransomed. Every one. If you make it to el norte, you will arrive penniless, that's a guarantee. Only one out of three will make it to your destination alive."

Upon boarding la Bestia again, Luca recognizes a certain boy, even before the Jardinero tattoo is visible. Lorenzo, 17 years old recognized them. "Word was to bring you in," he tells Lydia. Now the threat feels urgent again. It's all around her. She breathes it, and it's the same as ever: senseless, confusing, categorically terrifying. Javier feels as close as ever.

Life that existed in Acapulco before the quinceañera, and **Luca understands that to be a place that no longer exists. It's nostalgia for a phantom limb.** They are now in Guadalajara. But first they had to get past la policía. "La policía clear the trains at El Verde, and if they catch you—Don't let them catch you." Lydia knows how dangerous it is to trust anyone on La Bestia. There are thugs and rapists and thieves and narcos hidden in the ranks of la policía in every town, but it's not only the police who deserve their suspicion.

Lydia learned from Lorenzo that on the day Sebastián's article was published, Javier couldn't recall another time the press had devoted so much attention to a cartel as young as Los Jardineros. Marta, called her mom from boarding school in Barcelona later that afternoon and destroyed her with the simplicity of a single question: Mamá, is it true? On the day before Yénifer's quinceañera, the boarding school dean called to relay the news that Marta had been found hanging from the air-conditioning vent in her dorm room by a pair of her roommate's knotted tights. The suicide note was addressed only to her father. "One more death should not matter much."

"Javier made your family like a straight-up vendetta. Everybody in the city knew, everybody in Guerrero." At the shelter in Guadalajara the sisters were able to make a call to the hotel where their father works, Elmer Abarca Lobo in the main kitchen. They learned that he had been attacked coming into work the previous week. He was

stabbed once in the stomach and twice in the eye. After the call the nurse sat with Elmer in a coma and told him, “Your daughters called today. Soledad and Rebeca called from Mexico, and they’re doing well, Elmer. Your daughters are okay. They’re on their way to el norte.”

How do you find a coyote, make sure he’s reputable, pay for your crossing, all without getting ripped off? “You can’t just pick any coyote. A lot of them will steal your money and then sell you to the cartel, you know?” Mi primo César—he says this guy is the best. It took them only two days of walking and then somebody picked them up in a camper van on the other side and drove them to Phoenix. Gave ’em bus tickets from there to wherever they were going. It’s a lot of money, but he’s safe.” His name is El Chacal— the Jackal, and he works out of Nogales.” They pass through Mazatlán without stopping. The monotony is broken by screaming. A lone voice repeats the words over and over, like a siren: ¡la migra, la migra! The train is slowing but hasn’t stopped, and the men on top aren’t waiting. They scatter. They bolt. Lydia just knows. She can tell that los agentes de la migra in their uniforms are not here to enforce law and order. The trucks converge like pack animals. The men inside are masked and armed.

There are at least four agentes standing in the back of each truck, plus more inside, and they’re all kitted out like they’re going to war. la migra has planned the raid perfectly—the train, where they are now, is in the middle of just fields and fields and fields, all harvested, flat, brown, and bald. There is nowhere for those migrants to go. Lydia sprained her ankle in getting off the train. La migra rounded everyone up. No one got away. There are twenty-three migrants. They take their backpacks and put them in vans.

Behind Lydia’s most immediate fear of being murdered in obscurity, she’s also afraid that, whomever these men are working for, they may find out who she is and submit her to a different kind of murder instead. Even if they’re not actively looking for her, they might discover her accidentally. The sisters are separated from them where five men have their way with them. She and Luca are the only Mexican citizens. In a private office they withdraw the money from the billfold and counts it: just shy of 75,000 pesos, or about \$3,900. They were ready to release them, Luca would not budge. Back in the chair, more afraid of leaving the sisters than he is of staying longer in this nightmare. Despite everything he’s been through, or maybe also because of it, **her boy has weighed the call of his conscience above the call of his own salvation.** The commandant had put a price on the sisters, “Seventy-five thousand pesos each.” That sum is almost all the money they have left. He’s demanding more for each sister than he took for Luca and Lydia combined, and she has a sickening moment of understanding that this amount is predetermined. It’s the calculated value of their worth as human capital. “We will pay.”

Lydia now had a total of 4,941 pesos, or around \$243. They are free, but she watches over her shoulder the whole time. They haven’t eaten today, and they are hungry. Despite their adrenaline, they weaken as they go. By night they arrive at a city Navolato.

A doctor finds them beside the road and buys them food and pays for a motel room. Soledad miscarries her baby. The doctor returns in the morning and drives them to Culiacán where they await another train. “It will come, mija. And your patience shall be rewarded.” **This is the only way forward, so they go forward.** Adelante.

They travel north out of Hermosillo and deeper into the Sonoran Desert. A young boy, Beto, 10 years old from Tijuana, also boards their train. He tells them it’s impossible to cross at Tijuana now. “A few years ago it was easy. The fence was full of holes, plus ladders, boats—there were a thousand ways to get across.” Now it’s like a war zone, all drones and cameras and la migra just waiting over there like a gang of overpaid goalkeepers. Nogales is supposed to be better. I mean, it’s supposed to be easier to get across, because nobody wants to cross in the desert, so there’s not as much Border Patrol.”

Nogales makes them feel almost as if they’ve arrived in the United States already. One benefit of being a migrant, of having effected this disguise so completely: they are nearly invisible. No one looks at them, and in fact, people take pains not to look at them. She hopes that general indifference extends to the halcones. Lydia is worried about so many things. **The worst will either happen or not happen, and there’s no worry that will make a difference in either direction.** The sisters’ cousin has paid a dependable coyote \$4,000 each to get them across the border. “You know why I have a good track record?” He tells them. “Because I don’t take kids. I don’t like leaving people behind. I don’t like people dying in the desert. So I choose people who won’t die.” El Chacal says to Lydia “Five thousand for you. Six each for the kids.” “Dollars?” Lydia’s mouth drops open. “Claro.” “It’s going to be tight quarters in the apartment with the extra people, but it’s only a couple days.” Lydia visits the bank and removes her mother’s bank card, still untouched, 212,871 pesos. She’s not sure how she’ll get her hands on the money without the required documentation. the branch manager calls her into a private cubicle. She will tell her everything. All of it. She will throw herself on the mercy of this stranger’s kind face. Paola, the manager recently lost a nephew to the cartels. It’s so big, the pain. It’s exponential. “I might lose my job,” she says quietly. “But I will get you that money.”

The price El Chacal demanded was \$11,000. She gives it to him half in pesos and half in dollars because the bank didn’t have enough cash to give her all one currency. The total sum of her money, every penny she had, is roughly \$10,628. She’s \$372 short. Soledad remembers how much Lydia spent to ransom them. Beto has already paid for his crossing and still has money. He pays her shortage. While grocery shopping Lydia spots a billboard. It’s a sickle. And beneath the sickle, in fresh black paint, the slanted letters warn: VIENEN LOS JARDINEROS. Perched on the curved blade is an owl. La Lechuza. And across the eyes it says, ‘He is still looking for you.’ Lorenzo also joins the group to Lydia’s dismay.

We leave before sundown. Soledad has an opportunity and calls to find out that her Papi has died. She bears that burden alone. Nobody with a snuffle or a sneeze will be allowed to make the journey. It is April in the

Sonoran Desert. “This is a grueling journey. Two and a half nights of arduous hiking, and I am your only lifeline.” The coyote carries a pistol on these crossings to aid in convincing reluctant migrants about the absolute nature of his authority. They go in two pickup trucks for a three hour trip. They came to a checkpoint where Soledad could recognize the uniform of los agentes federales de migración, armed with flashlights and AR-15s. They greet el Chacal in a familiar manner, and he hands them an envelope. Later he tells the group they’re going to move quickly and it’s vital to keep up. It’s paramount that no one gets separated from the group. “Is everybody listening? This is important. If we get caught, do not tell them which one of us is the coyote. Understood? I’ll get arrested, and you’ll get sent home. If los carteles find out who squealed on the coyote and interrupted their income stream, you’ll have hell to pay. So you keep your mouth shut. If we get caught, we all get deported together, we come back and try again. You get three tries for the price of one. Agreed?” On the hike they encounter the sweep of that swiveling, mechanical eye, immigration cameras. The moment of the crossing has already passed, and Lydia didn’t even realize it had happened. **Nothing can be undone. Adelante.** At eleven o’clock, they take shelter. They pass three hours there, these are prime border patrolling hours.

They stop. There are four pickup trucks. “It’s either a cartel waiting for a delivery, in which case, watch your backs. Or, more likely, it’s one of those crazy fucking vigilante groups,” the coyote says. “Out playing nighttime Power Rangers, in which case, watch your fronts, because those hijos de puta would like nothing better than to mount a stuffed migrant head over their mantel at home.” Would it be worse to get caught by estadounidenses, who would take Luca from her? Or to get caught by mexicanos, who would return them to Javier? On the far side of this hill are a hundred more just like it, and probably a hundred more beyond those that they can’t see, because the hills get taller and sharper and more formidable as they go. They’re in the United States now, and already it looks like a movie set, but with real desert animals that can kill you, like scorpions and rattlesnakes and mountain lions. There are fifteen of them and the sun is sucking all the moisture from their depleted bodies.

“Tonight is difícil,” the coyote tells them. “Eight miles, rough terrain. You have to keep up. If you fall behind, we cannot wait for you. I won’t risk the whole group for one individual. If you get separated from the group there is a road to the west that Border Patrol and locals pass there regularly.” These miles cover some of the roughest terrain in North America, with elevation changes of up to seven thousand feet. They endure a downpour. Luca gets a blister and Lydia and he get separated from the group, but later rejoin them. It rains again and again. Then they see a fast-flowing black mass of water. So they climb up and up. One young man is dragged along in its maw like a ragdoll. He gets quite beat up and his leg broken. He and his uncle will go to the highway and wait for help.

They all know how lucky they are that it was Ricardín who broke his leg, and not them, and the recognition of that good fortune makes them each feel damned, doomed. Unconscionable. **Every day a fresh horror, and when it’s over, this feeling of**

surreal detachment. A disbelief, almost, in what they just endured. The mind is magical. Human beings are magical. Lydia thinks about how adaptable migrants must be. They must change their minds every day, every hour.

Lorenzo attempts to rape Rebeca and Soledad shoots him with the coyote's gun. Beto's breath knocks like a rattlesnake with asthma. Lydia is not sorry Lorenzo is dead. She worries that something vital may be broken inside herself. But the grief begins to surface. For everything she lost. For all the mistakes she made. For the apology she can never give to Sebastián. For being wrong about Javier. For being wrong about everything. For surviving when everyone else died. For being so numb. She is praying for her boy and their decimated lives. Lydia notices Lorenzo's cell phone. She reads the texts. Eleven days ago in Guadalajara. Lorenzo had sold them out. He'd sent Javier a surreptitious photograph of Lydia in profile. She was wrapped around Luca, the two of them squinting out from atop La Bestia. Tus amigos están en Guadalajara, Patrón, the text read. You are not free until I am free, he typed back. Return her to me. Lydia uses the phone to video call Javier. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but we are alive. Estamos vivos." Her hatred of him is enormous. "I killed the sicario you sent."

Because of the gunshot they have to leave three hours earlier than anticipated, in the heat of the day. There's a reason migrants move through the desert mostly at night. It's the murderous sun. But this time, when Beto coughs on the exhale, there's no breathing in again. His eyes are round with panic, his hands fly up to his throat, and the skin on his neck sucks in. In a remote campsite that's frequently traveled by the green and white trucks of the US Border Patrol, two RVs are waiting. The RVs have been parked there for two days. The men in those lawn chairs have done the pleasant, casual work of making themselves and their vehicles familiar. When El Chacal and his ten remaining migrants walk into that camp two and a half hours early, the waiting men aren't ready for them. The Border Patrol checkpoint on Route 19 is still open. They can't leave for at least three more hours.

El Chacal takes his backpack and heads back out into the desert. "Next stop, Tucson! Forty five minutes." The Border Patrol checkpoint is closed, as anticipated.

Epilogue

Fifty-three days, 2,645 miles from the site of the massacre. It's not the little adobe house in the desert Lydia imagined. But there is the yellow school bus, and Luca does board it every morning with a clean backpack and a new pair of sneakers. She has work cleaning houses. They live with the girls' cousin César and his girlfriend. Everyone contributes what they can. Lydia tries not to feel jealous when they wake up together and Luca tells her that Papi visited him in his dreams again last night. **She is stronger. She feels every molecule of her loss and she endures it. She is not diluted, but amplified. Her love for Luca is bigger, louder.** Lydia is vivid with life. In the fenced back garden of their little home on the tree-lined street, they bury eighteen painted stones. Beto's is sky blue. Adrián's is a balón de fútbol. Luca visits Papi's buried stone every day after school. He tells his father's buried stone about his new life in Maryland, how much he likes sharing a room with Mami. Soledad and Rebeca visit their father's stone less frequently, but slowly they're beginning to spend time out there.