

# Lost in the Glare

**S T O R Y**  
by Lawrence A. Herzog

**P H O T O G R A P H S**  
by Don Bartletti/Los Angeles Times

California Highway Patrol  
Accident Report #02-91-117  
**Name:** Joel Bravo Gonzalez,  
Guatemalan, 16 yrs. old, 4'10",  
92 lb.

**Date:** February 8, 1991  
**Description of accident:**  
Victim part of pedestrian group  
running from west to east on  
southbound Interstate 5, north of  
Via San Ysidro exit. At  
approximately 8:45 p.m., a brown  
1985 Buick Regal travelling at  
80 mph struck victim. Vehicle  
was being chased by San Diego  
police officer who elected to stay  
at scene rather than continue  
after car.

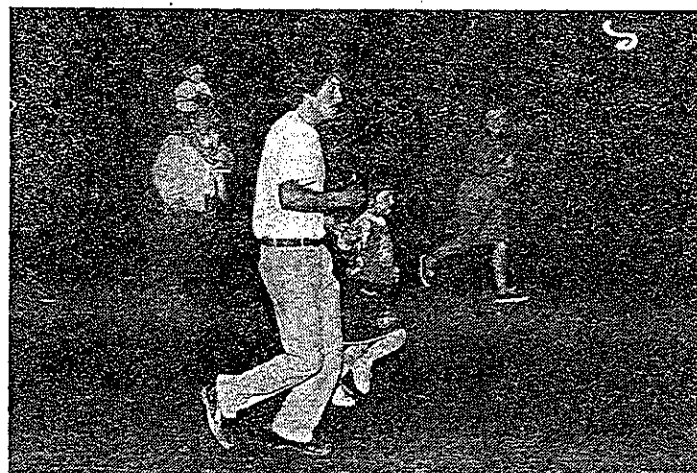
**Medical status:** Killed  
instantly, blunt trauma plus  
decapitation.

California Highway Patrol  
Accident Report #02-91-125  
**Name:** John Doe, male, Hispanic  
origin, age 20-30 yrs. old, 5'4",  
145 lbs.  
**Date:** February 9, 1991  
**Description of accident:**

It is nightfall near the Mexican border, and southern San Diego County's freeways look like just another stretch of California interstate highway. Processions of cars zigzag along the eight-lane concrete lifelines at the city's edge. For turnpike navigators in the airtight, climate-controlled comfort of their fashionable vehicles, the world at 70-plus miles an hour is a high-tech theater of blinking red-and-white lights.

But this is no ordinary California freeway. Here, just a few exits down the freeway, lies a Third World country of 80 million people. There are people massing in the hills each night, thousands of them, waiting to join another procession of migrant workers.

Since 1987, over 100 Mexican migrants have been run down and killed trying to cross San Diego County freeways. Every night,



**Border patrol agents started  
naming the tunnels after the  
commercial establishments**

objective is always to move the load of *pollos* (chickens) safely past the *migra*. Coyotes, mostly young males, know the turf well. A sprint across the freeway is routine. "*Ni pensamos* (we don't give it a thought)," says one. But for the Mexican migrants, the path across eight lanes of freeway at night can be a deadly one, especially for women or older persons.

Though any foreigner arriving in a new country is disoriented at first, these migrants are here illegally. Most are exhausted from a long journey to the border made with limited resources. Dodging cars on a freeway in the dark is risky business in the best of cases. This is not the best of cases.

At 9:50 p.m. on February 4, 1988, Oralia M. Alvarado was hit by a motorcyclist on 905 and killed. Her fatal accident occurred in an area of the highest freeway casualties, the

southbound Interstate 5 near Dairy Mart Road exit at approximately 6:25 p.m. Ran directly into path of car. Subsequently hit by motorcycle that swerved to avoid body, but slid into it.

**Medical status:** Blunt trauma to head and torso, pronounced dead by paramedics at 6:45 p.m.

I've seen these bodies strung out a couple hundred yards along the freeway. The coroner people get there and start picking up body parts at 200-plus feet — Officer Larry Urban, California Highway Patrol.

obuses, cabs, and games that line the freeways. They wait as the nightly stampede of automobiles unfolds. For Californians in their cars, the freeway voyage is routine, a journey from work to home or to the nearby shopping mall. For the Mexican workers, the speeding cars stand between them and safe passage to employment. The cars are killing machines.

Oralia Guadalupe Mendoza Alvarado, a 38-year-old widow and homemaker from Colonia Libertad in Tijuana, waited in the bushes with other migrants on a ridge overlooking westbound 905 at Otay Mesa on the night of February 4,

**ON SAN YSIDRO BOULEVARD THAT they connect to — Roberto's tubes, Coco's tubes.**

1988. From just beyond an opening sliced through the five-foot-high "controlled access" chain-link fence put up by the California Department of Transportation (CALTRANS), her coyote could see the flow of traffic below. The trick was to wait for *la migra's* green-

and-white vehicles to pass before making a run across 905 to the north side, where the group would then be shuttled along dirt trails to a predetermined rendezvous near Route 805. There they would meet their ride north.

For the coyote, the main

San Ysidro border crossing. One hundred sixty Mexicans have been struck by cars in this "San Ysidro Triangle." Eighty-nine of these pedestrians died, and 71 were injured.

On a typical day in 1990, between 1200 and 1600 illegal border crossers were arrested in San Diego, according to U.S. Border Patrol monthly apprehension statistics. The border patrol estimates that it intercepts one third of all border crossers, meaning that 2400 to 3200 people illegally cross into San Diego each day, or more than one million per

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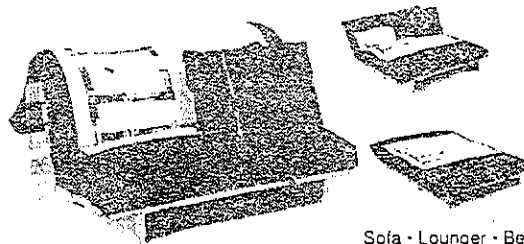
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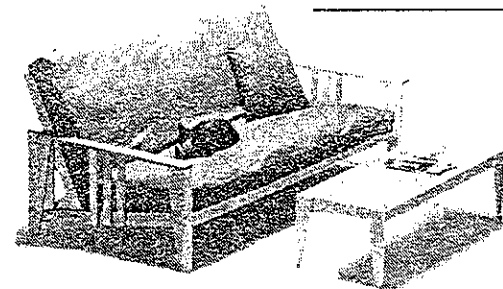
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*Crossing I-5 near Dairy Mart Road*

year (although many arrested are repeat crossers). These numbers are likely to rise, say immigration experts, mainly because the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, despite its provisions for penalizing employers who hire illegal workers, hasn't really slowed

entrance ramps that states: "Pedestrians, bicycles, motor driven cycles prohibited." The signs are only posted in English.

In Mexico, roadways are public space — an extension of the town square. There are fewer lanes, and traffic moves much more slowly.

the border patrol. "They do it because of the smugglers." Smuggling illegal workers into the United States is such a profitable venture that Tijuana now has a well-organized underworld of smugglers. "Everybody and his brother is a smuggler," notes one

want to make sure no one gets hurt. After all, the worst crime these people will commit in the United States is picking tomatoes," says border patrol officer Mike Harris.

Of course, this "hands off on the freeway" policy has come as

traffic and head toward points north. The freeways are bordered by wild tangles of acacia and thick groves of California pepper trees, perfect hiding places for illegal migrant groups. The gullies and canyons provide sanctuary and escape routes, should a border

being developed to avoid detection by immigration authorities. But why choose something as dangerous as dodging fast-moving cars on eight lanes of freeway?

For one, the "freeways" the migrants are accustomed to in Mexico are nothing like those in California. "Mexicans don't realize they're violating the law when they enter a freeway," says John Markey, a CALTRANS traffic engineering official. The California State Vehicle Code prohibits pedestrian access to all freeways. There is a small black-and-white sign posted on all

as motorists. People build houses along the highways. Vendors sell refreshments. Buses stop right on the freeway to let people off so they can walk to their houses or the village nearby. It's not uncommon to see herds of cattle or other animals grazing alongside.

Even if migrants aren't prepared for California's freeway system, why are so many drawn toward these superhighways in their trek north? They are pawns in a high-powered human smuggling business. "Not many migrants cross freeways on their own," says Ted Swofford of

units a week, making as much as \$300 a head, and the freeway has become a strategic part of their success. Years ago, smugglers discovered that the one place where they were not likely to be pursued was along the interstate freeways. Because of the dangers both to migrants and officers, the border patrol and California Highway Patrol adopted the policy that officers should not chase illegal border crossers on the freeways. "We just try to shoo them off the freeway," observes Lt. Joe Garrison of the CHP. "We

smugglers and the border patrol, each side is always on the lookout for an edge. Coyotes look for "safe zones" where they can hide their migrants before moving them to pickup sites, called "load zones" by the border patrol.

Incredibly, the smugglers discovered, the freeway offers the perfect refuge. It can be both a safe zone and a load zone. It is safe partly because the smugglers know that law-enforcement officials won't chase them there. It's an ideal place to pick up the migrants and quickly disappear into freeway

the freeway, 500 or 400 at a time," says Al Summers, a border patrol agent who has been working the San Ysidro sector recently. "They wait up there in the bushes for three to four hours, and then the load car comes and they take off. If you try to drive toward them, they disperse into the brush. You can lose 30 in a minute, and you never see them again."

One of the smuggler's strategies is to hide the migrants on the opposite side of the freeway from the direction they are headed.

(continued on page 16)



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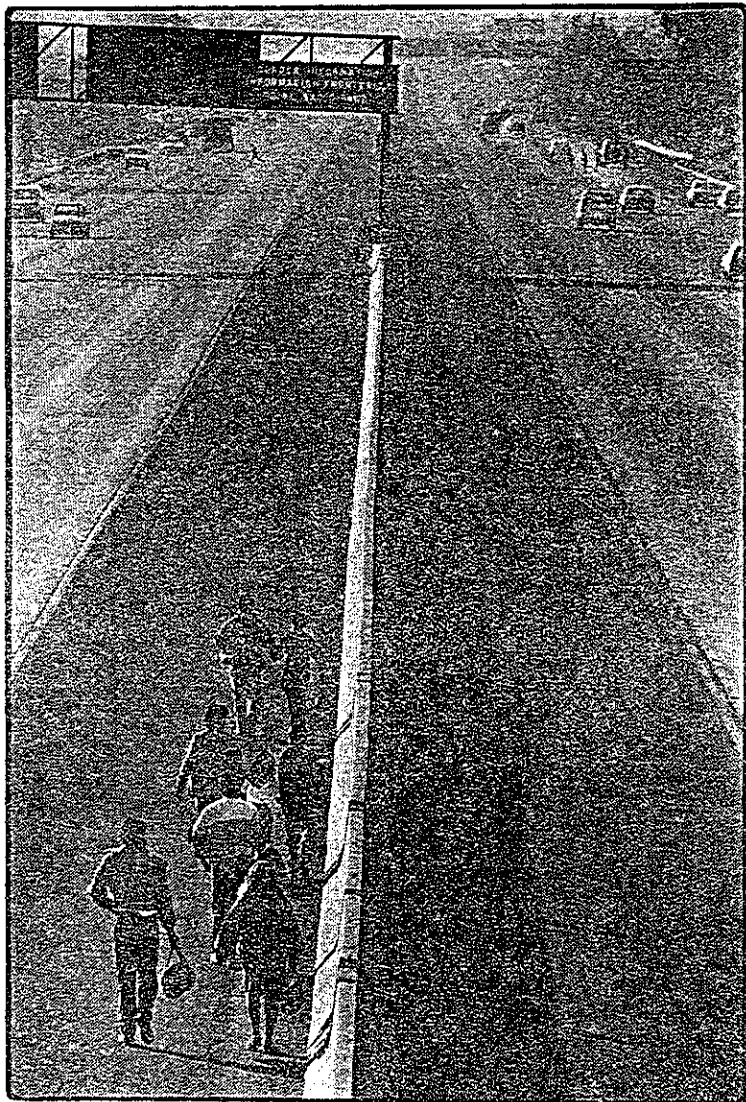


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*(continued from page 15)*

When the load car arrives, the migrants then have to cross the freeway to get to their ride. It is on that mad dash across the freeway that migrants may be struck by hit-and-run drivers.

One particularly lethal section of freeway is a two-mile stretch of Interstate 5 between Dairy Mart Road and the border. Fourteen of 16 recent migrant deaths in south San Diego have taken place here. At

night, smugglers sneak their loads across the border west of the San Ysidro border gate. Once they get past the border patrol vehicles on the levee of the Tia Juana River, they hike through trails in the estuary of the river and eventually hide in the thick, swampy undergrowth of willows and cottonwood along the west side of I-5. The pickups are made either on the east side of I-5 or, more

# Glare



*Migrants in the I-5 median listen to instructions from their coyote (left)*

**This past September, the border patrol even announced a new policy: agents could now pursue illegal Mexicans along the freeway. But two weeks later, the policy was canceled without explanation.**

typically, along San Ysidro Boulevard, a little farther east. They call this place "smuggler's alley," because so many pickups occur on the boulevard in places like Yum-Yum Donuts, Carl's Jr., or the Travelodge.

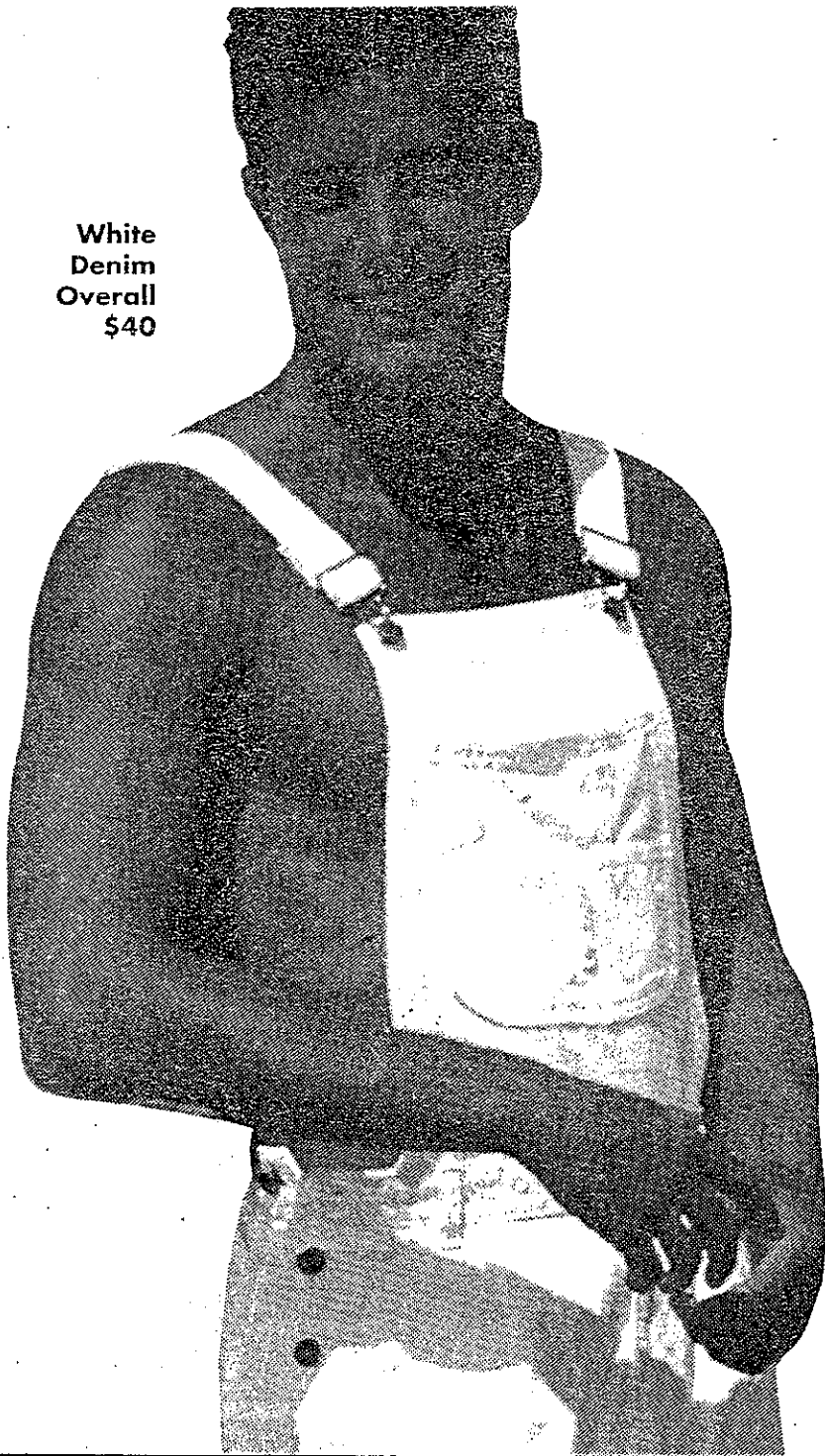
To get across I-5 from the west to the east side, migrants either

run across the freeway when traffic allows it (and that isn't very often), or they crawl through drainage tunnels under the freeway. These tunnels are used so often by the illegal crossers, border patrol agents started naming them after the commercial establishments on San Ysidro Boulevard that they

connect to — Roberto's tubes, Coco's tubes. The concrete tubes are just barely large enough for one person to crawl through garbage, mud, the smell of urine and feces, the possibility of rats. Meanwhile, hundreds of cars and trucks pound down on the pavement just above you. Dodging cars doesn't look too bad from down in the tubes.

Up on the freeway, the smugglers are so confident the highway is their turf that they taunt the border patrol openly. For fun, they will come out of hiding at times and, from the opposite

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side of the freeway, yell at passing border patrol vans, "Arrest me, arrest me!" They know they can get away before the vehicle crosses the freeway at the next exit and returns to the site. They laugh at the officers from behind chain-link fences, which CALTRANS originally put up to control automobile access onto the freeway. Now these fences protect the smugglers.

The word is out that freeways are safe zones for the migrants. One afternoon, in a ride-along with a border patrol agent, we passed an embankment along 905, near the intersection of 805, where a

migrant was resting in the shade of a tree in full view of passing cars. He noticed the border patrol agent had seen him but made no attempt to run, even as we made a U-turn to get to the side of the freeway he was on. As we finally approached, the migrant surrendered passively. He seemed surprised that he had been arrested; he thought the freeway was out of bounds for apprehensions.

The carnage along the freeways has U.S. government officials worried. There is no shortage of proposed solutions to the problem. The California Highway Patrol and the border patrol have orchestrated

periodic freeway "sweeps" where one north-south artery (I-5 or 805) is closed in both directions, and officers go in and arrest everyone trying to cross or hiding along the freeway. Hundreds are usually picked up in these raids. This past September, the border patrol even announced a new policy: agents could now pursue illegal Mexicans along the freeway. But two weeks later, the policy was canceled without explanation.

CALTRANS has jurisdiction over all interstate freeways. The bible of CALTRANS policy is the voluminous *Highway Design Manual*, which lays down

regulations for state highways. There is nothing in this manual about immigrants on freeways. To date, CALTRANS has tried putting up warning signs with flashing lights, illuminating areas of the freeway such as 805 at Palm Avenue (not to be confused with the citizen-based, anti-immigrant movement "Light Up the Border"), removing the acacia and pepper trees along the freeway (to destroy migrant hiding places), and advertising the problem with motorists. There is talk of trying to reduce the speed limits in the areas of highest fatality, or even building high walls in the median portions

of the freeway to keep anyone from crossing. It has been suggested that a special "freeway immigration police" be created to monitor the freeways.

Some of these policies may actually keep migrants off a few freeways. But if you can't stop the flow of migrants coming into the United States, can you keep migrants off every freeway? Probably not. Right now, most Mexicans coming into the United States enter at the California border. Their journey has brought them onto a collision course with that institution most sacred to the California lifestyle — the freeway. □



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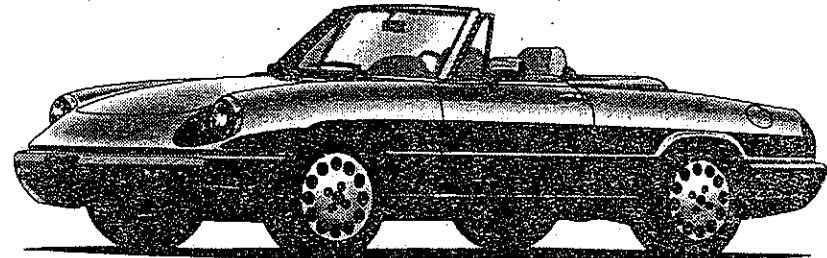
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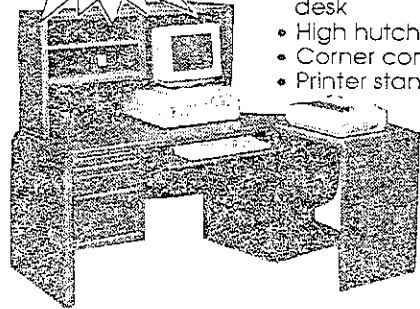
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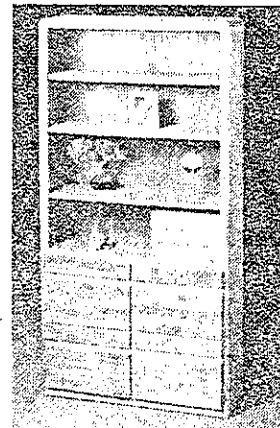
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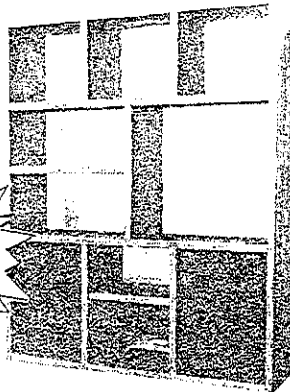


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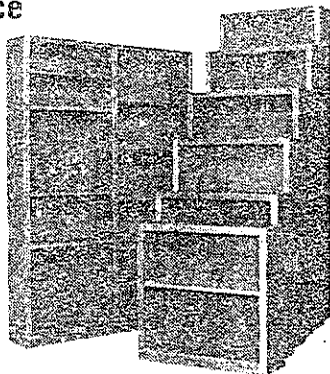
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