Divided Lives

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This is the story of José and María, a young couple living in rural northwestern Guanajuato, not far from the city of Dolores Hidalgo. It illustrates the impacts that intensified border enforcement and the growing criminalization of undocumented migration has had on Mexican migrants and their communities. José and María’s experiences are exemplary of those of many other families in the region, although theirs is a particularly dramatic case. Although José never thought of himself as a coyote, the U.S. Department of Justice charged him with being one after a county sheriff’s deputy pulled him over as he was driving fellow migrants in a pick-up truck through a small town in South Texas.

José and his wife María lived in Rancho San Nicolás in a municipio in the northern part of Guanajuato state (see Map 1). I interviewed them in the spring of 2005 after meeting them more or less by chance. I was working from a base in Dolores Hidalgo, Guanajuato and was trying to locate some of the ranchos where migrants I had interviewed in Texas had lived before emigrating to the United States. One guanajuatense I had interviewed a couple of years earlier in Texas had said he was from a Rancho San Nicolás near Dolores Hidalgo. I had since lost contact with this migrant and was unable to get back in touch with him to get specific directions to his home rancho before leaving for the field. When I arrived in Dolores Hidalgo, I consulted a local map that showed a settlement called San Nicolás located on an unpaved rural road that connected to one of the several paved highways leading away from Dolores. Without knowing if the San Nicolás shown on the map was actually the settlement I was looking for, I drove into the arid and mountainous countryside to find it (see Photo 1).

RANCHO SAN NICOLÁS

Late in the day when I reached the area where the map indicated San Nicolás should be, I pulled off onto a gravel road, where I soon passed a young man riding a bicycle in the direction I thought I’d find the rancho (see Photo 2). He told me that indeed this was the road to San Nicolás and that it was about 5 miles ahead. Noticing that he had said it was cinco millas rather than cinco kilómetros, I asked the twenty-something-year-old how long he had lived in the United States before coming back here. He said he
had been to work in Texas several times and that most recently he had
worked in construction in the Woodbridge, Virginia area. He himself was
not from San Nicolás but as we were talking a pick-up drove by, carrying a
number of people in the bed of the truck, and leaving us in a cloud of dust as
it headed on in the direction of the rancho. The man on the bicycle told me
to follow the truck since its driver and the people he was carrying were
from San Nicolás and probably were headed home for the night. I thanked
the man and followed the truck in my car (see Photo 3).

Photo 1. The countryside of northwest Guanajuato state
The road was extremely dusty and rough. It was strewn with rocks and crossed periodically by low-water fords that, fortunately for me in my rented compact car with extremely low clearance, were dry at this time of year. We drove for a time along an irrigation ditch (see 4) that watered some adjacent fields planted with corn and onions that splashed a swath of green amidst an otherwise buff and brown landscape (see Photo 5). Several other pick-ups full of people passed us in the opposite direction while still others with higher clearance overtook us and impatiently left us behind in an ever-thickening cloud of dust. Other roads branched off from
this one and led off to other, unseen settlements where, judging from the traffic, a surprisingly large number of people lived. We passed some scattered adobe and cement block homes here and there along the road (see Photo 6) before coming to a ford in the road across the bed of a small stream with a foot or two of water running through it. The pick-up truck I was pursuing continued on and drove across the stream. I followed, wondering if the car I was driving would stall in the water. Luckily, it had barely enough clearance and I made it across. Later, residents of San Nicolás would tell me that there were times during the rainy season when the crossing was impassable and they would be obliged to take a much longer route on a different road to get out to the main highway (see Photo 7).
After crossing the river, the rancho of San Nicolás appeared ahead and the pick-up truck began to let its passengers off at one house after another before pulling into a small, fenced compound that contained several cement-block houses, some chickens, and loudly barking dogs. I got out of my car and introduced myself to the driver from across the fence. After exchanging some initial pleasantries, the driver told me that this settlement was, in fact, called Rancho San Nicolás. Moreover, the driver, José, and his wife, María, who had been in the passenger seat next to him in the truck, told me that they themselves had lived and worked in Texas and invited me into their home to talk about their experiences.

Photo 7. Low water crossing near San Nicolás

Somewhere between 85 and 100 families live in Rancho San Nicolás. The rancho is organized into a number of separate “neighborhoods”, each of which is laid out around family “compounds” consisting of clusters of homes belonging to a single extended family surrounded by wooden or barbed wire fences. Most homes are modest, single-story constructions made of cement block or adobe with tin roofs, although some poorer families live in shacks built with wood boards. The village has a combined nursery school and elementary school and its own small church. It is logistically quite difficult for children in San Nicolás to continue their education past elementary school since to do so they must travel a long
distance daily to a larger town and cannot count on a public school bus to pick them up at their homes. The town does not have its own priest; rather, priests from the diocese in Dolores Hidalgo visit to conduct mass and perform other religious ceremonies as needed. Some limited irrigation water is available and some of the adjacent fields were planted with corn, onions, and tomatoes. There is not enough irrigated land to go around, however, so that most of the town’s residents are obligated to find waged employment to survive. Some men have found work at a local poultry plant caring for hens and collecting and packing their eggs (see Photo 8). The pay at the plant is poor, however—less than U.S. $70 per week—and work there is very strenuous. Employees work 10 to 12 hour days with only 20 minutes off for lunch and spend the entire shift on their feet. Only 15 workers are employed at the plant at any given time, caring for thousands of hens. As a consequence of the paucity of productive land and remunerative employment opportunities locally, many male residents of San Nicolás migrate to Mexico City, León, and the United States in search of cash income. The men who migrate to work in the United States go mainly to Texas, the Midwestern, and Southeastern states, crossing the Río Bravo into Texas, rather than crossing through the Sonoran desert into Arizona.

Photo 8. Bachoco poultry plant near San Nicolás

A BINATIONAL COUPLE LIVING IN RURAL MEXICO

José and María live in a compound that contains five small houses built by his brothers for his mother and their respective families. All the houses are made of cement block and have indoor plumbing and electricity and cement
floors. José and María’s home is furnished quite sparsely but is clean and well-kept. Their kitchen features a microwave oven and a modern, gas stove, while their living area is home to a television set, a DVD player, a personal computer, and a cellular phone. They paid for their house with cash earned from jobs they worked in the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area. One of José’s brothers, who lives next door, built the house for them in his spare time, which kept the costs down. The couple also owns two older-model, rather dilapidated pick-up trucks, both purchased in Texas. They supplement their wage income with the small fares they charge for shuttling neighbors between San Nicolás and neighboring towns.

Both José and María are about 30 years old and both were born here in Rancho San Nicolás. They have two young daughters, Cynthia, who is four, and Adriana, who is eight, both of whom were born in the United States. María’s parents migrated to the Dallas area in the late 1970s and she lived there from the age of five until the time she moved back to the rancho with José just two years before our first interview. She is a U.S. citizen, speaks English perfectly, and graduated from high school in Texas. Although she and her parents came back to Rancho San Nicolás to visit most years while she was growing up, she and José did not meet until he found work at her father’s scrap-metal recycling business in the mid-1990s, when he was on his first sojourn working in the United States as a clandestine migrant. Today, José works in the poultry plant near town. María works as the local preschool teacher and, along with other mothers in the rancho, also cooks and cleans for the school. Last year she had gotten a job working as a bilingual teacher in Dolores Hidalgo, but the pay was not enough to justify the expense of traveling that far from the rancho every day, so she quit.

Even though their home is paid for and furnished rather well by local standards, José and María live hand-to-mouth. They only make enough money to buy a minimum of food and clothing, leaving them no cushion should accident or serious illness befall any member of their family. María is trying to teach their daughters English, but it is not easy. She and José want the children to continue their education after elementary school, but it will be difficult to accomplish if they stay living in San Nicolás. Although they like living in San Nicolás and have many friends and family members in the rancho, their economic situation is precarious and they are worried about both the present and the future. María, especially, has been very stressed-out about their prospects, something she believes has contributed to the two miscarriages she has had since moving back to Mexico. They would return to the Dallas area if they could all go together, but they told me that the problems that José has had with the U.S. authorities as an
undocumented immigrant mean that he is barred from even entering the
country until at least 2010 (see below for further discussion of their legal
predicament). So, for the time being, if the family wants to live together
without fear of retribution from the U.S. authorities, they will have to do it
in Mexico.

After our initial meeting, I returned to visit José and María a couple of
weeks later, on a Sunday when José had a day off from working at the
poultry plant. That day, the couple took me with a pick-up truck full of
neighbors to the top of a neighboring mountain, where hundreds of people
from a number of surrounding ranchos were making an annual pilgrimage
in honor of the Santa Cruz. En route, we passed a long procession of
devotees of the Santa Cruz walking slowly up the mountain (see Photo 9).
At the top, we found a festival underway, replete with ice cream stands,
games for children, charros, and people lining up for free, home-cooked
food that was being prepared on an open fire and handed out by a group of
churchwomen (see Photo 10). Many families clustered under the shade of
bushes and trees near the summit, while others sat on the tailgates of their
trucks. The leaders of the procession arrived and carried the cross to a
small shrine set at the edge of an overlook atop the mountain. José and
María explained that this was a revered site for people from the
surrounding countryside and that many migrants came here before
embarking on the journey north to receive the blessing of the Santa Cruz
and would also come upon their safe return to give thanks. After eating, we
sat down on the ground under the shade of a cedar tree, I turned on my tape
recorder, and they proceeded to tell me the story of their life together as a
couple and of José’s many travails crossing the border.

Photo 9. Procession of the Santa Cruz
José was born in Rancho San Nicolás in 1975. Both his parents had also grown up there and were campesinos. His grandfather had owned some cropland and his father farmed while his mother took care of things at home. José has eight brothers and two sisters. He is the third oldest. His father died when he was seven or eight years old after getting in a fight with another local man and falling into the river and drowning. After that, his mother found work in Mexico City. Eventually the entire family moved to the state of Mexico, to a rancho near the town of Tepozotlán, where the kids worked herding cattle and milking cows, so as to be able to live with their mother while she worked nearby in the Distrito Federal. After a year or two, in the early 1980s, José's oldest brother, who was about sixteen at the time, was invited by some cousins in Rancho San Nicolás to go with them across the border to Texas. He accepted the invitation and found work in Dallas. At that point the rest of the family moved back to the rancho and was able to scrape by relying upon dollars remitted home by the eldest son. José and his other siblings were able to finish elementary school during this time. Then one-by-one he and the other brothers began to head north to join the oldest brother in Dallas, where they found work and also began to send money home to help support their widowed mother and younger siblings. The migration of the younger brothers was made necessary when the oldest brother got married and started his own family, making it impossible for him to continue sending enough money back to Mexico to support his mother and siblings in addition to his wife and own young children.
José finished elementary school when he was about fifteen years old. He hadn’t started school at all until he was eight years old and his progress was slowed further because he had to work taking care of neighbors’ cattle to earn money to help support the family. After finishing school, he found construction work in León, Guanajuato [a three hour drive from San Nicolás], going there for sojourns of six or seven months at a time, “camping out” at the construction site where he worked with friends and a brother or two. It was during this time, in the early 1990s, that José, now 16 years old, made his first attempt to go to find work in the United States, at the invitation of an elder brother and two of his uncles. As described below, this first attempt failed. He certainly had ample economic reasons for deciding to migrate to the United States to work. When I asked him about his original decision to migrate, he also noted that the apparent successes of other young men from San Nicolás in the United States had made a big impression on him, inspiring a great deal of envy and curiosity. His description of what influenced his decision echoes that of many other young men who have been interviewed by reporters and scholars:

Well, I think it’s your youth that mainly guides you. It’s the curiosity to know the United States. I think it’s mainly your youth that makes you do it in the first place, just to go and see for yourself. In the second place, you see people coming back with their dollars all the time, with their cowboy hats, they come with things that truthfully you don’t have here. Things that you’d like to have, like a bicycle, like a horse you’d like to buy, little things like that, that unfortunately you’d never have enough money to buy. So that’s why you make the decision, it’s, like, let me go there and see if I can make it since they say so many wonderful things about the United States. That’s why I went.

THE FIRST, FAILED ATTEMPT TO GET TO EL NORTE

José’s first attempt to migrate to Texas ended in failure. It was 1991, still several years before the dramatic intensification of U.S. border enforcement effort in the Rio Grande Valley had taken place. His older brother and two uncles had already found work in the Dallas area on several previous trips they had made. They knew the routes to follow leading through the South Texas ranch country and didn’t feel they needed a coyote to guide them. Besides, no one in the group had any money to pay a coyote, not even enough to cover the coyote’s own expenses to get to the border. José’s uncles and brother told him it would be rough, though, and that it sometimes took them as long as a week to walk around the highway checkpoints on their way into the Texas interior.
With their meager funds, the group traveled to the border by train, which was cheaper than taking the bus, from Dolores Hidalgo to San Luis Potosí, then on to Saltillo and Piedras Negras. From Piedras, they made their way upstream to Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila where they waded across a shallow place in the river and headed into Texas (see Map 2). They hiked for three days through the brush before being spotted by a Border Patrol helicopter, then apprehended by agents on the ground and returned to Acuña. José said everyone in their small group was very young, the oldest in his early twenties, and it all still seemed like an adventure to them. It was really kind of fun, he said, and he didn’t even remember feeling particularly tired or hungry. In Acuña again they evaluated their situation and decided it was best to return home since they were too short of funds to make a second attempt, which would have meant spending another day or two in a hotel at the border and purchasing more food and water for the trek. With the little money they had left, they purchased tickets to head home on the train.

Map 2. South Texas border region

José’s brother and uncles soon left for the United States again, but he went back to work in construction in León. A year or so later, he found a job
working at an Avon cosmetics factory in Mexico City, where he worked for 15 months before getting laid off. It was 1994 and he was now 19 years old. He received a severance package worth about U.S. $500 and headed back to Guanajuato with the money. Around this time another brother, only a year older, called him from Dallas and told him he should come north to work:

The brother that I was closest to, he's only a year older, he had gone [to Dallas] and he called me to say that it was better up there, that there were dollars to be made. He really encouraged me. And here I was wondering what it was like up there, but feeling like I wouldn't make it. But he insisted and he convinced me to try again. And that's how I decided to go again and that's when he told me to go find this person who would take me.

Having $500 in his pocket and no clear job prospects at the time also made heading north seem more promising than it had at any point since returning from his first, failed attempt. Moreover, his brother was already in Dallas waiting for him, would help him find a job, was referring him to the coyote that had successfully taken him across the border, and stood ready to pay the coyote when José arrived. Given the propitious circumstances, José decided to give it a try.

**Making arrangements with the coyote**

José confirmed what other men I interviewed had told me, namely that there was no shortage of coyotes in this part of Guanajuato and that this had not changed in recent years, in spite of the increasing difficulties in crossing the border posed by Operation Rio Grande and other, similar immigration enforcement efforts made by U.S. authorities elsewhere along the border. He said that the majority of men from around there worked in the United States and that everyone knew where to find a coyote that could get him across the border. Moreover, word traveled among the region's men about which coyotes were good and which were not, so that it was possible to avoid coyotes that had a bad reputation.

Around here about 70 percent of the men head for the United States, so word gets around who takes people, who's good at getting them across, so you know who's a coyote. ... Once somebody begins to get people in [the United States], the longer he goes without immigration getting him, he's, shall we say, getting more and more famous. That's the way it was with the guy I crossed with the first time. Things were going great for him, they never caught him.

José added that in the area around San Nicolás, he hadn't heard of any local coyotes over the years that had abandoned migrants on the trail, held...
them hostage, or extorted them, as is often reported in the news. He and others I interviewed presumed that these "bad" coyotes were based at the border and could not be trusted because they were unknown to people in the towns and ranchos where migrants resided in Mexico. Coyotes in his region got a bad reputation only when they were unable to get people successfully across the border without having to walk for many days under harsh conditions and/or being apprehended repeatedly by the Border Patrol. One of the major reasons for a coyote going out of business was getting prosecuted as an "alien smuggler" in the United States upon being apprehended leading migrants into the country. José said that coyotes in his part of Guanajuato state were generally thought of positively by migrants and their families:

_Spener:_ What opinion do people around here have of the coyotes? You say they’re admired for being able to get people across, but are they considered to be good people, bad people, or just normal people?

_José:_ Well normally around here they’re considered to be good people because they help you get to the United States and they’re seen as helpful to everyone. They see it as a benefit that some poor people will be able to get out of poverty by going to the United States. And if there’s someone who’s going to help you do it, you look at it positively. That’s why you don’t think of saying that [the coyote] is a bad guy, or something like that, even though he’s charging you money. Because when you get there you know that with any luck you’re going to make more money than you’re paying him.

_Spener:_ So, people around here think of [the coyotes] as being good people?

_José:_ Right, they’re people who want to help you, they can help you, because it is a big help because I think that anyone who doesn’t know the border runs a lot of risks. He doesn’t know the river, he doesn’t know the people, he doesn’t know the places, the routes. So a person who can guide you like that, I think he’s helping you a lot!

Given that U.S. and Mexican officials frequently are quoted in the press about coyotes getting rich by exploiting the desperation of migrants, I asked José if the coyotes he knew around his community were getting rich and he responded that they did not seem to be. On the one hand, he explained that the coyotes he knew did not make that many trips per year and that whatever money they earned they had to share with their collaborators on the U.S. side. So that although a coyote in Guanajuato might make several trips a year taking a group of 10 migrants charging $1,000 or even $1,500 per person, that money would be shared between the coyote and at least
one and perhaps several other collaborators. In addition, coyotes did not necessarily stay in business for very many seasons, given the risks involved and the potential for lengthy incarceration in the United States if they were appréhended leading groups through the brush on repeated occasions. Indeed, several local coyotes had left the business after serving time in prison in the United States or being warned by the U.S. authorities that they would serve time if they were caught again. On the other hand, José observed that coyotes were gente pobre that had no experience managing the money they had the potential to earn so quickly, an observation that other migrants and coyotes I had interviewed elsewhere had also shared with me:

They make a lot of money but they don’t have anything to show for it [no les rinde]. I think it’s because the more money you have, the more you spend on things that don’t make any sense. So normally that’s what happens to people who [work as coyotes]. They get a bunch of money and they go to the cantina and buy a woman [hire a prostitute]. They don’t spend their money wisely. So it doesn’t matter if they spend years taking people across. Sure, they’ll live better, but they aren’t going to get rich. And then one day they’ll have to give it up or maybe the day will come when they get locked up. That’s the problem they face.

Within this context, José’s brother in Dallas told him to look up the coyote that had taken him across the border to see if José could go with him, too. The brother told José to tell the coyote that he would “respond” for José when he got to Dallas, i.e. he would pay the coyote the fee for the trip. The coyote lived in a nearby rancho [village] and when José went to visit him they quickly negotiated a deal for José to go with him to Dallas.

So I go to see him. And I tell him, “Hey, you took my brother across a while back, his name is Joaquín.” And he said, “Oh, yeah! I remember him!” And I say to him “Well, look, he’s inviting me to go up there. He told me that I should check with you to see if you were going to be taking any people and if maybe you could give me a hand.” And he tells me, “No problem, come with me. Just give me until next Monday or Tuesday and we’ll meet at the bus station in Dolores and take off from there.”

As was the case with many of the coyotes working in the region, this man lived locally, rather than at the border or in the United States. José thought he was about 30 years old. When he would complete a trip north, he would come back to his rancho where he owned some land, which he continued to
plant with corn and other local crops. Coyotaje was, nevertheless, his main source of income.

**Making the trip**

It was May or June of 1994. José decided to make the trip with a friend of his from San Nicolás and a friend of that friend. They met with the coyote and his other customers for the trip, who were from other ranchos near San Nicolás. There were a total of about 15 people in the group, all men. José had negotiated a fee of U.S. $700 for the trip, which would not be paid until the coyote delivered him to his brother in Dallas. He and his friends had to pay their own way to the border and everyone in the group had to pay the coyote a small amount up front to cover his transportation, food, and lodging expenses along the way. José said that although the fee charged had risen considerably since that time, these payment arrangements remain typical. The group took the bus to Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila, where the coyote led them directly to the river after purchasing some food and water to carry with them. Unlike other coyotes based in central Mexico, this one did not appear to José to have any collaborators at the border. They did not stay with anyone he knew in Acuña nor did he arrange to have them taken across the river in a boat or using inner-tubes or rafts belonging to a local *patero*. He knew a shallow spot in the river and they waded across after dark. The rocks were slippery and they did not know how to swim, but the river was shallow enough that they were not afraid. Once across the river, they walked two days and two nights. It was hot, but they were lucky because they ran into thunderstorms along the route, which cooled things down considerably. They didn’t see any Border Patrol or other migrants along the way. It was, as José said, *paso libre*. The second night, after passing around the last highway checkpoint on foot, a pick-up truck stopped for them along a road at a spot arranged ahead of time by the coyote. All fifteen people loaded in, some in the bed of the truck and some in the cab, all lying down out of sight. They were driven to a mobile home parked on a ranch not far away where they all bathed and put on clean clothes that they carried with them in their packs.

I asked José if the coyote had told him how long and far they would have to walk to get past the checkpoints. He said the coyote had told him one day and one night, only half the time it actually took. Nevertheless, he wasn’t particularly resentful about this deceit:

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Normally [the coyote] lies to you a little bit. They don’t tell you how many hours you are going to walk. If they're going to walk you two days they'll tell you it'll only be a day and a half, so as not to scare you off. Sometimes you feel deceived by the person who
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does that, because they tell you you’re going to walk, say, three
days, and it turns out to be four or five days instead. But anyway,
so far nobody has ever abandoned me or anything like that, they
just say “it’s just up ahead” or “we’re almost there.” ... Mainly it’s
just to encourage you and you think to yourself, all right, it’ll be
soon, we’re almost there. It’ll just be one more day. Like that.

I also asked José if they had brought along enough water, given that they
had spent more time in the brush than he had been told they would and
that the weather had been hot. Fortunately, it had rained while they were
in the brush walking and that had cooled things off a bit. He said that they
had not run out of water, but that, in any event, the coyotes knew where to
find water along the trail:

No, we didn’t [run out of water]. But then normally the persons
I’ve gone with have the water under control. They know where
to get water, where there’s a papalote [a windmill with a cattle
pond or trough attached] or something like that. They say, “You
know what, here we’re going to walk three hours straight and
then we’ll hit water again.” If we’re carrying a bottle of water
they say “it’ll be three hours if you want to finish it off, then
there’ll be more.” And then from there, a little further ahead,
another half day or another half-night we’ll hit water again. So
that’s how they handle the water. That’s why the coyotes that
take people from around here, well you trust them, first because
you know them, so that if something happens to us, someone in
the family knows who to go to about it. Second, so far none of
them has let us down with the water issue. The only thing that’s
happened is that if there’s a drought, well, then, even they suffer,
too, right? Since they didn’t know there’d been a drought.

The next morning a van came by the trailer home where they had spent
the night and everybody loaded in, many lying down in the back so that
only six heads could be seen through the windows. They made it
successfully to the Dallas area, a few hours’ drive up the highway. The
coyote and his driver-collaborator, who was a Mexican friend of his, drove
the migrants to different points around town, where they were received by
friends and relatives who paid the coyote the agreed upon fee. José’s
brother was waiting for him with the money in hand: “It was no problem.
My brother was waiting for me with the amount of money they were asking
for. The coyote dropped me off, we said muchas gracias and that was it.” It
had been a successful trip. The coyote and his two collaborators (the driver
and the person who owned/rented the mobile home) had gotten all 15
undocumented migrants from Guanajuato to Dallas without incident. No
injuries, no encounters with the Border Patrol, no getting lost in the brush,
no going hungry or thirsty, no vehicle accidents, nothing. Each migrant had
somebody waiting for him at the end of the trip who was able to pay the coyotes. Everyone was happy.

**Life and work in Dallas, Texas**

José quickly found work in the Dallas area. First, he got a short-term job at a scrap metal recycling plant owned and operated by the man from San Nicolás, now a legal U.S. resident, who would eventually be his father-in-law. Soon after, his padrino [godfather], whom he had not seen since he was a young child, helped him get a job at a factory that manufactured road signs. To get that job he had to buy a fake Social Security card and other identification, which he did with the help of his brother. He earned $5.50 an hour at that job, or about $220 a week, from which taxes were deducted. This money went a long way, however, as he paid only $70 per month in rent, sharing an apartment with his brother and three cousins. Later he shared a house with 12 other people that had only one bedroom.

A bunch of us live in a single apartment. It’s really uncomfortable for you and, truthfully, you barely scratch by, but it’s the only way to be able to save any money, so the money you earn stretches a little further and you can send some money home. You don’t have the luxury of living in a bigger apartment. You have to live as poorly as possible in order have a little money left over.

Living cheaply, José was able to send his mother as much as $200 per month, allowing to save a little bit for himself as a “cushion” in case he got picked up by immigration. Because he started working right away and his expenses were minimal, he was able to pay off his $700 debt to his brother within just two months after his arrival. After José paid him that debt, the brother returned home to Guanajuato, asking José to stay on in his stead. It was becoming the family custom for at least one brother to stay working in the United States to send money home to their mother and younger siblings. José was not especially happy about this. After three months in Dallas, he was ready to go home, too.

When I first arrived, I was really disappointed. The United States wasn’t at all what I expected. I didn’t expect to see people running all around, being afraid of the immigration authorities, trying to avoid the attention of the police. The men like me that work there hiding in their apartments and little things like that, that I saw, that I began to see. I wasn’t used to seeing things like that! And I saw people who basically went to bars and sought refuge playing pool and things like that. ... The people I was living with, the illegal people that come from [Mexico], they have no alternative, since we don’t know English, we don’t have papers, there are a lot of things we can’t do. We’re forced to live in the
worst part of town. Really, after three months I wanted to go home, but my brother went back right after I got there, the one who had paid for my trip, and told me to stay put so I could support our mother, since if we both went home, there’d be no money for anyone. So I decided to stay however long I had to, so my brother could be at home for a while. When my brother got back [to Dallas], then I was able to go home and we kept on taking turns like that.

In all, José spent 18 months on his first sojourn to the United States. He probably would not have gone back again if it hadn’t been for meeting María, the daughter of the owner of the recycling plant where he first found work. It had been love at first sight and she showed him a side of living in the United States that he would not otherwise have seen:

> When I met my wife she showed me a different type of life there [in the United States]. She took me to the malls, to Wal-Mart, to see and do different things than the rest of my friends. ... I was already in love with her. So when I got back here [to San Nicolás], I didn’t last long. And without thinking twice about it, I went right back [to Dallas]. I told her, though, that I really didn’t like the U.S. lifestyle. ... I think that if it hadn’t been for her, I wouldn’t have gone back, at least not as soon. But unfortunately life here in Mexico is hard and you can hardly say you won’t go back [to the United States].

José had returned home to San Nicolás in November 1995. Because of his love for María, he headed back north as soon as he could, leaving in February 1996.

**THE THIRD TRIP NORTH**

José’s third trip to the United States would change his life. His passage across the border would go smoothly. On this sojourn north of the border he would be reunited with María and their romantic relationship would solidify. They would move in together, she would get pregnant, and give birth to their first child. They would struggle economically but their love remained strong and they would return to visit San Nicolás as a family, still connected by blood to the rancho, but firmly committed to living in the United States.

**Making arrangements with a different coyote**

On this trip north, José had to find a different coyote to take him. The man who had led him across the border two years earlier was already booked up by the time José decided to contact him. Other migrants in this part of Guanajuato corroborated José’s assessment that in the early months of the
year when most migrants wanted to head north, it was sometimes impossible to find an available slot on a good coyote’s trip:

What happens is that sometimes there are so many people that the coyotes don’t have enough space for you. This happens especially in January, February, and March, even through April, there are a lot of people who want to make a run north. In fact, sometimes the coyotes have to go up there, drop off a group of people, and then come back for another group. So they have to make a bunch of runs because of so many people.

Nevertheless, José was able to locate another good coyote without much trouble through his network of family and friends in the area. If anything, this coyote had a better reputation than the man who had taken him north the last time and, moreover, was better known because he lived nearer to San Nicolás. In fact, José already knew some of the second coyote’s brothers and some of José’s brothers knew the coyote himself, which bode well for a successful trip.

Advance arrangements for this trip were similar to José’s last trip. The coyote agreed to take about 15 migrants from ranches around Dolores Hidalgo. He would charge them U.S. $800 upon arrival in Dallas, to be paid by his customers’ friends and relatives there. All they would need pay up front would be the coyote’s expenses to get to the border from Dolores, about 2,000 pesos all told. Each migrant in the group would contribute equally to that amount, which would come to less than 200 pesos (under U.S. $20) per person, which was quite affordable. Of course, the migrants would each have to pay their own expenses to the border as well, meaning they needed to get together between U.S. $100 and $200 locally in addition to having someone to pay the remaining $800 for them upon arrival in Dallas. According to José, the coyotes knew they couldn’t charge any more money up front than they did: “Well, they know that you’re already struggling to get together the money to pay your own way to the border and setting them up to get paid later, so it’s hard to give them more money [up front], so that’s why they work that way.”

**A smooth, safe passage**

This crossing went as safely and smoothly as the first. Logistically it was basically the same. The group traveled together by bus to Ciudad Acuña. They crossed the river near the same place he had crossed the last time. They walked for three nights, hiding in the brush during the day. On the third night they arrived at a highway beyond the last immigration checkpoint and were picked up by two vehicles and driven to another mobile home, where they ate, bathed, and changed into clean clothes. The
next morning they drove on to Dallas and were taken one-by-one to the addresses where their "respondents" awaited them with the money owed to the coyotes. As before, the coyotes were unarmed, fulfilled their obligations to the migrants, and acted respectfully towards them. In José's opinion, this owed in large measure to the fact that migrants and coyotes were from the same area and knew each other:

They acted right. There wasn't any problem with anything. The coyotes show favoritism to the person who has someone who'll respond for him up there. It's like with my brothers. He's like, "I know your brothers. I know you because I know your brothers and they've got the money and I know they're straight." Because sometimes the coyotes have complained that they take people across and when they get there they run off. They just jump out of the van and take off without ever paying anything at all. So, the coyote is worried about who he's taking just like the one who's going with him worries about him. But in this instance they know us and we know them. So I think there's more trust when they know me and my brothers are responding for me. They told me there was no problem. ... You know, we're not signing any papers or anything, it's just your word. So my brothers told him, "You know what? You have to deliver him to us safe and sound and we'll guarantee you your money."

Given everything that I had read in the press and heard from U.S. government authorities about the abusive behavior of coyotes towards migrants, I asked José what the coyotes would do if someone couldn't or wouldn't pay them at the end of the trip. His response corroborated the testimonies I had received from migrants in other regions, several coyotes I had interviewed, and U.S. federal public defenders that had represented accused "alien smugglers" in court:

Well, there's not that much they can do about it. What they try to do is when somebody gets rebellious, gets aggressive up there and they don't want to pay, the only thing they can do is tell them, "Well, I'm going to take you back to Mexico. I'm going to take you and haul you back to Mexico." But this is just a threat, I believe. The ones I know have never done anything like that. They just tell them that to try to get them to keep their word. Because this is a negocio a palabra [a deal based on your word]. You say that you'll pay me so much and, well, I say, okay, I'll give it to you, but we're not signing any papers at all, it's just your word. So they try to make threats like that so that you'll keep your word. And sometimes, like when my brothers responded for me, they'll sometimes say, "Well, you have to deliver my brother to me safe and sound and then I'll guarantee you get your money."
Starting a new life with María in the United States

José began to work immediately for the sign factory again once he got back to Dallas. Once again, he was able to pay off the debt from the trip within a couple of months. He and María dated throughout the remainder of 1996 and she became pregnant by the end of the year. They moved in together when their daughter was born in June 1997. The birth of their daughter Patricia provoked a radical re-orientation in José’s relationship with the United States. Up until that point, he always thought in terms of how working in the United States would help his family in Mexico and perhaps make for a better future for him in Mexico. Now his compañera (they hadn’t gotten married yet) and his daughter were both U.S. citizens with no strong connection to Mexico. He began to realize that he was now working towards building a life for himself north of the border. He still preferred Mexico personally and still felt frightened and unfree in the United States because of his legal status, but he also realized that there was little future for his new family back in Guanajuato.

Life became different for me because after we moved in together, we had to find our own place to live. We had to make our own life. I had to forget a little about my family here in the rancho. I stopped sending so much money home.

At the same time, José and María felt they needed some distance from her family in Dallas. As he said, “It’s unusual for someone from here to be in a relationship with someone from there. There are usually problems of some kind.”7 They moved to a suburb, but couldn’t make ends meet on just José’s salary with María staying at home with the baby. One of María’s sisters and her husband had just bought a house in Dallas and needed help paying the mortgage, so they moved in with them. They lived with her sister and her family for a year. At that point, José began to feel it was important for them to go back to San Nicolás so the rest of his family could meet María:

That’s when I started to tell her, “You know what, my family hasn’t even met you. They don’t know what to think of you and hear bad comments about you. It would be better if we tried to go for a visit, to see how they receive us in my home, on the ranch. And that’s how we managed to come to an agreement to come to see my family so they could get to know her, and to meet our little girl.

María had visited San Nicolás many times as a child and José’s relatives remembered having met her on one of those visits, but she had no memory of them. They returned together by bus at the end of 1998. María was welcomed by José’s family and they were thrilled to meet the couple’s baby.
daughter Patricia. The couple and their baby stayed in town for a month before having to return north in January 1999. María and the baby took the bus back to Dallas. For José it would be much more difficult to get back “home.”

**THE FOURTH TRIP ACROSS THE BORDER AND THIRD SOJOURN IN THE UNITED STATES**

Since the last time José had traveled to the United States clandestinely three years earlier, border-crossing conditions had begun to change dramatically. In the summer of 1997, the U.S. Border Patrol launched Operation Rio Grande (ORG), which greatly increased personnel and equipment engaged in surveillance along the international boundary in South Texas. ORG initially focused on the stretch of the river running from its mouth in the Gulf of Mexico to Falcon Dam and was subsequently extended step-wise upstream to include the Border Patrol’s Laredo and Del Rio sectors.8 Whereas in Fiscal Year 1996, there had been 486, 422, and 390 Border Patrol agents assigned to the McAllen, Laredo, and Del Rio sectors, respectively, by 1999, when José made this trip, the number of agents had risen to 1,166 in McAllen, 685 in Laredo, and 639 agents in Del Rio.9 Not surprisingly, José had a considerably harder time getting through than he had on his last two trips across the border. He finally made it, but only on his fourth attempt.

**The first failed attempt through Ciudad Acuña**

To make this trip, José hired a coyote who was one of the collaborators of the coyote who had taken him across in 1996. The payment arrangements, route, group size, and methods were all the same as before. Things went awry, however, when José’s coyote and his group arrived at the mobile home where José had laid over on the last trip. When they got there, they found another coyote already there with another group of 15 migrants. Needless to say it was very crowded. When one of the migrants left the trailer to relieve himself out in the brush surrounding the trailer, he was spotted by a Border Patrol agent on foot. The agent radioed other agents, who quickly descended upon the trailer in several vehicles. When two of the coyotes, who had driven with one of the ranch’s workers to pick up some fried chicken, returned to the trailer to feed their customers, they found all the migrants sitting on the ground outside guarded by Border Patrol agents. None of the migrants fingered the coyotes, but by this time the Border Patrol had its IDENT computer database in operation. When they checked all the migrants’ fingerprints and photographs against this database, they found that one of the three men in the truck returning with
the chicken had been apprehended several times in the area with groups of migrants. This man was the only one of the several coyotes apprehended who was jailed and charged with “alien smuggling.”

The Border Patrol expeditiously sent José and the rest of the group, including the coyote he had contracted near Rancho San Nicolás, back across the international bridge into Piedras Negras, Coahuila. Given that his family was waiting for him in Dallas, José was anxious to attempt another crossing as soon as possible. The coyote, on the other hand, said there was no sense in trying again immediately. The Border Patrol had discovered the trailer they used as a layover point and the men who were going to pick them up in cars from there were not going to be willing to come back for them again immediately. It would take more time to set things up for another try and the coyote would need to do that from back home in Guanajuato. Moreover, other members of the group were tired, discouraged, and also wanted to return home before trying again, just as José had decided to do following his first apprehension attempting to cross the border in the early 1990s. One other young man named Juan, from San Felipe, Guanajuato, was also interested in trying again. He told José he had crossed successfully before from Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas by hiring a coyote at that city’s bus terminal. José decided to join the man and accompany him to Nuevo Laredo to try their luck there.

**Struggling to get across in Nuevo Laredo**

Upon arriving at the bus terminal in Nuevo Laredo, José and Juan were immediately approached by coyotes’ recruiters who offered to take them across into Texas. José was mistrustful of crossing with coyotes that had not been recommended to them, but they had little real alternative: “At that time we didn’t have [a recommendation for good coyote in Nuevo Laredo]. You have to remember that we were improvising at this point. We were already up there and I really wanted to avoid having to come back here from the border.” One recruiter offered to take them across for $400 each, with each of them paying $50 up front. They accepted his offer. The recruiter then took them to a run-down house in Nuevo Laredo. More people arrived, little by little, until there were more than 60 migrants waiting to cross. At around midnight the coyotes divided the group in two, with two guides to lead each new group of about 30 migrants. The coyotes piled all 30 members of his group into a large van and drove them out of Nuevo Laredo, some considerable distance up or downstream [he wasn’t sure which direction they went]. José was impressed with the level of organization of this gang of coyotes, who communicated with each other
with 2-way radios and who seemed to have an arrangement with the authorities on the Mexican side, since the police did not interfere with their not-particularly clandestine operation. Finally, they piled out of the van in the darkness along the river and then had to walk a considerable distance further along the Mexican bank before coming to the place the coyotes had chosen for them to cross.

One of the group’s guides jumped into the river and swam across to the other side. It was a cold, January night. The water in this spot was deep and swift. Of the 30 migrants wanting to cross, only a half or dozen were willing to try. Juan was unwilling to make the attempt, but José himself felt he needed to try. He took off his clothes, stuffed them in a plastic bag he had been given by the coyotes, and leapt into the river:

The current was strong and it pulled us downstream. At first we didn’t want to try, but the simple fact of seeing my wife up there [in Dallas] with my daughter needing me, well I was desperate. And that was how I got up the courage and I said to myself, “Well, I’ve got to go for it.” The other guy, the guy I was traveling with since we left [Dolores Hidalgo] said, “No, let’s get out of here, it’s too dangerous.” And I told him, “No, I have to do it, you know my wife and all. Let’s see if we can make it.” Then the coyote on this side of the river starts trying to encourage us. It’s like, “Come on, this is your opportunity. If we all had crossed, they [the Border Patrol] would probably catch us, but since it’s just a few people now, we’ll make it!” So, I jumped in.

José was not a good swimmer and was no match for the river’s current. He began to get swept downstream. Fortunately, the coyote on the far bank was able to grab his arm while holding onto a tree that had fallen into the river. Otherwise he probably would have drowned. The man pulled him up onto the Texas bank, where José quickly dressed. “You have to cross completely nude,” he said. “You don’t want to be wearing wet clothes because it chafes too much when you’re walking. Wet clothes are simply no use to you.”

Once they were all dressed, the group immediately saw a Border Patrol vehicle pass by and they split up into three groups of two migrants each and ran into the brush to hide. It was no use, however. They had probably tripped a sensor in the ground and they were almost immediately apprehended by agents who plunged into the brush after them. José begged the agent who arrested him to let him go:

They stopped us and started questioning us. And I said to [one of the agents], “Come on, give me a chance. My daughter needs me.”
But you know they don’t care if you have a family or not. They’re
just doing their job, period. At least that’s what they say.
Anyway, they caught me and sent me back to Mexico again.

Back in Nuevo Laredo, José found Juan once more and they decided to try a different coyote, also unknown to them. She would charge them $1,000 each to take them to Dallas. They would have to pay half the amount up front. She told them how they would do it:

She said she was going to get us a patero. That’s what they call the people that only take you right across the river. So she said, “I’m going to get you a patero. And once you’re on the other side I’m going to put you up in a hotel. And from there a trucker is going to pick you up.” ... It was just going to be the two of us. She told us they were going to put us in the sleeping compartment behind the driver’s seat [in the cab of the truck, not the trailer].

José called María and she drove to Nuevo Laredo with her father and the $500 to pay the coyota. The patero that the coyota contracted for José and Juan was a young man who ferried migrants across the river on inner tubes. They were apprehended by the Border Patrol twice before finally getting across the river and into a taxi on the third try. The patero and the taxista then delivered them to a motel in Laredo, Texas. The patero had been persistent and had looked at getting the men across as a personal challenge: “I’m going to get you across somehow. I’m going to get you there! I’ve never failed. I don’t know why we didn’t make it this time but we will the next time!” And he kept his promise to them on the third try.

José and Juan spent two days and nights, at their own expense, waiting in the hotel for the trucker to pick them up, but he never came. José concluded that the coyota was never able to even line-up a trucker to take them. Finally, they called María and her father, who had stayed in the area, to come to the hotel. Since the only obstacle that remained was the segunda garita [the highway checkpoint], they decided to try to take José and his companion to Dallas themselves. They bought a Texas map and came up with a plan: They would drive José and the companion up Interstate 35 and drop them off along the highway. The two men would walk to Encinal, the nearest town past the checkpoint. From there they would call María to come pick them up and drive them on to Dallas.

First, however, they needed to decide what to do about the $1,000 they had paid the coyota in Nuevo Laredo to take José and Juan to Dallas. María and her father, quite fearlessly, crossed back into Mexico and went to the woman’s house to demand she give the money back to them. María said she had to “fight with her all day” to get the money back.
Maria: We were there all day. She was saying that she didn’t have the money any more to give back to us. And I told her, “Well then, I’m going to be here all day until you give me some of that money.” And she saw that neither my father nor I were going to leave there. We spent the whole day at her house in Nuevo Laredo.

Spener: Weren’t you afraid of the coyotes?

Maria: No, because it was just the lady there and she was the only person there. That’s why I wasn’t afraid, plus I was there with my father. Well, I was a little worried about what would happen if some of the other coyotes suddenly showed up there, right, but she was the only one physically there, all alone in her house. She was making calls to see about getting the money back, but I’m telling you we were sitting there, not leaving, like we were on strike. But it was the only way because I could see she didn’t have any intention of giving us back that money. But finally, when she realized we weren’t going anywhere, she had no choice.

José: I think that she thought that once she had the money it was hers. “It’s in my purse, now it’s mine!” I don’t think she ever thought that anyone would ever come and demand their money back. That’s the reason why I think we were able to get a little of it back.

Maria: That’s right. I don’t think she ever expected that of us. She never expected that my father and I would come back and demand our money.

In the end they were able to recover half their money. Needless to say, their experiences in Nuevo Laredo confirmed for José the negative reputation “border” coyotes had back home in Guanajuato. His impression of both sets of coyotes he dealt with at the border was that they were “bad guys” who were only out for themselves, only interested in money. In their dealings with these coyotes, José and Juan constantly talked about what they would do if they had any problems with them. Fortunately, these coyotes had not been armed and they had not threatened or overtly abused the men in any way. Nor had José and Juan seen any contraband drugs present at any point when they were with the coyotes. José thought that migrants were protected somewhat by the strength of their numbers and the fact that they tended to look out for one another in their dealings with coyotes:

They never really abused us. They had us in a really run-down place, really a mess, garbage strewn all over, and things like that, but no, they never really mistreated us. I think that one thing that makes them hesitate a little is the quantity of people there is. The more people there are the more union there is among the
migrants. Let’s say if there are more than 20 migrants and there are 3 or 4 [coyotes] that want to mistreat us, then I think that’s what keeps them from going so far as to really mistreat us. It’s the excessive number of people there are. What they do try to do is to always subtly try to get money out of you. That’s what I think they’re mostly interested in. That’s what they do.

Walking from Laredo to Encinal

After María and her father recovered the money from the coyote in Nuevo Laredo, they bought José and Juan enough food (tortillas, tuna, saltines) and water for what they thought would be a hike of a day or two to the town of Encinal, around 40 miles north of Laredo on Interstate 35. They drove the two men to the edge of Laredo that night and let them out of the car alongside the road. A high-tension power line ran parallel to the highway and José and Juan decided to follow it at a distance. They found many migrants in the brush walking north parallel to the highway and decided to head further into the brush to reduce their likelihood of getting caught by the Border Patrol along that heavily-walked path. This came at a high cost, however, since the further they got from the highway, the denser the brush became. Instead of taking only a day or two to make it to Encinal, it took them three days and nights of bushwhacking through the thorny scrub of Webb County’s ranchlands. Their food and water ran out on the second day. When they attempted to approach a cattle pond for water, they had to flee when they accidentally set off a stampede of cattle that nearly trampled them. After three days of walking and sleeping under the stars in the January cold, José and Juan reached the outskirts of Encinal.

By this time María and her father had returned to Dallas, having waited two full days for José and Juan to emerge from the brush. They didn’t have a cell phone with them and had no way of knowing whether the men had been picked up by the Border Patrol, had gotten lost or way-laid in the brush, or if something worse had happened. Under the circumstances, they had little recourse but to wait for a call in Dallas. Upon arriving at the edge of the small settlement of Encinal, Juan told José he was afraid to leave the cover of the brush for fear that they would get captured by the Border Patrol again. He was too hungry, thirsty, and exhausted to face that possibility. José replied that he would take his chances in town since he had to get back to Dallas one way or another, that’s where his life was. Armed with a phone card his wife had bought for him in Laredo, José walked into town. It was around 1 AM, it was pitch dark, and nothing was open. Fortunately, he found a pay phone outside a little restaurant and called María. Desperate for word from her husband, she and her father
immediately left Dallas for Encinal in two cars. José went back into the brush for Juan and the two walked back to the restaurant building, where they found that the door leading from the restroom to the outside was unlocked. They entered the restroom to hide and rest until morning, sleeping on the foul-smelling, urine-soaked floor.

Around dawn José and Juan heard noises inside the restaurant and they knocked on the door to see if they could get served some food and drink. A Mexican American woman answered the door and José explained their situation to her and that they had money to pay for a meal. She agreed to cook them some breakfast and told them not to worry about the money. More importantly, she agreed to allow the men to hide in a back room while they ate and waited for María to pick them up, telling them she’d come for them as soon as someone came in the restaurant looking for them. María and her father arrived in the two vehicles not long after José and Juan finished eating. She gave José the keys to their pick-up and he and Juan hit the road immediately, leaving María and her father to have a cup of coffee in the restaurant before heading back to Dallas. Through the pick-up’s rear-view mirror, José saw a Border Patrol vehicle pull into the restaurant’s parking lot as they took off down the highway, as discreetly as they could. Although they were well-beyond the segunda garita located just outside Laredo, it was clear that they were still in a heavily-patrolled area. It was a good thing that María and her father were in a different vehicle and were not driving anywhere close to them. But luck was with them this time: Even though they were passed by several other Border Patrol vehicles on Interstate 35, they were not pulled over, and they made it “home” to Dallas by the early afternoon. It had been a brutally-hard trip. The next trip, just one year later, would be even worse.

Back to life and work in Dallas, Texas

Upon their return to Dallas, José started working again for María’s father. His father-in-law’s business was going poorly, however, and he couldn’t afford to keep José on his payroll. Fortunately, José was able to find work as a carpenter with a firm that specialized in making repairs on buildings for insurance companies. The company was owned by an Anglo and for the first time José found himself working primarily among English-speaking U.S. citizens. He picked up some work-related English from them and learned to get around Dallas driving a car for the first time. He and María struggled economically, though: The $250 he brought home every week was not enough to support them and pay-off the substantial credit-card debt that he and María had racked-up during their attempt to live on their own
apart from their respective families. Fortunately, they were able to live with María’s sister and her husband again, who still could use the help making their mortgage payments. This kept down their housing costs, making it possible for them to just barely scrape by.

Increasingly, though, José, María, and their respective families were troubled by the fact that they had not been married by the Catholic Church. Although José’s family had given María a good reception on their visit to San Nicolás, her family still did not entirely approve of her relationship with him and questioned the validity of their civil marriage. The birth of their daughter two years earlier fueled everyone’s concerns about the propriety of their relationship. Around halfway through 1999, they decided to return to Mexico at the end of the year to get married. It turned out to be a momentous decision.

**JOSÉ’S FIFTH TRIP ACROSS THE BORDER: DISASTER STRIKES**

María and José were married by the church in Dolores Hidalgo just before Christmas in 1999. They spent a month or so with José’s family in San Nicolás before heading back to Dallas in January 2000. Given all the difficulties they encountered on José’s last trip north, they came up with what they thought would be a better plan for this return to the United States. This time, they would attempt to enter the United States across the bridge through the legal port of entry in Laredo, driving a truck they had sold to José’s brother that was still registered in the United States under María’s name. José would use the papers of the brother-in-law of one of María’s brothers. This man, who was a U.S.-born Chicano, was about the same age as José and was similar in appearance. The plan did not work. The immigration authorities at the port of entry accused José of impersonating a U.S. citizen, which is a felony under U.S. law punishable by up to five years in prison and a lifetime ban on legal admission to the country. José and María, who had their two-year-old daughter with them, begged for mercy. José described the scene as follows:

> We were begging the immigration man to please think about our little girl, because we had our daughter with us. Think about my wife! Give us the chance to just go back. And so they gave us the opportunity to have it count just as an apprehension, like they do normally when they catch us and just send us back [to Mexico]. But they seized our truck. So we were really discouraged. She left for Dallas [on the bus] and I came back here to look for a coyote from here, so I wouldn’t go through the same thing I did last time [with the coyotes at the border].
A fated crossing

José returned to San Nicolás a newlywed without his wife and daughter, and a failed border-crosser to boot. A neighbor of his in the rancho was a trusted coyote, so it was logical that he go to talk to him about joining his next trip north. As other Guanajuato migrants have described to me, there is no shortage of coyotes in the region to take them north. The difficulty, as described previously, is that during the “peak season” in the first three months of the year, the coyotes may be all booked up. This is because coyotaje there is carried out largely by migrants who, in concert with a small number of collaborators in Texas, have “gone pro.” A typical coyotaje enterprise there consists of a man living in a rancho who travels to the border with a group of 5-10 migrants who live in his own or nearby ranchos. At the border, the coyote may take the group to a patero on the river, who takes the group across to the Texas side in a launch or using inflatable rafts or inner tubes. Or he may know a shallow point in the river where migrants can wade across under normal circumstances. Next, it is the job of the Guanajuato coyote to lead his customers through the Texas brush country to a point beyond the immigrant checkpoints located on every major thoroughfare leading away from the border. At that point, the coyote depends upon a friend or several friends from the Texas destination city to pick him up with his customers and drive them to that city, where the customers will pay the agreed-upon fee upon arrival. The principal factor limiting how many migrants a Guanajuato coyote can take with him on a given trip north is the number of friends with vehicles he is able to count on to pick him up with his customers once they are past the checkpoint. This turned out to be the problem facing José and the coyote he approached in late January 2000:

He was a neighbor of ours. He’s not here right now, he’s in the United States, but he was a neighbor of ours and I knew him well. ... But he told me that he didn’t have anyone who could pick us up over there. Then he asked me if maybe my wife could bring our pick up back to the border and then she could drive back [to Dallas] in a different car, and I could take the other people in the pick-up with me. And I told him, “Well, the truth is that I need to go in a hurry and I’d like it to be cheap, being as I lost that truck and I owe a lot of money. I just got married and it’s real tough for me right now.” So he says to me, “Well, if you want to go for it just tell me when and we’ll go.” So I told my wife, “Bring me the pick-up to such and such a place on such and such a day at such and such a time.”
It seemed like a good plan. José, his coyote-neighbor, and ten other people would cross the Río Bravo near Ciudad Acuña, where he had crossed several times before. They would walk through the brush to one of the same trailers where he had laid over before. There the coyote’s driver and María would meet them with vehicles to drive them on to Dallas. It had worked for the coyotes before on many occasions. And, just as importantly, José and María would avoid paying the $1,000 that the coyote now charged migrants for his services. Everything went according to plan at first. The twelve men crossed the river and walked to the trailer where they waited to be picked up. The coyote’s driver showed up on schedule, but María’s truck broke down on the way and she had to stop to have it repaired. José, the coyote, and the remaining migrants waited at the trailer for an extra day. Finally, María arrived with the pick-up, accompanied by one of her brothers in another car. She gave José the keys to the truck and immediately left in the other car with her brother.

Three of the migrants hid in the bed of the pick-up under a tarp, while one other man and the coyote rode in the cab with José. They drove through one small town without problem, but José got confused about which road to take at an intersection in the second town they came to—other times he had traveled this route he’d been crouched in the back of a truck trying not to be seen. The coyote told him he’d gone the wrong way, that there would be more patrols on this road, but José didn’t want to brake or pull over, fearing he would attract unwanted attention to them. They made it out of the second town but, sure enough, they were pulled over by a county sheriff’s deputy about 10 minutes later. The deputy claimed that José had been driving erratically, swerving from one lane to another, but this was not true. He simply saw three Mexican men driving an older-model pick-up truck with a tarp over the cargo in the back and decided to stop them to investigate. When the deputy found the other men under the tarp in the back of the truck, he told José, “Well, you belong to immigration now!”

José and his friends begged the deputy not to turn him over to the federal authorities, telling him that José had a wife and daughter waiting for him in Dallas, who needed him, but the deputy would hear none of it. They were all turned over to the Border Patrol. Because he was driving, José was accused of being the coyote. The “real” coyote and the other three men were VR’d back to Acuña. José went to court and was convinced by a public defender to plead guilty to one felony count of “alien-smuggling,” in spite of the fact that none of his companions would testify against him in court, since driving a vehicle carrying a “load” of “illegal aliens” was considered to
be strong *prima facie* evidence of guilt by judges and juries hearing such cases. As a first-time offender, José was sentenced to 100 days in federal prison. Their pick-up truck was also seized and auctioned off by the authorities. Upon completing his sentence, he faced an immigration judge and was formally deported to Mexico. In spite of the fact that his wife and daughter were U.S. citizens, he would be barred from legally returning to the United States. If caught again on U.S. soil, he would likely face a sentence of several years in federal prison.

**No life for them together in Mexico—yet**

While José was in prison, María found out she was pregnant again. Things began to fall apart quickly. She couldn’t pay her bills. Her family was pressuring her to leave José. Then she had a miscarriage. Her parents announced they were getting divorced. When José was released from prison and deported back across the border, María borrowed a pick-up truck from her mother and went to meet him in Nuevo Laredo. From the border, they drove to San Nicolás to contemplate their future as a U.S-citizen wife of a Mexican undocumented immigrant and convicted felon who were also the parents of a young girl who was a U.S. citizen by birth. As José explained, that future was clouded:

I told her I didn’t want to return to the U.S. since I’d been deported. I said, “If you want, let’s go to Mexico,” but then we said we don’t have anything. We don’t have a place to live, we don’t have a car. But the U.S. government isn’t giving us any other choice. ... [Back here in San Nicolás] we began to talk. And she was here in Mexico for a while, and that’s how she got to know Mexico better. I think that’s when she really became fond of Mexico.

Indeed, when I talked to María separately and with José on several occasions, she explained how she had actually come to prefer living in Mexico to living in the United States and she said it was comforting her to be in her ancestral rancho while her parents’ marriage was in the process of dissolving back home. She and José had arrived in April when he was released from prison. The months passed. Their love for each other remained strong, in spite of all the challenges they faced.

Then María realized she was pregnant again. They still had no money and no home of their own in which to live. So, María went back to Dallas to give birth to their second daughter. After she left, José went to work in construction again in León, but the pay there was as poor as it had ever been. The hospital birth of their baby in Dallas cost them a fortune because they had no health insurance. María called José to say she didn’t see how
they were going to make it. She didn’t have enough money to even buy diapers, much less pay rent. They wanted to be together as a family more than anything. By now, both of them preferred to live in Mexico but their economic circumstances were such that they couldn’t take care of even their most basic necessities there, at least not yet. According to José, there was really only one conclusion they could reach: “So that’s when we decided to look for a good coyote, because if they caught me they were going to lock me up again.”

**JOSÉ’S FINAL SOJOURN IN THE UNITED STATES**

It was December 2001, just a few months after the September 11 terrorist attacks. Data available subsequently would show that the number of Mexicans apprehended by the U.S. authorities as they headed north to the United States dropped precipitously in the year following the attacks. This was not because it was suddenly more difficult to enter the United States in any real sense—there was no rapid increase in the number of U.S. agents patrolling the border, for instance—but rather because the U.S. economy slowed dramatically and many Mexicans had their doubts about the advisability of traveling to the United States, just as many U.S. citizens curtailed unnecessary travel for many months after the attacks. José and María felt they had no real alternative but to try to get him back to Dallas so they could be together and he could find work to support his family. Then maybe they could save enough money to move back to San Nicolás, where they could live without the constant fear that José would be stopped by the police for some minor infraction and sent to prison for years for re-entering the United States after being formally deported. They would be taking a tremendous risk in having José come north again, but it was something they had to try.

**Crossing with some coyotes from Texas**

A friend in Dallas strongly recommended them to some special coyotes that, at least until that moment, had never lost a customer to the immigration authorities. The coyotes were a husband and wife team, he a Chicano and she an Anglo-American U.S. citizen, who lived in a South Texas town. They did not seek customers, instead relying exclusively on people being recommended to them discreetly by those who had traveled with them before. The Dallas friend gave José the coyotes’ phone number. José called them and told the husband “I’m so-and-so. You don’t know me but I’m so-and-so’s friend.” The coyote was a bit nervous about taking José, since he’d been out of the business for a while. Nonetheless, he agreed to take José for a fee of U.S. $1,100, with half paid up front. They agreed to meet at the
plaza in Reynosa, Tamaulipas on a certain day at a certain time. José would recognize the man because he would be carrying a red bandana in his hand.

José found the man easily in Reynosa, but the man’s appearance made a very bad impression on him at first. His head was shaven and he had some ugly tattoos on his arms. Nonetheless, the coyote was polite and friendly enough. He told José he would find him some good pateros to take him across the river. Before they met with the pateros, the coyote told José not to carry any money with him because there were bandits along the river who might try to rob him. José already had agreed to pay the coyote U.S. $550 up front, so he gave him the additional funds he was carrying to hold for him until he reached the U.S. side. The coyote told José to be careful with the pateros but that he’d be protecting him: "If you don’t show up by such-and-such a time, I’m going to come back over here [to Reynosa] and I’m going to make them tell me where you are." The coyote’s confidence and forceful manner reassured José somewhat. He would be waiting for the pateros to bring José to a fast-food restaurant near the riverbank on the Texas side.

Sure enough, when José arrived at the riverbank that night with the pateros, bandits emerged from the brush to rob them. They desisted in the attempt, however, when they saw that José was arriving in the company of the pateros, with whom they evidently had some sort of arrangement. As soon as the would-be assailants left, the pateros had José remove his clothes and put them in a plastic bag, as he had done on other occasions. They then took him swimming across the river on an inner tube. Once on the other side, José and one of the pateros quickly dressed and walked through the brush for about 10 minutes. When they emerged from the brush, they could see the fast-food place about 300 meters head, on the other side of a highway where many cars were stopped waiting for a traffic light. The patero told him they would make a run for it, crossing through the cars on the highway as fast as they could. As they approached the edge of the highway, the cars began to move and they saw that a Border Patrol vehicle was approaching in the traffic. They hid in the grass in an embankment along the road and waited for the vehicle to pass, which it did, only about 15 feet from where they were hiding. The agents did not see them and did not stop. “At that moment I realized my luck had changed,” José said. The patero and he then ran across the highway and into the restaurant’s parking lot, where the coyote was waiting for them in his mini-van. The coyote paid the patero, who left to return to Reynosa. The coyote then went into the restaurant and came back with his wife and their 5-year-old son.
The coyote-family and José drove north up U.S. Highway 281. When they approached the immigration checkpoint at Falfurrias at about 9 PM, they had José hide under a blanket and some suitcases in the back of the minivan. The coyote, who was Anglo, was driving the vehicle. At the checkpoint a Border Patrol agent asked how many people were traveling with her and if they were all U.S. citizens. The woman answered it was just she and her husband and son and that they were all U.S. citizens. The agent told them “Okay, have a nice trip” and they drove on to Dallas. They got there at about 3 AM and took José straight to María, who paid the remaining $550. This time he had successfully run the gantlet. José did not mention to me whether the Border Patrol had deployed drug and people-sniffing dogs at this checkpoint the night when he passed through in December 2001. I did not ask him in our interview and he likely did not know, since he was hidden under a blanket at the time. Within a couple of years after the 9-11 attacks, such “K-9 units” were often deployed at highway immigration checkpoints in South Texas to alert agents to stowaways in vehicles. Although K-9 units are not foolproof (I have interviewed migrants who have gotten through checkpoints where they have been deployed), José’s chances of being detected would have been much greater had they been present the night he passed through Falfurrias.

**Working and saving money**

María had been working at a church-run daycare facility. When José arrived she was able to help get him a job as a janitor at the same church. He worked there for a month, but then one of María’s brothers offered to help him get a job where he worked, with a commercial construction contractor. The brother-in-law worked as a mechanic for the heavy machinery the company used and taught José how to maintain the equipment. The pair worked together on the same crew. José started out earning $9.50 an hour which was soon raised to $11.00. By the time he quit the job, he was earning $12.50 an hour, but was also working many overtime hours at time-and-a-half. María told me that during this period José worked as many as 80 hours a week. For the first time since they had gotten married, the couple had more than enough money to live on. They paid-off María’s credit cards and reimbursed José’s brother for the truck they had lost to the immigration authorities trying to enter in Laredo the year before. Before they returned to Mexico, José and María went to see an immigration attorney.14 They asked the attorney if there was any way they might be able to legalize José’s status in the United States given his arrest and conviction for alien-smuggling. The attorney told them that yes, it might be possible, but that José would have to return to Mexico to apply and that he
would not be eligible to re-enter the United States for a few years. So, José told me, “we planned it all out, our house and everything, we did it with the idea of coming here and waiting as long as it took to resolve my situation.” So, they began to save money for their return to Mexico.

Soon they had saved over $10,000. While José kept working, María returned to San Nicolás with money to buy materials for their house. They paid one of José’s younger brothers who had returned to the rancho during that time to build the house for them. In addition to the obvious advantages of keeping wealth and income “all in the family,” this arrangement was beneficial to both parties since it provided the brother with scarce income and enabled José and María to pay for the construction at a lower price and over time, since the brother lived right next door and worked on the house in his free time. With the house underway and the money still rolling in, they also purchased another used pick-up truck with the idea of returning to Mexico with two vehicles, something that would be helpful in the isolated, rural area where they planned to live. Finally, at the end of 2003, they were ready to return. In spite of the fact that José was earning a lot of money now and their luck seemed to have changed, they were both relieved to be leaving the United States. José put it this way: “I couldn’t go on living like that. I couldn’t leave the house. I couldn’t go anywhere because of the stress, because of the fear that they’d snatch me up and throw me back in jail.”

COMING HOME TO SAN NICOLÁS

Materially, José, María, and their children are better off than many other residents of San Nicolás and neighboring ranches. Their house is well-built and has some modern appliances brought back from the United States or purchased with funds they earned there. María is better-educated than anyone else in town and also speaks fluent English, which in principle could make her an attractive employee to Mexican businesses or government agencies. At the same time, the ban on José’s entry into the United States, the lack of local income-generating opportunities, and the depletion of their savings has left them living in very precarious circumstances. If their truck breaks down, they don’t have funds to repair it. They have no health or disability insurance, so serious accident or illness could be calamitous. Recently, one of José’s aunts required surgery to remove a cancerous stomach tumor and José helped pay for it, borrowing funds from other friends and relatives. So now the couple owes the hospital around U.S. $2,500, a debt they are unable to pay from income they can earn locally.
Both José and María like living in San Nicolás. She now feels at home here and actually prefers it to Dallas as a place to live and raise her children. She has been accepted by José’s family and other members of the community and occupies a respected position in San Nicolás as one of the local teachers. She believes that people in San Nicolás are less materialistic and more family-minded than people she knew in Dallas, including the members of her parents’ and siblings’ families. In Dallas, she said, people live for their possessions. Parents spend a lot of time away from their children working so they can buy fancy appliances and gadgets, like video games. Here, she says, people are not addicted to such things and have more time to actually spend with each other and their kids. Her own family back in Dallas thinks she is crazy for having moved back to San Nicolás. They see it as backward and primitive and can’t imagine how she gets along without all the modern conveniences and diversions available in the United States.

On the other hand, José and María worry about their future in Mexico beyond the immediate term. Their two daughters can go to school through sixth grade in San Nicolás, but after that they would have to travel elsewhere to continue their education. This would imply a considerable increase in their family expenses that they cannot afford at their present income. Given her higher level of education and her fluent English, María’s earning potential in Mexico is considerably greater than José’s, but there are few opportunities beyond her current pre-school teaching locally. Although she could teach school or work for a company, perhaps in the tourist sector in Dolores Hidalgo, San Miguel de Allende, or Guanajuato City, she and José do not have the important social connections to people in those labor markets that would facilitate her getting a job that would pay well enough to offset the considerable transportation expenses she would incur commuting between any of them and San Nicolás.

Because María has never worked elsewhere in Mexico and her network of social relationships is limited almost entirely to San Nicolás and the Dallas area, she has no real “ins” to finding jobs in Mexican cities that would offer pay commensurate to her level of education and English-language ability. One possibility they have considered is having María attend university in Celaya, Guanajuato to get a teaching degree that would permit her to work as a full-fledged teacher at higher pay and, perhaps more importantly, allow her to develop a network of professional contacts that would help her find a job in one of the better schools in the state of Guanajuato. José also has some members of his extended family living in Celaya, who might be able to help him find a job there in construction or in
a factory. The biggest challenge facing them with regard to Celaya is housing and their lack of savings: They have a house in San Nicolás but could not sell it or rent it if they wanted to move. Arriving in Celaya, they would have no place to live, no money with which to purchase a home, and not enough income initially to rent a house or an apartment. José, on the other hand, has worked in construction in León, Guanajuato, and has friends from San Nicolás who continue to do so. Unfortunately, the pay is so low that it barely is worthwhile having him commute there from San Nicolás and too low to permit the rest of the family to move to León with him. Indeed, when he and his brothers have worked there in the past, they have always camped-out on the construction site itself rather than rent a place to live.

In the absence of a more permanent resolution to their need for a steady cash income capable of covering their family’s expenses in Mexico, María has begun to make her own periodic sojourns back to the Dallas area not just to visit her family, but also to work for several months at a time. She did this, for example, in July and August of 2005, while her kids were out of school, staying with one of her sisters and working two jobs where she was employed before moving back to Mexico—at the church-run daycare mentioned earlier as well as working at a restaurant where she has worked on-and-off on a part-time basis since high school. She was able to save up a couple of thousand dollars in this way before returning to San Nicolás in time for the new school year to start. When I last visited José and María in San Nicolás in January 2006, María was preparing to leave for Dallas again to spend another three or four months working. This time she would bring only their younger daughter, who is not yet in primary school; the older daughter would stay back with José so her school year would not be interrupted.

In principle, having María make periodic trips to work in Dallas to generate cash for the family when the need arises could represent a solution to the family’s predicament. She is, after all, a U.S. citizen and can travel back and forth across the border and work in the United States without restriction. Although she and José would rather not be separated from each other or their children for months at a time, the periodic, months-long absence of a spouse/parent while working in the United States is actually the norm of family life in San Nicolás. Moreover, because María is a U.S. citizen, it is in fact much easier for their family to pursue this strategy than most other families in San Nicolás whose members work in the United States without papers. Indeed, in their own extended family José and María have an example of a couple where one spouse has “papers” to
work in the United States and “commutes” to work in Texas while the rest of the family remains living in San Nicolás: José’s oldest brother Horacio. The chief difference between the situations of José, María, and their children and Horacio’s wife and children is that Horacio is a man. The gendered rules of behavior in this part of rural Mexico are such that however “normal” it is for a man to be away from home for long stretches of time, leaving his wife behind to care for the children while he is earning dollars, it is nearly inconceivable for the father to stay behind to care for the children while the mother works north of the border. Thus, although their family is, in fact, pursuing a gender-bending income-generating strategy, they do not see it as a long-term way of resolving their economic predicament, in large measure because it is not a strategy that other members of their respective families and the community support.

ADVICE FOR OTHER MIGRANTS

I asked José the question I ask all the migrants that I interview: “If someone without papers who had decided to go north of the border in search of work came to you for advice about how to do it, what would you tell him?” Like many other interviewees, José said he would tell them to find a coyote to help him that had been recommended by friends who had already crossed successfully with him. In spite of all of his experience, he himself would not attempt to cross alone nor would he recommend trusting a desconocido [stranger], whether from around here or at the border. He said there were still plenty of coyotes working in his part of Guanajuato and that you could get reliable information about them just by asking around among people who had been to the United States. In spite of the build-up of U.S. forces at the border, coyotes where still successful in getting his paisanos to their destinations on the other side, and he doubted that it would ever stop:

Spener: They keep operating in this area?
José: Yes, I don’t think it’ll ever stop as long as we migrants keep going north.
Spener: And they keep finding ways to get across?
José: Yes, if it’s not one way it’s another. People really don’t have the option of staying here. I’ve been through all these things, but there are sadder stories, some stories that are not as sad as mine, too, but I believe that everyone needs to go to the United States for economic reasons. And I think that the best thing is to go with [a coyote] you know and that you rely on him to get you there.

José did note, however, that because the price charged by coyotes had risen substantially in recent years, owing to increased difficulties crossing and
the greater threat of lengthy incarceration if they were apprehended and prosecuted in the United States, migrants were finding they had to extend their stays north of the border. Where formerly men would go for sojourns of as little as three or four months at a time, today they had to stay a year or longer in order to clear enough money from working in order to justify the trip. This has become quite a hardship for families living in San Nicolás since it means that fathers, husbands, and working-age sons are seldom home.

With regard to the on-going availability of coyotes, I asked José why he had never consciously decided to try his hand as a paid guide and transporter. Clearly he had the knowledge and contacts in order to “go professional” if he chose to and could have earned a great deal of money working as a coyote. He explained that the risk was too great and that in order to work as a coyote he would have to involve his wife and children, which he did not feel would be proper. In addition, he believed that coyotes became addicted to a cash income that not only was obtained at great personal risk, but also led them to behave irresponsibly with money and, in some cases, head down the path of dissolution, drinking away the “easy money” they earned and paying insufficient attention to the welfare of their loved ones. María, he said, shared his personal rejection of coyotaje as a career, suggesting to me that they had at least discussed the possibility of his becoming a coyote at some point in the past.

In addition to their own calamitous experiences, José and María regarded the case of a neighbor of theirs who used to work as a coyote as a cautionary tale. The neighbor, Roberto, like many men in San Nicolás and neighboring ranchos, had migrated without papers to the Dallas, Texas area over the course of many years. Like other men, he gained a reputation as knowing the best routes and eventually became a coyote, accompanying groups of migrants from San Nicolás all the way to Dallas, relying upon a handful of collaborators with cars to pick him and his customers up once they had walked around the highway immigration checkpoints in the border region. Roberto was not especially well-liked in San Nicolás: He had always been diffident and unfriendly, was prone to petty jealousies, and had the reputation as being the local “grouch.” His reputation as a coyote was good, however, and many local men had traveled north with him at one time or another.

Roberto’s problems had begun around the year 2000, when he was working for a company that had a fleet of cars and delivery trucks in Dallas. The owner, who was Mexican American, allowed Roberto to use company
vehicles on his days off to drive to the Valley to pick up loads of migrants in exchange for a share of the profits. This arrangement worked well for a period of time until Roberto got greedy and started making trips without notifying his boss and without paying him a cut of the profits. On one of these trips, Roberto rolled over one of the company vehicles, totaling it. Fortunately, no one had been killed or seriously injured in the accident. The boss found out about the accident and demanded that Roberto split the cost of replacing the vehicle. Roberto failed to pay the boss, however, who then fired him and warned him that he had better avoid Dallas in the future lest he come after him to settle accounts.

At this point Roberto returned to San Nicolás and started working again as a coyote from there, leading migrants to other destinations in Texas. He was apprehended with migrants several times in the brush and was warned by the Border Patrol that they suspected he was a coyote and that eventually he would be prosecuted as one, but he persisted. Eventually, he was prosecuted and imprisoned for several months. While he was working as a coyote, Roberto had a nice truck and wore fancier clothes than his neighbors. Although he was by no means rich, he spent money freely by local standards. He has a wife and young children to support now, as well as an elderly mother who is quite ill. Recently he has had to come to neighbors with his hat in his hand asking for money to get his mother medical treatment. José and María say that Roberto has lost a lot of weight recently and rumor has it he is suffering from untreated diabetes. Everyone in town wonders what will become of him.

**JOSÉ AND MARÍA’S MESSAGE TO THE PEOPLE OF THE UNITED STATES**

At the end of one of my interviews with them, I asked María and José what message they would like to convey to the people of the United States about the situation facing undocumented Mexicans entering their country. This is a question I asked many of the migrants I interviewed and like most, this couple had a difficult time articulating a response at first: it was not a question anyone had ever asked them before and they were not immediately prepared to answer it. When they did respond, they focused primarily on some immediate, practical matters rather than articulating a broad philosophical or political message. In this sense, their answers were also similar to those given by other migrants I had interviewed. I posed the question first to José, who had this to say:

I’d like to ask the Anglo-Saxon to pay more attention to the people who truly suffer. Not just because this is my situation, but because there are many situations like this. Lots of people that they kick out need to be there [in the United States] because of
their families. But it doesn’t seem to matter to them [the Anglo-
Saxons]. They just say, “You’re out of here! Now get!” I think
they ought to look into things a little more to see if a person in
reality deserves to be in the United States before deciding to kick
him out. That would be my point. I feel this way because in my
own case, from the time that I entered [the United States], I
entered with the dream of working and bettering myself.
Unfortunately I had this piece of bad luck, but up there in fact I
never had problems with the police or anything. I never even
causé an accident or anything like that and nevertheless they
decided that I had to leave. People should realize that my story is
all about the border. It’s all about crossing over to give my girls
the best that I can. I also think that I would probably still do it so
my daughters can study and get ahead in life. ... Sometimes you
really have no other alternative. So for me, that’s the message
that I would give them, to pay more attention to that.

Clearly, José had a difficult time looking beyond the particulars of his own
personal predicament. At the same time, he insisted that his situation was
like that of many, if not most other migrants: They only go to the United
States to work. They stay out of trouble the best they can while they’re
there. They’re only there to provide for their families in the hopes of giving
them a brighter future. I heard this basic message in many of the
interviews I conducted with migrants.

Maria’s message was interesting in the way that she asked the people of
the United States to “fix” a very specific problem that made life exceedingly
difficult and even dangerous for undocumented Mexicans living north of the
border:

They should give [the Mexican migrants] more opportunities.
Like they shouldn’t deny them driver’s licenses so they can get
around, since it is very necessary to have a driver’s license. Or
some kind of permit, not a permit, but a Social Security card, an
I.D. so they can work without problems. More than anything else
the driver’s license is helpful because we had a lot of problems
because of that. At times he needed to drive and when that
happens you are always worried that they’ll stop him. And then
in order to get car insurance you have to have a driver’s license
and if you don’t have the driver’s license you don’t have
insurance. 19 So if you have an accident someday, how are you
going to be able to cover that accident? You’ll have to pay a lot of
money in cash to be able to cover it!

At one level, I must admit that I found the messages of José and Maria to be
disappointing. By asking them for a “message” to the people of the United
States, I was fishing for some sort of rhetorical jewel that could capture in a
phrase or a few sentences a transcendent moral truth about the experiences of Mexican undocumented migrants and their families in this era of global apartheid. Instead, their messages boiled down to simple and concrete pleas to resolve the everyday problems faced by people like them, who live prosaic lives of quiet desperation, divided by law, bound together in a struggle for survival.

Notes

1 Stories posted on this website complement research reported in the book *Clandestine Crossings: Migrants and Coyotes on the Texas-Mexico Border*, written by David Spener and published in 2009 by Cornell University Press. References to José and María's story appear in *Clandestine Crossings* on pages 134-135, 182-183, and 218. Research and writing for the book and this collection of stories were made possible by generous support from Trinity University and the John D. and Catharine T. MacArthur Foundation.

2 The names of José and María, their family members, and the village where they lived are all pseudonyms. I have also altered some other minor aspects of their story in order to protect their anonymity.

3 A *rancho* in this part of Mexico refers to any small rural, agricultural settlement located some distance away from the nearest *pueblo* (town). It is not synonymous with what Anglophone readers would call a *ranch*.

4 I saw numerous production facilities of this kind dotting the rural Guanajuato countryside, most of them owned and operated by Bachoco, the biggest poultry-processing company in Mexico. According to the company's website, it operates more than 700 production facilities throughout the country (http://www.bachoco.com.mx/spanish/faq.asp, consulted on February 5, 2006).

5 Indeed, this is the most common payment arrangement I have found in all the migrant communities where I have conducted interviews.

6 *Pateros* take clandestine migrants across the Río Bravo to Texas in boats, inflatable rafts, or inner tubes. Their services typically involve nothing more than the river crossing.

7 Although José and María considered their situation to be unusual in this regard, in my field work I have interviewed other informants in other communities who were in the same type of binational relationship in which one partner was a U.S. citizen and the other was an undocumented Mexican national, but both were either born in the same town in Mexico or one was
the child of someone who was born in the same town in Mexico who had migrated to the United States years earlier. These types of marriages are consistent with Rouse’s characterization of Mexican transnational communities as spanning the border in migratory circuits. See Rouse, Roger. 1991. “Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism.” Diaspora 1:1:8-23.

8 See Clandestine Crossings, Chapter 1, “The Unfolding of Apartheid in South Texas.”

9 Data supplied to the author by the U.S. Border Patrol.

10 A man from another part of Guanajuato recounted to me how he had to return to his rancho after being apprehended by the Border Patrol in the brush not far from Eagle Pass, Texas. I asked him why he and the coyote and the other migrants did not re-group in Piedras Negras and cross again immediately. The problem, he explained, was that in getting caught by the Border Patrol the group had missed the ride that was waiting for them past the checkpoint. When I asked him why the coyote could not simply call the driver to tell him they would be leaving again immediately and to wait for them at the designated spot, he said that they would have to wait another full week before the driver could return for them the following Sunday. The driver, it turned out, worked full-time in Dallas during the week and could only pick migrants up on Sunday, his day off.

11 Most migrants I have interviewed most of the time do not pay their coyotes much of the fee for their trip until they arrive in their U.S. destination (see Clandestine Crossings, Chapter 5, “Trust, Distrust, and Power”). Cases in which migrants will be transported in a commercial tractor trailer rig seem to be something of an exception to this rule, however. Presumably, coyotes that collect half the total fee at the outset of the trip do so in order to be able to use the cash to recruit professional truck drivers to haul their customers. These truckers are frequently Anglo Americans who are not tightly integrated into the coyote network for whom the occasionally (and quite profitably) drive.

12 A coyota is a female coyote.

13 Typically, Mexicans who are apprehended by the U.S. immigration authorities near the border sign an agreement to “voluntarily” return to Mexico immediately, without facing criminal charges or going through a formal deportation proceeding. “Voluntary return” is advantageous to both the immigration authorities and the apprehended migrants. The former avoid having to dedicate scarce prosecutorial resources and detention space to routine cases involving non-violent offenders. The latter can make another attempt to enter the U.S. surreptitiously without running the risk of
being charged with illegal re-entry after deportation, which is a felony carrying a maximum charge of five years in prison.

14 It was telling that in describing this professional to me, José called him a contador—an accountant. Like many other Mexican labor migrants I have interviewed, José's comprehension of the U.S. legal system was extremely limited. It is also quite possible that the contador was not an attorney at all, since there have been many incidents reported in the press of unscrupulous businesspeople posing as immigration professionals who are, in fact, not attorneys and are not licensed to give immigration advice or prepare immigration applications. See, for example, Marshall 2005.

15 Attorneys I subsequently consulted about their situation told me that José's conviction meant that it would be extremely difficult for him to ever get admitted legally into the United States in the future.

16 In spite of the fact that he had worked in concert with a coyote in transporting other migrants once before and, as a consequence, was a convicted "alien smuggler" in the eyes of the U.S. government, José did not regard himself as ever having worked as a coyote.

17 José and María introduced me to Roberto at the festival atop the mountain described at the outset of this chapter. I tried to convince him to grant me an interview, but he was unwilling to talk to me. The information given here is based on what José and María told me about him. Although I was able to elicit accounts of their experiences with coyotes from migrants in the region in and around San Nicolás, I was not able to interview any coyotes directly. José and María told me on a subsequent visit that several people in San Nicolás had questioned their willingness to talk to me about their experiences. They wondered if I was with the migra and had gone there to spy on them in order to help the U.S. authorities figure out how to put a stop to so many people from the area crossing the border. José and one of his brothers, whom I also interviewed, said that even though everyone knew who the coyotes were and that neither migrants nor the coyotes themselves regarded them as criminals, the coyotes were well aware that they were breaking the law by taking people across the border and therefore had ample reason not to discuss their activities with a gringo outsider whom they did not know.

18 Like many Mexicans, José seemed to think of the "true" Americans as being the non-Hispanic population. Nearly all the Latin Americans he had known in Texas had been either working class Mexican immigrants or Mexican Americans who, in his personal experiences, were already more or less familiar with the “truth” of the experiences of the indocumentados.
In the state of Texas, by law all drivers must carry current liability insurance coverage in addition to a valid driver’s license.