Sandra, in San Antonio, on Her Way to Seattle

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Sandra was a 21-year-old mother who lived in poverty with her three children in the northern border city of Piedras Negras, Coahuila. Her husband, a maquiladora worker, had a foul temper and a drinking problem. He routinely beat her and abused her emotionally. Fearing for her safety, her mother and father, who had gone to live in Seattle, Washington, convinced her to flee her husband and join them in the United States. They set her up with the same coyotes that had brought her mother across the border a year earlier. I interviewed Sandra in her aunt’s house in San Antonio in 2004 a few days after coyotes had brought her and her three-year-old son across the border. It had been a harrowing trip, but she and her son had arrived safe and sound. She was waiting for another relative to come to drive her to Seattle, a couple of thousand miles away, to reunite with her parents. She was worried about how she was going to wrest her other two children away from their abusive father.

I was introduced to Doña Anita by a member of her parish church on the West Side of San Antonio who knew that I was writing a book about the border-crossing experiences of undocumented immigrants. Most of the parishioners of her church were Mexican like her and lived in the surrounding working-class neighborhood. Anita was 39 years old when I interviewed her in 2004. She and her husband had gotten married sixteen years earlier in Piedras Negras, where they both had grown up. They first came to live in United States in 1989, using fake border crossing cards to enter. Anita was pregnant when they arrived, and she gave birth to her daughter in Dallas shortly after. Her husband got work in a car wash but was arrested in an immigration raid a few months later and was deported back to Mexico. She stayed on a few more months with her baby, but then had to go back to Piedras because she had no money to pay the bills without her husband there working. They remained in Mexico for another couple of years and had two more children there. Later, she and her husband were able to get real border crossing cards based on his steady employment in a factory in Piedras Negras. They couldn’t make a go of it on his meager salary, though, and decided to try their luck again in the United States, using
their *micas* [the Mexican slang term for the border crossing card] to enter. This time they went to San Antonio because it was the closest major city to the border. They didn’t know anyone living there at that time, in the early 1990s. Her husband got a job working in construction, earning $250 to $300 per week.

Anita and her husband settled permanently in San Antonio. He continued to work in construction. They now lived in a dilapidated rental home on a quiet residential street. They felt lucky not to have had any more run-ins with immigration, since down the block there was a laundromat where some young men had recently been picked up and deported in an unexpected raid. The presence of *la migra* in their neighborhood was palpable, Anita said, and it made residents fearful:

> They were roving the streets for a while last year. I was afraid to walk my kids to school. There are times we don’t even send the kids to school, so we don’t have to go out in public. It’s like they’ve got us surrounded. We feel like we’re in prison here because we can never feel comfortable anywhere we go. And if they catch us, it’s the kids who really suffer. That’s what happened with a friend of mine just the other day. She was at the laundromat when it was raided by *la migra*. They arrested and deported her. They arrested her little girl, too, and they held her until another family member could come get her.

Anita had relatives living in other parts of the United States further from the border. In particular, she had a sister who was living with her husband in Seattle, Washington. The sister had just sent for her 21-year-old daughter and three-year-old grandson to join them and had asked Anita to put them up in San Antonio for a few nights until she could send another relative to pick them up and drive them to Seattle. The two had made it to Anita’s house a couple of days earlier, having crossed the border through Laredo with a band of coyotes based in Coahuila. They were still there the day I went to talk with Anita about her own experiences. She asked if I would also like to speak with her niece, Sandra, about how the crossing had gone. When I said yes, of course, she went to a back room of the house to see if Sandra was awake and willing to talk. Anita came back and said Sandra would be happy to talk with me and that she would be out in a few minutes. While we waited, Anita explained to me that Sandra’s parents had convinced her to join them in Seattle in order to get away from her abusive husband in Piedras Negras. They had set Sandra up with the same coyotes that had brought her mother across a year earlier. A few minutes later, Sandra came out and started to tell me how she came to be sitting with me in her aunt’s living room that day.
WHY SANDRA HAD TO LEAVE MEXICO

Sandra was from a rancho in the east-central part of the state of Coahuila near the town of Peñasco. According to Sandra, there wasn’t much in her rancho, “ni agua ni nada” [no water or anything], and it was poor. The only paying work to be had was in a maquiladora assembly plant in Peñasco. Both her parents had worked there when she was growing up. Sandra had completed la secundaria [the equivalent of the 9th grade in the United States] before dropping out of school and going to work, first in local stores in Peñasco and later in a maquiladora in Piedras Negras. She met her husband working at the maquiladora when she was just eighteen. She got pregnant almost right away and got married shortly after giving birth to her son, José Raúl. Her relationship with her husband was conflictive and their relationship only lasted about two years before she left him. That was enough time for her to give birth to another child and get pregnant once more before she and her husband separated. Her two other children were two years and seven months old, respectively, at the time I interviewed her. Fearing her husband’s violent temper, Sandra returned to Peñasco to stay with relatives to decide what to do next. She brought José Raúl with her but had to leave her two younger children with their father, who refused to relinquish custody of them. By this time, both her father and mother had left Peñasco and were living and working in Seattle, her father as a brick mason and her mother as a hotel housekeeper. Five of her father’s brothers were also living and working there. Given that she had no money and no way of supporting herself in either Peñasco or Piedras Negras, her parents encouraged her to join them in Seattle. If she could get a job there and save up some money, perhaps she could hire a lawyer to get custody of her other two children. Her decision was one that many people from the rancho near Peñasco had made over the years. About as many members of her community lived in various locales in the United States as still lived around Peñasco itself.

CHOOSING A COYOTE TO MAKE THE TRIP

Sandra’s father had been able to cross the border without problems three years earlier with a valid mica that had since expired. Her mother had a much harder time entering the United States since she had no valid crossing documents. She had first tried to cross the border with a group of coyotes in Piedras Negras, paying them U.S. $1,800 at the beginning of the trip. After crossing the river, her mother had to hike through the brush for a whole day before getting arrested by the Border Patrol and sent back across the international bridge to Piedras. Having paid the $1,800 fee ahead of
time, she was supposed to be able to keep trying to cross with the same coyotes until she got through. Unfortunately, when she went looking for their leader, he was nowhere to be found. By then, she was in no condition to make a second attempt immediately and had no way of recovering the money she had lost. Like her daughter a year or so later, she returned to the rancho near Peñasco to decide what to do next.

One of Sandra's father's brothers in Seattle recommended another coyote to the couple. This man set people from Peñasco up with his collaborators in Nuevo Laredo, who took them across the border and onward to San Antonio. These coyotes charged migrants $2,000 for the trip, in two payments, half up front and the remainder upon arrival in San Antonio. Things had gone very easily for her mother on this second trip and she made it to San Antonio and then on to Seattle without incident. Sandra had the following to say about her mother's experience with these coyotes:

She said that it had gone well for her. She hadn't had to walk at all. It had been real easy. She said I should go with them too, since she hadn't had to walk at all. She was afraid at first, given what had happened the first time she tried to cross. She really didn't want to come. My father just told her let's give it a try to see how it goes, and thank God, it was easy this time! She felt real good about them because she hadn't had to walk at all. My mother says they took her across the river, took her to a rancho and a tractor-trailer rig came to pick them up at the rancho. She says that she left Peñasco at three in the morning and made it to San Antonio that very same night.

Moreover, many other Peñasco residents had traveled to Texas with these coyotes and also recommended them.

The two quite opposite types of experiences her sister had with coyotes, along with other varied experiences that people in San Antonio had had, seemed to have influenced Sandra's Tía Anita's view of coyotes and how they operated. Before introducing me to Sandra, Doña Anita had told me that she had heard about the border-crossing experiences of a lot of friends and that “sometimes they make it with no problem, sometimes the coyotes are muy malos [awful] and sometimes they are buenas gentes [good guys].” “It just depends,” she said, “on which kind you wind up with.” Sometimes, even, things could turn out very differently for different people making different trips with the same coyotes. As it turned out, although Sandra's mother no batalló nada [hadn't struggled/suffered at all] on her trip with these coyotes, Anita said that Sandra had arrived three days ago with her feet all blistered and her legs and arms scratched and full of thorns, scared to death of the rattlesnakes she'd seen while hiking through the brush.
SANDRA, IN SAN ANTONIO, ON HER WAY TO SEATTLE

SANDRA AND JOSÉ RAÚL’S 24-HOUR ODYSSEY FROM PEÑASCO TO SAN ANTONIO

Sandra was still trying to make sense of the trip she had just made when I interviewed her in San Antonio. It was confusing and things had not gone the way she had been told they would. For one thing, she had been told that she and her son weren’t going to have to walk at all, when, in fact, she had to walk a long way through very rough country. Worse still, because her son could not make such a hike and neither she nor anyone else would be able to carry him, the coyotes separated the two of them and took her son across the bridge into Texas in a car filled with Mexican American children. In response to my first question about how the trip had gone, she blurted out the following:

The first coyote took us from Peñasco to Laredo. Then he delivers us to another coyote, who turns us over to another coyote who has some muchachillos [kids], 16 or 17-year-olds, take us across the river in cámaras [inner tubes]. Then they take us to a house, and then they deliver us to another person who loads us into a tractor-trailer. Then this person takes us to another person who walks us around the garita [the immigration checkpoint]. We walked from eleven o’clock at night until four in the morning. And then from there yet another person gives us to another person in another tractor trailer to get to San Antonio, where they drop us off at a hotel. When we were in Nuevo Laredo, they said that we weren’t going to have to walk at all. We were just going to cross the river, walk a couple of blocks, and that would be it. And then we arrived at the house on this side in Laredo, Texas, and the lady there said, no, we were going to have to walk for about four hours. But it was more like five! And they don’t let you rest—it’s just walk and walk the whole night long.3

Continuing the conversation and asking a series of follow-up question, I learned that there had been about thirty people in the group she traveled with, including nine Brazilian men. Sandra and her fellow Mexicans were charged U.S. $2,000 each, paid in three installments—$100 upon leaving Peñasco, another $900 upon arriving in Laredo, Texas, and the remaining $1,000 upon arrival at the hotel in San Antonio. Sandra’s uncle in Seattle, the same one who had arranged for her mother’s trip, wired the money to the coyotes at each step along the way. The Brazilians, she said, had been charged a great deal more than she and the other Mexicans in the group had paid. One of the things I wanted to know was why people from Peñasco, Coahuila traveled all the way to Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas to cross into Texas, when Ciudad Acuña and Piedras Negras, Coahuila were much closer.
Spener: Don't a lot of people from Peñasco cross through Piedras Negras?

Sandra: The thing is that in Piedras there's a lot of immigration [on the Texas side] and there are a lot of police along the river on the Piedras side. That's why we all go through Laredo.

Spener: What about Acuña?

Sandra: Well, who knows? I imagine it's the same story, but I'm not sure. The muchacho that took us from Peñasco to Laredo said that almost everyone was going through Laredo and Juárez, but that Juárez was more dangerous and it took them longer to cross people there because they're under more surveillance there [los checan más].

Sandra said that neither she nor her son had been mistreated physically by anyone on their trip. She did not seem to be traumatized in any way when I interviewed her. She seemed fairly at ease, given the circumstances, and spoke animatedly. I was relieved to hear that the men on the trip had left her alone, for she was young, slender, and pretty, and I had read numerous journalistic reports of women being abused and raped as they came across the border. Like many women who cross the border clandestinely, Sandra made this trip accompanied by an adult male relative—one of her uncles, in this case—and also benefited from the fact that there were other people on the trip from Peñasco that she knew. Still, she said that she was scared while she was making the trip, trusting no one, especially when she learned that the coyotes planned to separate her from little José Raúl. Had she known this, she would never have brought him with her:

When we got to Nuevo Laredo, they told me that I couldn't bring my son with me, that he couldn't walk with me, and that I had to leave him there with them. And I didn't trust them. I said, “How am I going to leave my son with people I’ve never even met before?” And they told me, “You have to leave him with us because you're going to walk and he's not going to be able to walk.” And I said, “How am I going to leave him here if I don't know if you're really going to take him across and give him back to me or not?” And, well, they said, “Look, you just have to trust us.” So I left him there and they didn't give him back to me until the next afternoon. They took him across the bridge with false papers. Some woman with a bunch of their own kids. We dropped my son off at her house.

After leaving her son with the woman who would take him across, Sandra, her uncle, and about a half-dozen other migrants were driven in a car by some men to a spot along a highway near the river, where they were left with some muchachos who would take them across on inner tubes.
They were still in town, just not right by the downtown bridges that connected Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas with Laredo, Texas. They had to run across a busy highway dodging the on-coming traffic. The men were in communication by cell phone with their wives, who were stationed at some other vantage point along the river where they could observe the movements of Border Patrol vehicles on the opposite bank. While they were waiting, the teen-agers got high smoking a few joints. Another young woman was in Sandra’s group and both were worried about crossing the river with these stoned teen-aged boys:

At the river you’re wondering if you’re going to drown with these teen-agers who were drugged-out. The other girl and I were scared. What if they drowned and left us there, or something like that? And we were real surprised by something. We asked them why they couldn’t take across another other stretch of the river we’d seen on the way there, where there were rocks and we could have walked across. And one of them said, “No, we can’t cross there because it doesn’t belong to us. Everyone has their own little spot” [cada uno tiene su terrenito].

When the women saw that a post along the river had been vacated, they called the men and gave them the “all clear” to cross. At that point they jumped into the river on their inner tubes and the teens pulled them across, swimming alongside them.

As soon as we made it across the river we ran, I don’t know, about four blocks to a bunch of houses. Some other muchachos were waiting for us there with their car. And they wanted to charge us more money! They said, “We can take you, but you have to pay us,” and I don’t know what all. And the muchachos that took us across the river told them, “No, they’ve already paid. Take them to the señora!” So they take us to the parking lot of this supermarket and a lady comes for us. She’s real mad at the guys, and she says “What do these pinches mexicanos [fucking Mexicans] think they’re doing?” Then they argue for a minute before she loads us up in her car and takes us to her house. When we got there, she let us take showers and wash our clothes, and fed us. She treated us well.

According to Sandra, this woman worked with another woman and they appeared to be the leaders of this band of coyotes was headed by women she met: ¡Las jefas son puras mujeres! [The bosses are all women!]. Moreover, she took them to be gringas, since they didn’t speak Spanish very well and their children didn’t seem to speak or understand it all.
Spener: How did you know they were the jefas?
Sandra: Well, because they were the ones they gave the money to. And they were the ones that told everyone else what to do and how to do it. When you contact them to say you want to go with them, it’s a señora you talk to.
Spener: But don’t they speak Spanish then?
Sandra: Yes, they speak Spanish, but not very well. And the lady’s kids only spoke English. She had another guy translating for her because she had a hard time understanding Spanish.

Later that night another group of migrants arrived at the house and it was quite crowded. The next evening the big group of migrants, now around 30 persons, including the Brazilians, left the house and were loaded 15–each into two tractor-trailer rigs. They drove for a short time and then unloaded along the side of the highway at around midnight to walk around the immigration checkpoint run by the Border Patrol north of Laredo on Interstate 35 [see map]. Although it was summer, they were fortunate that it was relatively cool with a steady rain. The drivers of the rigs

Map 1. South Texas Border Region
handed them off to two men who would guide them through the brush. These two men told them to stay quiet and walk in a single file, following one of the men, with the other bringing up the rear. Sandra recalled that “They told us to stay in that formation because if one of us fell behind or got lost, they would have to leave us there.” They also told the group that if the Border Patrol apprehended them, they should say that they were all walking on their own with no guide. Sandra explained that it was in the migrants’ interest not to finger their guides, since they would depend on them to try to cross again if they were caught this time:

Sandra: They said that if immigration caught us we should say we didn’t know who the guides were. When we were going through the monte [brush], the two guides told us that if the migra catches us we should say that they were just two more mojados, like us.

Spener: And was everyone agreeable to this?

Sandra: Well, who knows what they would have done if they’d caught us? But yes, we agreed. Because they didn’t treat us badly or anything.

Spener: You had already paid half the trip, right? What would have happened if la migra had caught you?

Sandra: If you don’t make it, they’ll take you back across again without charging you the down payment again.

Spener: And did they tell you where to go to hook up with them again if you were caught?

Sandra: No, they didn’t. But a kid from Peñasco was with us and he had tried to cross the week before. The migra caught him and sent him back. And the coyotes were bringing him again, without paying, from Peñasco to Laredo and from Laredo to here. He didn’t have to pay again. They keep bringing you across until you make it.7

Although she had only had to walk a total of five hours though the brush—many migrants in the contemporary period have to walk days or even a week to get around the immigration checkpoints, with hundreds dying each year—Sandra had found the hike to be grueling.8 She was also angry, given that she had been told ahead of time that there would be no walking involved. Because of this, she said she would not cross again with these coyotes, even though she had made it successfully to San Antonio:

Spener: So, do you think you would use these same coyotes to cross again? If someone else was thinking about crossing, what would you tell them about this experience?

Sandra: I wouldn’t want to do it again. I walked a lot and I arrived all full of thorns. The brush is thick, and you get stuck by thorns all along the way. At the moment we crossed the river, I
threw my socks away since they were wet, and I had to walk in my tennis shoes with no socks, so I got blisters all over my feet.

Spener: So, there weren’t any paths to follow?
Sandra: No, only in a few places. I think they had gone through there before, because the grass was all trampled in places. But in other places, no. And then we had to go through a section full of nopales [prickly pear cactus]. There was no way through, you just had to try to avoid the thorns as much as you could. And then the guides got lost. Se nortearon [they got bewildered]. So we had to go through that same thicket of nopales twice!

Spener: How did they know where to go? Did they have flashlights or anything?
Sandra: No, we walked in dark. I guess they just knew the way. I noticed that they had hung ribbons on the trees in some places, so they would know where they were.

Not only was she anxious about whether she would ever see her son again (not to mention the two babies she had left behind with her husband), Sandra feared for herself on the hike through the brush. This was not something she had ever done before and she wasn’t prepared for it:

I was scared from the beginning. But then when we just had to walk and walk, I was so tired and we didn’t have any water. Then I really got scared, since they had told us that if we couldn’t keep up, they’d have to leave us behind. So I was afraid that they’d leave me out there in the middle of nowhere. And I think they would have done it, too! But I managed to keep up. Thank God we didn’t have too hard a time getting through [no batallamos en pasar].

Although Sandra was not happy about having to hike as much as she had done, she was also aware that the Brazilians on the trip had experienced a lot worse crossing through Mexico. When she complained about being too tired to go on, her uncle told her to just keep going, the Brazilians had spent 18 days getting through Mexico and had told him that they had walked two whole days in Chiapas after crossing the country’s southern border with Guatemala. One of Brazilian men had lost a shoe in Mexico and was walking through the brush barefoot. She didn’t know why he hadn’t gotten another pair of shoes in Nuevo Laredo. She supposed it was because the Brazilians didn’t have any money with them, but wasn’t sure because she really couldn’t understand their language.

He only had one shoe. Just one! But then he took it off. Then he put it back on again. Then he switched it from one foot to another. Then for a while he tied tee-shirts around his feet and tried to walk like that so they wouldn’t burn so much. His companions helped him along sort of half carrying him. He was
falling behind as we were getting near the end and they asked the guide to wait up because his feet were bleeding. But the muchacho said we couldn’t wait because the trailer was already there waiting for us. Later, when we finally made it to the hotel in San Antonio, the drivers brought him some alcohol so his feet would heal up. Because the Brazilians were headed to Florida from here.

The migrants and their coyotes walked in silence so as not to attract the attention of any Border Patrol agents who were watching the area. The two guides communicated with one another with hand signs. There were times when they had everyone duck down and keep still to be sure that they were not detected by anyone else in the area. Although the guides had warned that anyone who couldn’t keep up on the trail would be left behind, the migrants helped one another out as they marched through the night. There was another young woman on the trip who also had a difficult time keeping up the pace and the men took her by the hand and helped her along. When they had to climb over barbed wire fences, the men in the group let the two women go first and kept them from falling or getting stuck. The only one on the trip who had serious difficulties was the shoeless Brazilian man.

At about four in the morning they arrived at an abandoned gasoline station where the same two tractor-trailer rigs awaited them. The two guides stayed behind in the brush while 15 migrants climbed into the sleeping compartments of each of the two truck cabs. These coyotes apparently were aware of the dangers of transporting migrants locked in the trailers of such rigs—19 migrants had died in the back of one such rig in Victoria, Texas the year before in the worst single tragedy to ever befall a group of migrants as they attempted to enter the United States. I asked Sandra what it was like traveling with so many people in the cab of the truck:

**Sandra:** They don’t load us in the trailer compartment [en la caja]. They have us get up into the sleeping compartment [el camarote]. Not in the back, because they say there are more difficulties if they leave us locked in there. And we all got in.

**Spener:** What was the sleeping compartment like with 15 people in there?

**Sandra:** Well, it’s kind of like a bunk bed [una litera], like a double bed, with some up above and some down below. But we were all piled in there, real scrunched up, but no one was on top of anyone else. There was plenty of air. It went fine. No problem.

Sandra didn’t know what town the gas station where they were picked up was, but she estimated that it was only about two hours away from San
Antonio. The truck drivers, who were gringos and didn't speak Spanish, took them to a motel somewhere in the city, where a Mexican man had rented a couple of rooms for them, one for the passengers from each rig. They stayed there for a few hours waiting for the coyotes to confirm that the remaining monies the migrants owed had been wired to their account. After a little while, the Mexican man went to the room where Sandra was staying with five Mexican companions and the Brazilians.

He came in and said, “Let’s go. Just the Mexicans. I’m going to take you guys now.” There were five of us: My uncle, another guy, the other girl, and me. I had gotten friendly with the other girl on the trip—we’d tried to look out for each other. After we left the hotel, the coyotes dropped us off at her house and she let us stay there until somebody from our family came to pick us up. She was coming as a mojada [a wet], too, like us, but she makes her home here in San Antonio. Her kids were born here and everything. She let us stay with her until we were able to get a hold of my aunt and she brought us over here to this house.

Since news stories often reported migrants being held against their will under armed guard, I asked Sandra what kept migrants from leaving once they arrived at the hotel. At first she didn’t understand my question since they hadn’t waited that long and trying to leave without paying hadn’t even occurred to her. She knew to expect to wait until the rest of the money for here trip was wired—that was the way she knew things would be from the beginning. I then asked her more specifically if any of the coyotes anywhere along the way were armed or brandished weapons against them:

**Spener:** Another question I always have is that sometimes they talk about extortions and abuses committed along the way. Were these people armed? Did they carry pistols, knives, anything like that?

**Sandra:** No, we didn’t see anything on them. Just the man that took us from Peñasco to Laredo. He had a pistol in his car, but he never took it out or anything.

**Spener:** And in Nuevo Laredo, did any of those people ...

**Sandra:** Well, the ones that took us across the river from Laredo, Mexico to Laredo, Texas, they got high before they took us, with marijuana, but they did it off to one side, not in front of us. And the lady where we left my son, she was smoking a cigarette. Those were the only bad things I saw.¹⁰

One of the things that Sandra thought was remarkable about the trip was that they had not seen any sign of the Border Patrol anywhere along the route once they had crossed the river—no vehicles, no agents, nothing. People from Peñasco thought that the coyotes probably had some kind of
connection inside that got the Border Patrol to look the other way when they came through. One of the reasons they thought so was that these coyotes only crossed into Texas on Wednesdays. Doña Anita, who had been listening quietly to my conversation with Sandra, suddenly interjected when this question came up:

Anita: Sandra's mother used to say that, too. That you can only cross on Wednesdays.
Spener: What's so special about Wednesdays?
Anita: They're all in cahoots together. I imagine that the immigration agents know they're coming and they let them through.
Sandra: My mother also came on a Wednesday. And there was this guy from Jalisco with us on the trip. He said they always went on Wednesdays, too. He'd wanted to leave on Sunday when he got to Laredo but they told him they only crossed on Wednesday. He said he figured it was because la migra, the Border Patrol, wouldn't be checking the brush where we were. And he was right, because while we were walking we didn't see a single agent. Not even one! I imagine that immigration is working with them because we didn't see any immigration at all.
Spener: So, you don't think it was just luck, they knew what they were doing.
Anita: Yes, it seems that way to me. Because they always cross on Wednesdays and they always make it.
Sandra: We even walked through a little town and still, nothing. That's why I say immigration must be in on it and lets them through.
Spener: Well, it wouldn't be the first time something like this has happened.
Sandra: The girl who came with us said she has a family member who has a friend that brings kids across the bridge in Eagle Pass. The woman's husband works for immigration. When he's working the bridge, he lets her bring the kids across.

Of course, Sandra and her aunt were just speculating about the possible collaboration between Sandra's coyotes and the Border Patrol. They had seen no real evidence of any such conspiracy. Still, there had been many documented cases of immigration and customs agents taking payment from coyotes in return for letting them bring migrants across the bridges or through the immigration checkpoints on the highways leading away from the border. Thus, their speculation about a possible deal between the coyotes and elements of the Border Patrol could not be dismissed out of hand.11
SANDRA, IN SAN ANTONIO, ON HER WAY TO SEATTLE

REUNITING WITH HER SON

Sandra had received no word about her son during the trip nor did she learn anything definitive when she first arrived in San Antonio. All the coyotes would say was, "Don’t worry, he’ll be here soon." When she got to the home of the other woman who had been traveling with her, she called her uncle in Seattle, the one who had set up her trip with these coyotes, to see if he knew or could find out anything. The uncle called the coyotes, who told him that they were buying some clothes for José Raúl, since he would be coming across on the bridge. He’d be there soon, they told him. A few hours later Sandra got a call that they should go pick up her son at a mall. He would be waiting for them there with a woman and another child.

Spener: How did he seem when you got there?
Sandra: He looked fine, but he was crying. I think he’d had about as much as he could take [estaba desesperado].

Spener: How did it seem like they had treated him?
Sandra: Fine, because I asked him if they’d given him anything to eat and he’d eaten. If they had been mean to him at all [si no le habían regañado]. He said no, they hadn’t. In fact they had bought some toys for him, I think so he wouldn’t cry. I asked him if they’d done anything to him, and he said no.

Spener: And you didn’t see that he had suffered?
Sandra: No, because there had been other kids with them, too. I asked the girl that was waiting with him at the mall if the other boy that she had was hers, but she said she couldn’t tell me anything. So we just picked him up and left. I didn’t talk with her at all.

REFLECTING ON HOW SHE’D BEEN TREATED BY THE COYOTES

Sandra’s memories of making the trip, which she had only completed a few days earlier, were still fresh in her mind and vivid. She was happy to have made it and to be reunited with her son. The coyotes obviously knew what they were doing and got them to San Antonio expeditiously and safely. No one had harassed her or treated her son badly. Everything had gone more or less according to plan—she left home one evening and was in San Antonio the very next day. At the same time, she was evidently upset about having had to walk when she had been led to believe—whether by the coyotes or by her family members was not clear—that she wouldn’t have to walk at all. Moreover, she had not been told that she and her son would be separated, something she would never have consented to had she known ahead of time. In addition, she had been frightened by the coyotes’ warnings that she would be left behind on the trail if she couldn’t keep up and had been horrified at the suffering of the shoeless Brazilian man. How
was it possible that no one had gotten him a new pair of shoes to wear? And she was not happy that the young men with the inner tubes took them across the river stoned. She was also disturbed by several of the interactions she had with the coyotes along the way.

Sandra was insulted at the way that one of the jefas of the coyotes had responded when Sandra and her companions told the woman that those young men in the parking lot in Laredo had tried to charge them more money to be driven to her house.

Those guys wanted her to give them more money for us, as if we were something to be sold. They treated us like animals that can be bought and sold. And then later the señora asked us if they’d tried to get us to give them money and we said yes. And she told us they were trying to rip-off her merchandise [ganerle la mercancía], as if we were things.

Nevertheless, the señoras had treated them in a friendly, courteous manner once they were at the house in Laredo. They asked them if they wanted to take a shower and if they wanted anything to eat. “They treated us well and were friendly and all. They said, “Eat up because you’re going to be leaving soon.” But the two women spoke English between them and Sandra and the other migrants didn’t understand anything they said to one another.

With most of the rest of the coyotes, there was little conversation. The guides in the brush had asked them to walk silently, so they barely talked with them on the trek around the checkpoint. When they got to the gas station where they climbed back into the trucks, the traileros [truckers] were angry at the guides for having arrived an hour late. In her case, the trucker just heaved the fifteen migrants up into the sleeping compartment and threw them one bottle of water for all of them to share. When they got to the hotel in San Antonio, the truckers didn’t get them any lunch to eat. When they asked for food, the truckers said no, they would just have to wait until their families came to get them. A little later, one of the truckers came to her room and just threw a little food on the bed and said, very rudely, “Here you go, eat.” Sandra said it was just some snacks, very little food for fifteen people who had just been through the ordeal they had experienced. She and her cousin took only a few bites and left the rest for the Brazilians, since they were going to wait in the hotel longer before traveling on to Florida. Later, they spoke a little more with the Mexican man who came to drive them to the house of the other woman on the trip. He asked them where they were from and when they said Peñasco, he said that was where he was from originally, too, but that he had lived in Texas for many years. And then there was the non-conversation with the young woman who
brought her son and the other child to the mall. In spite of the fact that so many people from Peñasco traveled with this group of coyotes, there did not seem to be much love lost between the coyotes and their customers. There had been, as Sandra said, *muy poca relación* [very little interaction] between them on the trip.

**THE NEXT STEPS SHE WOULD TAKE**

Towards the end of the interview, little José Raúl scampered into the living room after having finished watching a video cartoon in the bedroom in the back of the house. He sat on his mother’s lap and sucked his thumb anxiously as we wrapped up. Sandra had been able to speak with her parents by phone. They were happy and relieved that she and their grandson had made it. They were looking forward to being reunited with her in Seattle in a few days. Another of her uncles (she seemed to have a lot of uncles) would come in his car to pick her up tomorrow or the next day to drive her there. First, though, they would pass through St. Louis, Missouri, far out of their way, to drop off the uncle that had traveled with her from Peñasco, as well as one of her cousins and another young man from Peñasco. There was, apparently, another outpost of the growing Peñasco diaspora in that Midwestern city. They were still waiting for the cousin to arrive in San Antonio, however. He was supposed to have traveled with Sandra and her uncle the previous Wednesday, but the coyotes did not have room for him and he had to wait until the next week. He had left the previous evening and was due to arrive sometime that afternoon or evening. They were just waiting to hear from him. Sandra’s parents said it would take her about three days to get to Seattle. They would help her find work. After that she would try to get custody of her other two children and bring them to Seattle to join her:

> I don’t know when I’ll go back to Mexico. Next I’ll have to struggle to get my kids. The two others that I had to leave in Mexico. One is two years old and the other is just seven months. It’s going to take a lot to get them here. I’ll have to find someone else who will bring them across the border. And now I’m going to have even more trouble because I spoke to their father and he doesn’t want to give them to me. He says he’s going to keep them there with him. So, who knows how it’s all going to work out.

At the end of most of the interviews I conducted with migrants, I asked them if there was any special message they’d like to send to the people of the United States about their experiences as Mexicans who have come to this country. In retrospect, it was really quite unfair to ask Sandra this question. She was still in the middle of a harrowing voyage and really did
not know yet what to expect about life in this country or what its non-Mexican inhabitants would be like. I did ask it, however, and she looked at me blankly at first. Coming to her aid, Doña Anita offered an answer from her point of view, having also crossed the border clandestinely and having lived in the United States for over a decade:

**Spener:** Just imagine that you could send a message through this microphone to the American people about the Mexicans that come to the United States. What would you say to them?

**Anita:** I’d just like to say to the *bolillos* (white, Anglo Americans), we’re just coming here to work. We’re not bad people. I have been discriminated against, I’ve experienced it, but the great majority of you are good people. In fact, the *bolillos* help Mexican people a lot, and the black people, too. There have been very few times when I’ve felt looked down upon. They’ve treated me well in the hospitals and just about everywhere. It’s unusual to be discriminated against. A person comes here to progress, to help out her family, not to get into trouble.

**Sandra:** Please do not discriminate against us so much. Remember we don’t come here to get into trouble. We’re just here to work, to get ahead.

In Sandra’s case, she was also here to escape an abusive relationship and to reunite with her parents. She had been brought across the border by the same women who had brought her mother before her and might well bring her other two children after her. Whether they would all get ahead or not remained to be seen.

**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. 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 Anita, Sandra, José Raúl, and the name of their hometown in Coahuila are all pseudonyms.

3 Rough as this hike was, Sandra actually got off quite easy compared to what many migrants I have interviewed had to go through. See *Clandestine Crossings*, Chapter 2, “The Long March through the Brush Country,” and Chapter 6, “Passing Judgment.”

5 Disputes between members of different links in the coyote chain can turn into serious problems for migrants. Many of the cases of migrants being held for “ransom” by their coyotes involve intra-network disputes about monies owed by one group of coyotes to another. See *Clandestine Crossings*, Chapter 5, “Trust, Distrust, and Power,” for more discussion of this issue.

6 Generally, *coyotaje* along the Texas-Mexico border has been a business run by Mexicans and Mexican Americans. It is impossible for us to know for certain whether the women Sandra took to be the leaders of this group of coyotes were “pure” *gringas*, light-skinned Mexican Americans, or perhaps *gringas* married to Mexicans or Mexican Americans. Regardless, the vast majority of defendants prosecuted as coyotes in the federal courts in Texas in the early 2000s were Mexicans and Mexican Americans. See *Clandestine Crossings*, pages 184-185.

7 For a broader discussion of why migrants do not usually finger their coyotes when they are apprehended by the authorities, see *Clandestine Crossings*, Chapter 5, “Trust, Distrust, and Power: The Social Embeddedness of Coyote-Assisted Border Crossings.”

8 For more information on deaths of migrants, see *Clandestine Crossings*, Chapter 2, “The Long March through the Brush Country.”

9 To learn more about this terrible incident, see Jorge Ramos’ book *Dying to Cross: The Worst Immigrant Tragedy in American History*, published in 2006 by Harper Paperbacks. See also the introductory chapter of *Clandestine Crossings*, as well as portions of Chapter 4, “Coyotaje and Migration in the Contemporary Period” and Chapter 5, “Trust, Distrust, and Power.” For a discussion of the way the Victoria incident was portrayed by the authorities and in the press, see Spener, David. 2008. “El apartheid global, el coyotaje y el discurso de la migración clandestina: Distinciones entre violencia personal, estructural y cultural.” *Migración y Desarrollo* 10:127-56. [English-language version available at http://www.migracionydesarrollo.org/].

10 For further discussion on the use of force and violence against migrants by their coyotes, see *Clandestine Crossings*, Chapter 5, “Trust, Distrust, and Power,” the section titled “Power Relations between Migrants and Coyotes.”
For more extensive discussion of collaboration between U.S. immigration agents and coyotes, see *Clandestine Crossings*, Chapter 4, "Coyotaje and Migration in the Contemporary Period."