Se batalla mucho

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Se batalla mucho relates the migratory experiences of Hilda and Julián, a young married couple from a small village in the rural northwestern section of the state of Guanajuato. Julián was the brother and next-door neighbor of José, whose story “Divided Lives” also appears in this collection. Julián made his first trip to the United States in 1994, at the age of twenty-one, just as he and Hilda were beginning their romance. He went back and forth between Guanajuato and Dallas, Texas for the next couple of years before returning to marry Hilda at the end of 1996. They returned to Dallas together to live and work early in 1997. Although their first border-crossing together went relatively smoothly, when they attempted to return with their baby daughter after a visit home at the beginning of 2000, they suffered tremendously. Hilda and Julián’s second sojourn in Dallas was marked by a series of economic and emotional setbacks that led them to question whether it made sense for them to remain together in Dallas, especially since it was nearly impossible for Hilda to work after having two more children there. Finally, in mid-2003 they decided it would be best for Hilda to return to Guanajuato with their children. Even though it was getting more difficult and dangerous every year, Julián continued to go back and forth across the border to work. Their precarious financial situation left him little alternative.

I first met Hilda in the spring of 2005 in Rancho San Nicolás, her hometown in rural northwest Guanajuato. She lived in a small cement-block house with her three young children on the same plot of land where the families of her husband Julián’s brothers and mother had their houses. I had been introduced to Hilda by her cuñado [brother-in-law] José and his wife María, who lived next door. [See the story “Divided Lives” for an account of that couple’s migratory experiences and a description of Rancho San Nicolás.] Hilda’s husband, Julián, José’s brother, was working in Dallas when I first interviewed her. I would not get a chance to talk with him until the following January, after he had returned for the Christmas holidays to see her and their son and two daughters. Both Hilda and Julián had been born in Rancho San Nicolás in 1973 and had been raised there, although Julián had lived for a couple of years as a child near the Distrito Federal in the state of Mexico. Their respective parents were also from Rancho San Nicolás and were campesinos, growing corn, chiles, and beans and raising some cows and goats.
Hilda's father had gone to work in the United States for a number of years, but that had been a long time ago. Since returning to Mexico, he had worked selling paletas [popsicles] from the back of his pick up truck in San Nicolás and the surrounding ranchos. Hilda worked with him selling paletas from the time she was seven years old until she went to the United States for the first time when she was twenty-two. She completed primary school when she was about fifteen, and had helped her mother around the house and worked with her father after that. Hilda was one of nine siblings, five brothers and four sisters. Everyone lived in Mexico and she was the only one who had ever migrated to the United States. All of them except her oldest sister, who lived in León, the state's largest city, lived in Rancho San Nicolás. Julián was one of ten siblings, eight brothers and two sisters. His father had died when he was young and all but one of his brothers had lived and worked in the United States at one time or another. Like Hilda, Julián had only completed primary school, dropping out when he was fourteen or fifteen, after attending intermittently from the age of ten. Upon dropping out of school, he went to work in the fields and tending goats, as well as doing short stints as a construction worker in León, biding his time until he would go to the United States like most young men from the rancho did. He would have to wait until he was twenty-one and his older brother, who had been living and working in the Dallas area, would pay for a coyote to take him north. Julián and Hilda had met in school but did not become romantically involved until shortly before he headed north for the first time in 1994.

**JULIÁN’S FIRST TRIP NORTH**

Julián had been able to go to school as long as he did because of the money his older brother Humberto had been sending home from Dallas, Texas, where he had been working. As soon as he quit school, Julián began to think about heading to the United States. A lot of his friends were going, as it was common for young men from the age of sixteen on to head north for the first time:

I was working at home and in the fields but I caught the bug [me entró la espinita] since other guys my age were talking about going to el otro lado. My older brother was sending money, but it was only enough for food. He didn’t send it for us to spend on just anything we wanted. As you get older you want to buy things, like nicer clothes, new pants and shoes, but you can’t afford it. You see other people coming back with nice clothes and all and so I decided to go, too.
Julián had to bide his time, however, since he didn’t have anyone willing
to pay for his trip north. He didn’t have any money of his own, not even
enough to get to the border, much less to get across it and travel into the
U.S. interior. It had been years since his older brother Humberto had been
back to San Nicolás. In Humberto’s mind, Julián was still just a youngster,
hardly ready to head north:

In order to be able to go you need to have people who will help
you. My brother was up there. He was there for around six years
without coming back. And when a person goes up there he thinks
that the people back here don’t grow. So I would say to my
mother, “Listen, tell my brother to help me.” Then when he
finally came back, I told him, “Listen, I want to go over there, too.”
By then he could see that I was pretty strong. He said he’d send
for me as soon as I turned twenty-one. But he warned me that I
would need to spend at least a year there, in order to pay all the
costs, that it wouldn’t work for me to go just for a couple of
months and want to go home.

So, finally, when Julián turned twenty-one, Humberto agreed to set him up
with a coyote to bring him to Dallas. Although Julián was beginning a
relationship with Hilda by then, his main motivation for going was
personal—providing for a wife and children was not yet on his mind. As it
turned out, he was able to build himself the house in which his family now
lived with the money he earned on that first two-year sojourn in the United
States.

My thinking at that time was to go and buy clothes and see what
it was like up there. People said that it was real nice and all. And
then, I’d see if I could make a bit of money to build a house back
here. And thanks to God, I was able to save the money to build
this house. And that’s what I did in those two years.

In September 1994, Humberto took his younger brother to a coyote near
San Nicolás that had been recommended by some friends who had crossed
with him previously. They agreed that Humberto would pay the coyote
$500 when he got Julián safely to Dallas. Julián traveled with the coyote to
Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. There they stocked up on provisions for the
hike they would make after crossing the river, which would take several
days. They bought flour tortillas, which would not crumble and get moldy
like corn tortillas would, as well as canned beans and tuna. They also
bought gallon jugs of water for the trail. Then the coyote took him to some
pateros. The pateros took Julián, his coyote and another dozen or so
migrants across the river in a launch. From there they began their march
through the South Texas brush to get around the immigration checkpoints
on the highways that led away from the border. Although Julián's coyote said they would only walk for three days, it turned out to be five, walking at night and resting during the day. Their food and water ran out on the third day, but they were able to refill their water jugs at *papalotes* [windmills with cattle troughs attached] they found along the trail. This water was not really fit for human consumption and could make you sick with diarrhea and vomiting, though this had never happened to Julián on this or other trips he had made. Julián said that, in his experiences, even "good" coyotes tended to lie a bit about how much walking their customers would have to do to get around the checkpoints:

> I believe most of them lie. They know that if they say you will walk less they can charge you more, since people think it'll be easier than it really is. And once you're out there, there's no way you're going to turn back. That's why I think most of them lie.

Fortunately, it wasn't as hot as it could have been at that time of year, especially walking at night, and Julián was young and in pretty good shape.

On the fifth day, Julián and the other members of his group came to a small town—he thought it might be Carrizo Springs, but wasn’t sure. The coyote told the group to wait for him in the brush while he went into town to pick up the car in which he would drive them to San Antonio. Because there were more of them than would fit in the car, he would make two trips. Fortunately, San Antonio was not too far away. The coyote drove Julián and several others to a house in San Antonio. From there he was driven on to Dallas, where he arrived in the middle of the night. He called his brother, who came to pick him up at the home of one of the coyote's collaborators. The brother arrived, paid the coyote his $500 and took Julián home. He had made it.

Julián was understandably exhausted from the trip and rested for several days after arriving. He was anxious to start working and making some money, though, and his brother and some of his friends from Guanajuato helped him find work at a factory that formed sheet metal for a variety of uses. In order to work there, his brother bought him a fake state I.D. card and a Social Security card at a flea market. Julián was paid $170 a week, working approximately forty hours. He lived with his brother and one of his older cousins, who had originally brought Humberto to Dallas and who was also Julián's *padrino* [godfather]. With this arrangement, Julián only had to pay fifty dollars room and board each week. Without such cheap food and housing Julián would not have been able to make a go of it in Dallas on his substandard wages. He didn't go out much and tried to limit his spending as much as possible. He was actually able to save a substantial
amount of what he earned, especially at the beginning, though it seemed to get harder to restrain himself from spending on things he wanted the longer he was there. Two years went by quickly:

Honestly, the time went by fast. I really liked it there, although I had my girlfriend at home and we would write letters to each other. She would always ask me to come home and I wouldn’t want to because I was happy there. A lot of people don’t want to go home because they’re out dancing and partying all the time, but I was never one of those people. I always just went back and forth between work and my house. On Sundays sometimes I’d go walking out to stores, since I still didn’t know how to drive. I was scared at first because people would tell me that if I went walking around the black people would beat me up or the migra would catch me. But then you gain more confidence that nothing’s going to happen to you. Even though I did hear that the migra was around, I was bored staying at home all day every Sunday. … After two years I decided to go back because I wasn’t able to stretch my money as far, I wasn’t sending as much home to my mother, and I wasn’t saving as much.

When Julián returned to San Nicolás at the end of 1995, he resumed his relationship with Hilda and set about building a house with the money he had saved. He knew how to build a cement block house from having worked construction in León a few years earlier and paid a friend to help him build it. It only took three months to build. Hilda moved in with him. But then, he was out of money and needed to head back to Texas to earn some more. He left again in April 1996 with the same coyote who had taken him two years earlier. The logistics of the trip were similar—travel to Nuevo Laredo, cross the river, hike through the brush for several days to get around the immigration checkpoints, and then drive to Dallas. This time, however, they got picked up by the Border Patrol several days into their hike through the brush:

I don’t remember very well, but I was with my brother and one of my cousins. I remember we were walking along some railroad tracks when we heard a bunch of dogs coming up behind us. The guy who was leading us said, “Here comes immigration,” and we looked down the tracks and we could see some lights that were moving. And he said, “That’s immigration coming. Run!” I remember it was around midnight and we started running. We kept running until we came to a barbed wire fence. We couldn’t hear the dogs anymore. We crossed the fence and the guide said, “We’ll stay here until dawn.” It was like five or six in the morning. We were all real tired from running and we all just fell down on the ground to sleep. When I woke up I saw the immigration agents climbing over the fence. My brother was next to me and I
said, “They’ve got us.” They shined a flashlight on us and I remember they had their pistols in their hands. They said for no one to move. We were lying on the ground and we sort of half sat up and were sitting there and they told us not to stand up. I remember this well because my brother was sort of squatting already and they said “We mean sitting on your butt.” Then one of them went over and pushed him so he sat back down. And that’s how they caught us and sent us back.

Julián and his companions did not finger their coyote to the Border Patrol agents who arrested them, even though the agents asked them which one was the coyote. Like other migrants I interviewed, Julián said that he and the other migrants had planned with the coyote ahead of time what they would do if they were caught:

**Julián:** The guide always tells you just before you cross the river, “If they catch us or anything, you just say that we’re all just friends. Don’t tell them who’s leading you.” And since everyone who leaves from here is thinking they’re going to need him again, they think that if they say he’s the one who’s bringing them he won’t want to take them again. That’s what they’ve always told me when I’ve gone.

**Spener:** So this is common and everyone agrees to it?

**Julián:** Right, everyone agrees. They say that sometimes immigration scares the kids who are going for the first time and they say who the guide is, but these cases are rare.

**Spener:** So normally they don’t get scared and they don’t identify the coyote. A lot of time in the newspaper the Border Patrol says that people don’t identify their coyote because their afraid of him. In your experience, has that been the case?

**Julián:** Well, in my case, if I identify him, we know each other and he lives near my ranch. I don’t know what might happen to me or my family. Any person from a town like mine wants to avoid trouble. I think to myself, well if I tell the immigration agent that he’s the one, then they’re going to pressure more to find out more about how I contracted him, where he lives and all that. And it’s just easier to say no, we’re all just friends.

**Spener:** But do you feel like telling immigration who it is when they catch you?

**Julián:** No, I never have.

**Spener:** So you weren’t mad at the coyote? You didn’t blame him?

**Julián:** It’s not his fault. I think that if I were a coyote I would really try to get people there because that’s how I’m going to make money. So they try to hide you and try to get you there because they make more money that way. If you don’t make it they don’t make any money and immigration isn’t going to give
them any money for giving people to them. So, maybe it’s their fault but they do as much as they can so you don’t get caught.

Back in Nuevo Laredo, Julián, his companions, and their coyote were all exhausted and their feet blistered from the days they’d spent walking before being caught. None of them felt up to another trek through the brush right away. They coyote suggested that they go back to Guanajuato to rest up before making another attempt to cross and they all agreed.

Julián could not stay long in San Nicolás. He was out of money and had no way to support himself. Moreover, his family needed his remittances to stay afloat and he was thinking about marrying Hilda, which also implied expenses. So, less than two months later he left for Texas again, this time with a different coyote from his area that had gained a reputation for success in getting through the Border Patrol’s defenses. The logistics were once more the same, but this time he and his companions did not get apprehended and he made it safely to Dallas. When he got there, he paid the coyote $700, lent by his brother, and went back to work at the sheet metal factory.

Julián earned a bit more money working at the factory this time around. Instead of $170, he started at $5.50 an hour and soon was making $6.00 an hour. Because he was on the official payroll, however, taxes were deducted from his paycheck. He lived at his padrino’s house again and kept his expenses low. He decided to go back home to San Nicolás in December of 1996, though, because he and Hilda missed each other so much. His padrino encouraged him to go home and either stay there permanently or bring Hilda to live with him in the United States:

This cousin who is also my padrino tells me that I need to bring [Hilda] there to live with me. Her mother is saying that she’s making herself sick, she misses me so much. She’s worried about her. And I ask him how I’m going to do that. So we start looking into how I might bring her. I asked him to help me. Then he also decided to go home with me. I don’t remember exactly what the deal was, if he was getting his papers or something, because everyone else in his family had gotten their papers but him. In any event we went back together in late December.

Hilda was in agreement to go with Julián to live in Dallas. She really wanted them to be together. “What I want is to be with you,” she told him. “I’ll go with you wherever you take me.” They got a civil marriage certificate but did not get married in the church before they left. Julián’s padrino contacted a friend who knew someone in Laredo who took people across the border into Texas. Julián got in touch with the Laredo contact
and agreed to meet him in a week. It was early February of 1997. This time they would cross the border in a very different way:

I remember we got to Laredo and my cousin’s friend took us to the person who was going to take us across. We got to his house in the morning and we spent the day there. Then in the evening they put some make-up on my wife and they did up my hair like a Chicano from over there. I asked them how we were going to cross. And they pulled out some little cards that showed that we were students, from the school over there. That we were going to pretend we were high school students. As we left they said that we should say at the first immigration checkpoint on the bridge that we were “American citizens.” So as we went across the bridge, there was a man driving, a lady next to him, and us in the backseat. The official looked at us and we just said “American citizens.” And that’s how we did it at the second checkpoint, too. And we made it with no problems.

After getting through the second immigration checkpoint, the coyotes dropped Julián and Hilda off at a highway rest-stop, where they were picked up by one of his cousins. The cousin paid the $1,200 they owed the coyotes and drove them to Dallas.

**LIVING IN DALLAS TOGETHER FOR THE FIRST TIME, 1997-2000**

Julián expected to go back to work at the metal-forming factory where he had last been employed, but when he went there, he found that they would not be able to take him back. While he was in Mexico, the government had begun to conduct audits of company employees’ Social Security records. His old supervisor told him he would be happy to have him come back to the factory, but he would have to have a valid Social Security number to give him. He advised Julián to get his papers in order and come back when they were. This, of course, was not possible for Julián to do, so he had to find work elsewhere. He found it in las yardas, i.e., doing yard work with a landscaping company for a while. This work did not pay well, however, and later on a cousin of his invited him to work with his employer, a construction contractor that ran heavy machinery—bulldozers, backhoes, and the like. By this time, Julián had gotten his driver’s license and was thus qualified to be trained in operating such equipment. This type of construction work was reliable and paid fairly well. He was soon making ten dollars an hour, though taxes and other deductions were taken from his check.

Hilda got her first job working in a textile factory. She didn’t know when she started to work there that she was already pregnant with her first child. The work there was strenuous and her boss was not willing to make special
accommodations for her in terms of the tasks she was expected to carry out. She was having bouts of morning sickness and was very tired. With Julián’s support, she decided to quit the job soon after she started it. It was hard for them to make ends meet. They were living in their own apartment and could not make the rent on Julián’s earnings alone. They brought in a roommate to help defray their rent expenses. They also had payments to make on a used pick-up truck they bought to get around. Hilda got a job working at a Mexican restaurant a couple of months after their daughter was born, earning five dollars an hour. She arranged for one of Julián’s cousins to babysit for them while she worked. She was hired to be a dishwasher, but the owner had her do a bit of everything—cleaning the bathrooms, chopping vegetables, making tortillas, and tending the plants on the grounds. The owner, who was also Mexican, was quite bossy and exploitative. She knew that Hilda didn’t have papers and wielded that power over her.

She humiliated me a lot. And at the end she didn’t pay me my complete check. She didn’t pay me for all the hours I worked. I would tell her, “Señora, I worked more hours than this.” Because I was keeping track of how many hours I worked. She said, “Well, if you don’t like it, don’t come back.” She knew that I needed the job because, like I told you, we couldn’t make it on my husband’s paycheck. We had to pay the rent, the truck payments, diapers, formula for my little girl, and we wanted to save up some money to make a trip home. So I had to put up with it. Once I fell real hard at work because she was hurrying me to finish the dishes so she could close up. She said, “If you don’t get those dishes done, I’ll lock you up in here tonight. I have to leave.” And I said, “Sí, señora,” but I slipped and fell because they had just mopped and the floor was wet. I hurt my back and my husband had to come get me and take me to a lady who massaged it to help me with the pain. I felt a little better and was able to go back to work. I told my boss that I had really hurt my back and needed to go to the hospital. And she said, “Don’t even think about going to the hospital because I’m not paying for it.” If you want to go to that señora and have her fix you up, fine. But if you go to the hospital you’ll have to pay for it yourself. You won’t get a cent from me.” Thank goodness the lady was able to help me and I got better. That way we were able to save up some money and return home.

Hilda and Julián spent three years in Dallas on their first sojourn to live and work in the United States. They had worked hard but had barely been able to make a go of it economically. After three years away from the rest of their families, they were ready to go home for a visit. The pressure for them
to return became acute, however, because of an ultimatum that Hilda’s family made to her:

I left home without ever getting married in the church. My parents are very Catholic and once when I called home, my mother said “Your father says that unless you come home and get married you’re not his daughter any more.” And I felt really bad and I said to my husband, “Yes, let’s go there and get married because I feel real bad that my father would say that about me, that I’m not his daughter anymore.” And Julián said, “Fine, we’ll have to save up some money to do it.”

CROSSING TOGETHER THROUGH JUÁREZ, JANUARY 2000

After their wedding, Hilda and Julián stayed in San Nicolás for another couple of months. During this time, they made arrangements with a coyote who lived nearby in San Felipe, Guanajuato to take all three members of the family to Dallas via the border city of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. They chose this coyote for two reasons. First, he came well-recommended and was married to a woman who was one of Hilda’s father’s cousins, giving them more confidence that he would keep the promises he made to them. Second, their crossing strategy with him did not involve any trekking through the desert. He would take them walking across the international bridge and then put them on a plane to Dallas from the El Paso, Texas airport, just across the border. Their baby daughter, who was one at the time, could go across the international bridge with no problem because she was a U.S. citizen by birth. The coyote, who had papers and maintained residences both in San Felipe and in the Dallas area, crossed his customers through Ciudad Juárez instead of Nuevo Laredo or Piedras Negras, other popular crossing spots for Guanajuato migrants, because his wife was from that city and his mother-in-law continued to live there and collaborated with him. He would charge them a total of $2,000, requiring $1,000 up front and the remainder to be paid upon their arrival in Dallas. They would pay him from a combination of their personal savings and loans from family members and friends in Dallas. It seemed like a good arrangement but the trip would turn into a terrible ordeal.

Hilda, Julián and their daughter agreed to meet the coyote in San Felipe one day in March. He drove them to Ciudad Juárez in his pick up truck and dropped them off at a modest hotel. He said he would come for them in the morning to take them across the bridge. He arrived early the next morning. He brought clothes for them and dressed them up to look like U.S.-born Mexican Americans. Hilda thought he made them look like cholas, a pejorative term in Mexican Spanish referring to Mexican American gang-
members and their distinctive style of dress. He then took Hilda and Julián with him to the international bridge connecting Ciudad Juárez with El Paso, Texas, leaving their daughter with his mother-in-law. As they approached the bridge, the coyote instructed them to walk behind him and tell the U.S. immigration inspector that they were “American citizens.” He did not provide them with any documents nor did he appear to have any relationship with the inspectors on the bridge. When Hilda and Julián went through the checkpoint on the bridge, they told the inspector they were U.S. citizens and they were waived through. To Hilda it seemed that it was pura suerte—just lucky—that they were allowed to pass. Once they were across the bridge, the coyote loaded them into a pick-up truck and drove them to a house where they waited while he went back to Juárez and pick up their daughter. When he returned with the baby he told them that he had gotten their plane tickets and they would head straight to the airport.

At the airport, Hilda carried their daughter in her arms and Julián carried their luggage. The coyote walked ahead of them, carrying their tickets. He said he would give them the tickets just before they boarded the plane. As they were walking behind the coyote in the airport, a couple of Border Patrol agents gestured to them to stop and demanded to see their immigration papers. Of course they did not have any and the coyote kept walking. They were arrested by the agents and taken to the INS detention center next to the downtown bridge that they had just walked across a couple of hours earlier. They were held there all morning, with their baby crying constantly because she was hungry and they had not had anything to eat before leaving the hotel in Ciudad Juárez. The agents eventually brought some crackers for her, which she ate quickly and fell asleep. They also brought “voluntary return” papers for Hilda and Julián to sign, which waived their right to a formal deportation hearing before an immigration judge. The agents also insisted that their daughter “sign” her paper by putting her fingerprint on it. The agents then released the family and let them walk back across the bridge into Juárez. As they were walking across the bridge, one of the agents warned them not to come back because if they got caught again, they would take their baby away from them. This, of course, was a phony threat, but Hilda said that the agents seemed to enjoy “humiliating” Mexicans like them.

Back on the street in Ciudad Juárez, Hilda and Julián debated what they should do. They had almost no money and nowhere to stay. Julián was in favor of going back to San Nicolás to regroup and come up with a new plan, but Hilda thought they should keep trying to cross since they were already at the border. Moreover, she said, they had no money to live on in San
Nicolás and already had debts to pay to people there. After discussing it for a bit, they decided to retrace their steps to the coyote's mother-in-law’s house. The coyote seemed to be expecting them when they arrived. He told them he was sorry about what had happened and that he would keep trying until they got across successfully. “He told us not to worry,” Hilda said. “He would figure out a way to get us across. ‘I’m going to get you some fake papers so you can get across. These papers will cost me five hundred dollars each, but I’m going to get them for you.’ And he got them for us.”

The next day the man’s mother-in-law dressed them up as “cholos” again and they walked across the same bridge into El Paso. This time one of the immigration agents recognized them from the day before and checked their papers closely and took their fingerprints. When the prints did not match the prints embedded in the documents they were carrying, the agents demanded to know who had sold them the papers. Hilda and Julián insisted that no one had sold them the papers but rather that they had been given them. After an intensive interrogation, the agents “voluntarily returned” them to Mexico again. Once more, they walked back to the coyote’s mother-in-law’s house to decide what they would do next. It was late at night by then and the house was a long ways from downtown, up on the mountain. They had no money for a taxi and no way of calling the coyote. “We walked up there and there were a bunch of druggies [mariguanos] along the way, smoking and fighting with each other. My husband and I were just praying they wouldn’t do anything to us.” When they got to the house, the coyote was waiting for them. Again, he told them, “Don’t be discouraged. We’ll try again. My cuñado [brother-in-law] also takes people across, but walking. He has a trip leaving tomorrow.”

The next day the coyote from San Felipe took Hilda and Julián to see his cuñado. They found out that, in fact, he would be leading a group of nineteen people across the river that night, leaving at 9:00 PM. The cuñado said that they would have to walk across the border, but Julián and Hilda said it didn’t matter, that they just needed to make it to Dallas. They left their daughter with the San Felipe coyote and his mother-in-law, who would bring her across the bridge to meet them after they made it. This time the crossing would be extremely miserable and would result in arrest on the outskirts of Dallas.

They left that night at nine. It was a cold late winter-early spring desert night. The coyotes drove them in pick up trucks to the mountains on the edge of town. From there, they ran downhill until they approached a house near the river. A pack of dogs came out from the house and ran towards them barking and would not let them continue on towards the river. The
A coyote approached the house and spoke with the owner, he paid the owner some money, who then came out and tied up the dogs. The coyote and the migrants then waded across the river, which was quite shallow at that point. On the far side of the river they came to the cement-lined American Canal that both served for irrigation and immigration control purposes. There they lay down on the ground in silence upon seeing a Border Patrol agent walking nearby along the road scanning the terrain with his flashlight. When the agent passed without seeing them, the coyotes gave the go ahead for them to cross the canal. The water in the canal was swift and deep and many migrants had drowned in it over the years. Julián took Hilda’s hand but she was still nearly swept away. Since she didn’t know how to swim she was quite sure she would have drowned if another man who had already made it across had not given Julián help in pulling her from the water.

Once they all crossed the canal, they had to cross the highway that also ran parallel to the river in El Paso. They did not dare climb up the embankment to the road, however, for fear that the Border Patrol would spot them. Instead, they all crawled into a culvert under the highway that was clogged with garbage and debris. By the time they negotiated their way through the culvert it was three in the morning. There they waited for one of the coyotes to come pick them up in a truck to continue their journey. They were all wet and it was freezing cold that night. “We were all shivering,” Hilda said. I couldn’t even feel my feet. They were frozen!” Their ride did not materialize, however, and shortly before dawn the coyote who was leading them ventured out to find out what had happened to the driver. They rest of them did not dare leave the culvert, for they could hear the Border Patrol’s dogs outside along the road:

The person that was supposed to pick us up didn’t show up. The coyote went to find out what happened. We couldn’t make any noise or anything because immigration was out there. We could hear their dogs out there. There we were. We hadn’t eaten anything and we are all soaking wet. We were shivering, just stiff with cold. Finally at about five in the afternoon a van came for us and picked us up.

They drove for several hours towards Dallas. Hilda and Julián didn’t know exactly what route they took, but they did not have to get out and walk around any immigration checkpoints on the highway. Late in the evening they arrived at a house near Dallas. An Anglo, English-speaking woman lived there. They had several rooms for the migrants to stay in. The woman and the coyotes told the migrants to shower, which they did.
Unfortunately, they did not have any clean, dry clothes to change into after they bathed. The woman tied a big black dog to each door to keep the migrants from attempting to leave:

“They tied a dog at each door. Some big black dogs. They put the dogs there so we couldn’t leave. People were saying things like, “We’re not far from where I’m going. I know how to get there walking.” But the lady said, “You aren’t going to leave here until they bring me the money for you.” So people started calling people to bring the money and come pick them up.

People were still bathing and calling their friends and relatives to come get them when immigration agents raided the house:

“That was what was going on when suddenly police were everywhere. They broke down the doors and sprayed the dogs with something that subdued them. And these big policeman came in with their pistols drawn and pointed them at us. A man was in the shower and they pulled him out, thinking he was the coyote. They shouted for him to open the door but he didn’t want to because he was naked, not because he didn’t want to open the door. The agents thought that he was the coyote and that he was hiding in there. So they broke down the door to the bathroom and pulled him out by his hair and threw him on the floor and kicked him around. The man was laying there naked! Then they got the man up and handcuffed him and shackled his feet. Then they handcuffed all of us and threw us into a couple of vans. They drove us to the immigration office and unloaded us off the van. They tied our hands and feet to some little benches and kept us chained there all night. We couldn’t sleep because we were sitting there chained to the bench. We hadn’t eaten and we kept asking them to please get us some water because we were thirsty. They finally brought us a glass of water and a flour burrito. We were there for two days, with me crying all the time for my daughter, because I had left her in Juárez. Finally they put us all on a big plane with a bunch of other people. They weren’t deporting just us, they were deporting a whole lot of people. The plane was loaded full of children, some of them newborns. And they were all in shackles, too, like the adults.

Hilda told me there must have been at least two hundred people on the plane, including some Central Americans in addition to her fellow Mexicans. They were flown to Ciudad Juárez. When they got off the plane that night, they were surrounded by Mexican police and their dogs, just as they had been on the U.S. side. In addition, she arrived back in Mexico barefoot:

“I was barefoot because they had taken my shoes and they got lost somewhere. I don’t know where they put them. They took all of
our shoes and we were all barefoot. Before we got on the plane immigration made us take off our clothes. They took off our blouses, everything to make sure we weren’t carrying—I don’t know what!

Hilda said she thought that the coyote that was with them when the raid occurred must have had some kind of deal worked out with the immigration agents since he did not seem to have been detained. She and Julián never saw him again. In spite of the ordeal they had been through, Hilda was surprisingly complimentary of the treatment they had received from these coyotes, as well as the other migrants who traveled with them:

No, they acted right by us. Like when we were in the truck, they stopped to buy us chips and soda. ... I stuck by my husband the whole time, since I was the only woman out of twenty people. But all the men behaved themselves. They didn’t say anything untoward [no decían groserías] and they acted right by me.

Hilda and Julián went back to their hometown coyote’s residence in Ciudad Juárez to reunite with their daughter. He already knew what had happened to them since he had been in cell phone communication with his cuñado. This time he had another plan for getting them across: Another of his cuñados had a contact inside the U.S. consulate in Juárez who sold visas. It would take a couple of weeks to get them, but they would be real, valid visas issued to Hilda and Julián. The coyote felt responsible for all the bad luck and trouble that had befallen their family. Since their money had run out, he offered to let them stay with him in his in-laws house while they waited for their visas to come through. It took longer than expected, though: They stayed there a full month. It was not a wholesome scene. Their coyote’s cuñados, although they did not live there, came in and out regularly. They smoked marijuana and injected other drugs in the house. “It was really awful, really sad there,” Hilda said. The mother-in-law fed them though, mostly eggs, tortillas, and potatoes, and gave them their own room to stay in. Aside from the drug use by the woman’s sons, they were treated respectfully and given what they needed to get by.

Finally, the papers—new laser visas—came through. To make sure they would pass inspection, Julián walked across the bridge into El Paso alone. He showed the papers to the immigration inspector, who allowed him to enter the United States. He walked back across the bridge into Ciudad Juárez and reported the good news to Hilda and their coyote. The next day the whole family crossed the bridge with the coyote in his truck. The immigration inspectors checked their papers against the records in their computers and allowed them to pass. The coyote drove them all the way to
Dallas in his truck. In spite of all their travails, Hilda and Julián felt that their coyote had treated them well, doing everything he could to get them to Dallas. “Those papers cost him a lot of money,” Hilda told me. “He paid more for them than he charged us. He stayed in Juárez the whole time until we made it. Remember, he was related to my father. We had a family relationship with him, too.” Perhaps in recognition of the repeated ordeals they had been through, the coyote never charged them the second installment of what they had agreed to pay him. Grateful as they may have been to have finally made it with this coyote’s help, they never communicated with him again and didn’t know if he was still in business.

The coyote dropped them off in Dallas at the house of a friend of Julián’s, but the friend was not there. According to Hilda, he was in Mexico for a visit. It was pouring down rain, they had not eaten, and they only had two dollars between them, a one dollar bill and four quarters. They found a store to buy some bread and bought a soda from a vending machine:

It was just raining and raining. My husband said, “Let’s go and buy a bolillo [a type of Mexican baguette]. He had two dollars, one bill and four quarters. There was a soda machine there. We decided to buy a soda to wash down the bread, since we didn’t have any more money. I put the quarters in the machine and a whole bunch of quarters poured out, like five dollars worth. My husband said you never expect God to help you, but we didn’t have a cent. Our baby’s diapers were soaking wet and we didn’t have any to change her into. With that five dollars we bought some more soda and some diapers. We waited around until it stopped raining and walked over to the place where a couple of my husband’s cousins lived. They invited us to stay with them for a while.

LIVING IN DALLAS TOGETHER FOR THE SECOND TIME, 2000-2003

The travails that Hilda and Julián had gone through to make it to Dallas at the beginning of 2000 presaged the difficulties they would encounter living there on their second sojourn. Julián did not find work right away when they returned, and then when he did it was working for low pay in las yardas again. Hilda was obliged to go back to work at the Mexican restaurant, whose owner she so despised. She worked at night and left the baby with Julián, getting home around midnight. Her boss was as overbearing and cruel as ever. When Julián got a better job running construction equipment again, she quit. It wasn’t long, however, before she had to find waged work again. Julián’s cousins’ house was filling up as more of their siblings arrived from Mexico to live there. Julián and Hilda decided
it was time for them to move out and find their own apartment, which they did, a tiny studio for which they paid about three hundred dollars a month.

Hilda got a job with a crew that cleaned schools at night. She started at 8:00 PM and worked into the wee hours. Sometimes Julián did not get home from his construction job until after Hilda had to leave for work, since his construction sites were sometimes far away and evening rush hour traffic in Dallas-Fort Worth could be dreadful. On these occasions, Hilda would leave the baby in her crib with the TV on and lock the door on the way out. She wasn’t usually home alone for more than a few minutes, but Hilda was nonetheless unhappy about the arrangement. She would get home in the middle of the night, exhausted—they worked her hard at the cleaning job, too—and her little girl, now two years old, would wake up and want to play. After about a month of this, Hilda quit the cleaning job. By this time, she was pregnant with her son. Because they needed the money, she found another cleaning job, this time working in a private hospital. One of the benefits of working there was she would get free prenatal care and be able to give birth at the hospital. She presented the Social Security card and state I.D. she had bought on her first sojourn as the work documents the hospital required. Around that time federal authorities conducted the same type of audit of Social Security numbers at the hospital as they had at the factory where Julián used to work. The hospital was obliged to fire about a hundred Mexican workers, including Hilda. She not only lost her job but also access to the prenatal care and right to give birth at the hospital. She ultimately gave birth to her son in one of Dallas’ public hospitals, where, she said, nearly all the patients were Mexican.

Hilda did not go back to waged work after her son was born, opting instead to stay home with both her children. She got pregnant again not long after her son was born and gave birth to a second daughter in early 2003. After the terrorist attacks in Washington and New York in September 2001, the construction company where Julián worked went bankrupt and he was forced to go back to yard work for a time, which paid considerably worse. Without Hilda working, they couldn’t really make ends meet. They didn’t have enough beds or clothes for everyone in the family. They scavenged dumpsters for old mattresses. Hilda applied for food stamps, as well as food from the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, but her immigration status and inability to understand English over the phone stymied her efforts. She stayed indoors all day with her children while Julián worked. The neighborhood was not very safe, she didn’t drive, and she didn’t have enough money to take her family elsewhere to do things. Although Hilda was grateful and happy that Julián and the kids were all
together, things were not going well for them economically, nor were she and the kids happy. Although it was a wrenching decision, Hilda decided, and Julián concurred, that everyone would be better off if she took the kids back to San Nicolás to live:

I was crying because I wanted to go home. I was happy being with my husband, but I had to do it for my kids. It pained me to see them just looking out the windows like they were in jail, all locked up there. And then they were getting sick all the time, too. So I said to my husband, it would be better if I went back. It was June. My littlest one was only three months old. The three of us got on the bus and rode to San Felipe, where my suegra [mother-in-law] was waiting for us. My husband stayed on in Dallas until December. We didn’t have any money. He said he’d be able to save up some money after we left. With all of us there we couldn’t save at all. The rent would come due, and then we had to buy diapers—and we had two kids in diapers then. We just couldn’t make it. ... I told my husband, I’ve been trying so hard, but I just can’t make it here with my kids. I’m suffering a lot, I told him. I’m locked up in a little room with them all day. Back home I have my house, my furniture, and my family. I love my husband and now I miss him but I also love my kids and I’d do anything for them. That’s why I decided to go back.

Another reason Hilda wanted to return, Julián later told me, was that her father had been sick and she wanted to be in San Nicolás to help him and her mother if he took a turn for the worse at any point. So, Hilda and the children returned to San Nicolás in June 2003. Julián stayed in Dallas through the end of the year, trying to save up some more money and arrange to bring a pick-up truck back with him that the family could use at home in Mexico.

**JULIÁN’S MOST RECENT TRIP TO THE UNITED STATES**

Before Julián went back to San Nicolás in December of 2003 he was trying to get the title to a pick up truck he had bought straightened out so he could bring it back with him legally. Having a truck in San Nicolás was imperative, given its isolation and lack of adequate public transportation in the area. He had owned a 1995 pick-up free and clear, but he would have had to pay a large amount in import taxes to bring it back to Mexico with him, since it was still less than ten years old. To get around that problem, he sold his 1995 truck and bought a 1988 pick-up that he could take to Mexico without paying so much in taxes. Unfortunately, he was not able to get free title to the new vehicle in time for him to get home to his family for the Christmas holidays and he left taking care of the matter to the cousin to whom he had sold the 1995 vehicle and who had not yet paid him. The idea
was that as soon as the title came through, the cousin would arrange for someone to drive the truck to Julián in San Nicolás and pay for it out of the money he owed him. Months passed and the vehicle never came. Julián called his cousin repeatedly, who claimed that he had never gotten the title to the truck from the lot where Julián had bought it. Aside from the inconvenience of not having a truck to drive in San Nicolás, Julián could not avail himself of what waged work was available in the area. Finally, in August 2004, he decided he needed to go back to Dallas to get the truck or, if that was not possible, earn some money to buy another one.

To get back to Dallas, Julián contacted a coyote who operated out of Rancho El Alto [a pseudonym], just a few kilometers away from San Nicolás. He went to this coyote based on the recommendations of some friends who had crossed with him recently. He had a good reputation for success. Rather than borrow money from friends and relatives to pay the coyote, Julián worked out a deal with his cousin that he could cancel the debt to Julián for the pick-up truck he had bought by paying Julián’s coyote when he arrived in Dallas. The cost for this trip would be $1,400, considerably more than the last time Julián had traveled with a coyote several years earlier. The logistics for this trip were similar to those of his first cross-border trips a decade earlier. Julián took the bus to Nuevo Laredo with the coyote and several other men from his and neighboring ranchos. They waded across the river near Nuevo Laredo and began a four day march through the sweltering brush to get around the immigration checkpoints on the highways leading away from Laredo.

Although they did most of their walking at night, when it was cooler, it was still an extremely difficult trip. Julián handled it well, under the circumstances, for he had been playing baseball a lot during his last few months in San Nicolás and was in better shape than he had been in a while. As was typically the case on treks like these, the water they were carrying with them ran out after the second day. They refilled their water jugs from cattle troughs the coyotes located along the route. This water was not really fit for human consumption, but, as Julián said, they were so thirsty they knew they had to drink it. Although Julián did not get sick from the water, a man in his forties who was making the trip with his teenaged son did. The man was already having a hard time keeping up. He was tired and his feet were covered with blisters. Then, late on the third day, he began to vomit the water they had drunk. The coyote tried to encourage the man to keep going:

The reaction of the coyote was to try to encourage him, keep his spirits up. He told him not to drink so much water and that he
should try to eat a little more to have the energy to get there. He really couldn’t eat much, though. On the last day, we walked during the daytime. They usually walked you at night. [The coyote] told us that we had to get to where they were going to pick us up. And by about noon, this man couldn’t carry his mochila [knapsack] anymore. He wanted to leave it behind, but he needed the clothes when he got where he was going. I took his pack for a couple of hours and then another person took it. ... The rest of us tried to help him. The coyote had worked it out with the person who was going to pick us up that we’d get there by a certain time. So he tries to pressure you so you get there by then. When the man couldn’t keep up he told us to go on, but we let him rest for a while to get his spirits up. And he made it walking on his own. We were all really tired but we held on and made it there in time.

It was a good thing that the man was able to keep going. Julián said he and others would have carried them on their shoulders if they’d had to, but if they had left him behind he almost surely would have died. “We were out in the middle of the monte,” he said. “It would have been hard for anyone to find him out there.”

One of the coyote’s collaborators picked up Julián and the other migrants with his car at the edge of the monte at about four in the afternoon. He drove them to a house near San Antonio, where they arrived at about six. From there, the coyote called to another collaborator in Dallas, who then drove to San Antonio to pick up Julián and the others that were headed to that city. They also called Julián’s cousin to let him know that he had made it and that they needed the money he had agreed to pay. Much to Julián’s dismay, his cousin was several hundred dollars short of the $1,400 they coyotes expected. Fortunately, Julián was able to negotiate a deal with his coyote from El Alto whereby his cousin could give the money he had to the driver when they arrived in Dallas. Julián would pay off the rest of what he owed as he was able once he started working. He would send the money home to Hilda in San Nicolás and she would pay the coyote, who lived nearby. And that’s how it worked. Upon arriving in Dallas in the middle of the night, Julián’s cousin met him and the driver at an agreed upon spot. His cousin paid the driver the money he had, the driver said good-bye and left, and the cousin drove Julián back to his house.

The next day, Julián went to work as a “yard man,” cutting grass, blowing leaves, trimming bushes, and weeding gardens. Within a couple of months, though, he was back at work in construction, earning ten dollars an hour as an operator of heavy machinery. He began sending money home to Hilda, who paid off the coyote. He was finally able to get the title to the truck he
had bought, after battling the owners of the lot who had sold it to him. It was terribly important for Hilda and him to have a car in San Nicolás, especially for Hilda when he was not there. She explained the situation as follows:

I don’t drive but he wants me to learn in case he has to go back north. So I don’t suffer so much here. Right now I have to go everywhere by bus. To get groceries, for example. And it’s a real hassle [se batalla mucho]. And if my kids get sick, I have to be able to get them to the doctor. That’s why our dream is for my husband to bring a pick-up back with him.

Julián worked through the end of 2004 and kept on until October 2005. Hilda missed him terribly. He told her he would get the money together to have her come back with the kids, but their oldest daughter, who was in school by then, didn’t want to go back to Texas:

I missed my husband terribly after he went back to Dallas. It made me sick. He said, “You know what? I’m going to get the money together to bring you back. Bring the kids. But my older daughter refused to go.

“You go, mamá. I’m not going.”

“Why not, hija?”

“No, mamá, up there you’ve got us locked up inside all the time. There are no parties or anything up there.”

She likes her freedom. You can see how they run around here. It’s not like that up there. Up there they’re always stuck inside watching television from the time they wake up till the time they go to sleep.

Julián would have liked to return home earlier, but one of his aunts in San Nicolás required surgery to remove a cancerous tumor from her stomach, and he was called upon to help defray the costs (his brother José had also put up money for her medical care). He also wanted to save up as much as possible so he would not have to go back to the United States for at least another year. When I interviewed him in January 2006 had the following to say:

God willing, I’d like to spend this year with my family, if I can find work here. I don’t know about next year. Hopefully I can get a stable job here. If not, I’ll go again. Right now my kids miss me.

If I go out anywhere, my wife tells me they ask her what time I’m coming home, how many days I’m going to be away. So like I say, I’d like to try not to have to go back up there again.

One thing they did quietly, without telling either set of parents, was arrange for Hilda to get a tubal ligation so they would not have any more children. They felt that three children were enough and realized it would only
complicate their situation further if they had any more. She was happy with her kids and was glad to see them happy to be living back in San Nicolás.

Fortunately, at the time I interviewed him, Julián had gotten work building a bridge across the river that ran by San Nicolás. This was providing him with some badly needed waged income. When the project was finished, he thought he might look for construction work in León or in Querétaro. He wasn’t very excited about the idea, though, because it meant being away from home for at least a week at a time. In addition, the income he could earn working in construction in Mexico was enough to live on only if his family incurred no extraordinary expenses. “I can make enough for us to live on,” he said, “but if someone gets sick you have to go into debt. If you have to go into debt, then it’s difficult to repay that money here. So that’s when you start thinking about going up there [to the United States] to pay off your debts.”

Julián actually preferred living and working in Dallas to living in San Nicolás. In spite of all the difficulties she had had as a wife and mother in the Dallas area, Hilda was restless in San Nicolás and also would not be averse to going back. Both of them agreed, however, that they would not want to go back until after their kids were bigger and had finished school in Mexico, even though all three were U.S. citizens by birth:

We’re going to try to give our children their schooling here. And then when they’re mature enough to know right from wrong, we can go back. Because I’ve seen how the kids are up there, the teenagers. I see how the kids carry on up there and that’s why I want my kids to go to school here. Maybe the schools are not as good here, but I don’t like the way schools are up there. I like the fact that they learn English, but I don’t like the way the kids treat each other. … I have friends who’ve told me about how kids at school get forced into drugs and things. If we keep them here while they’re small, we won’t have any problems like that. If we go up there and they’re bigger we’ve got a better chance since they can tell you if anyone is giving them problems and try to help them deal with it. That’s why my wife and I want them to study here, at least through the eighth grade. Then we can decide whether we all want to go back up there.

JULIÁN’S REFLECTIONS ON COYOTAJE AND THE DANGERS OF CLANDESTINE BORDER CROSSING

In addition to speaking with Hilda and Julián about the particulars of their various cross-border trips and their sojourns living and working in Texas, I spoke at length with Julián about his opinions about coyotaje as a strategy for getting to the United States. Julián’s reflections about coyotaje
can be organized into three general categories: 1) his characterization of the social origins, trustworthiness, and quality of service provided by the coyotes he had dealt with directly or whose reputations he knew from the experiences of other migrants who lived in his community; 2) his assessment of the level of risk of making coyote-assisted clandestine border crossings and who should be held accountable when migrants suffer abandonment and even death on the trail; and 3) the amount of money migrants had to pay to coyotes to get to their destinations in the United States. In addition, Julián had opinions about the possibility of participating in an expanded guest-worker program that might permit him of future opportunities to labor in the United States as a legally-contracted, temporary or seasonal guest worker. Not surprisingly, Julián viewed participation in such a program as an attractive alternative to coyotaje as a strategy for pursuing employment opportunities north of the border.

**Characterization of coyotes and their relations with migrants**

For Julián, the line that distinguished coyotes from their customers in his community in rural Guanajuato was a blurred one. From his point of view, coyotes and the other members of his community were cut from the same cloth. Julián's assessment coincided with that of migrants I interviewed in Monterrey, Nuevo León who regarded their coyotes as being the local migrants that best “knew the way” to get across the border:

*Spener:* What opinion do you have of the persons that have taken you across? They say lots of bad things about coyotes in the press in the United States. In your view, what are they like? Are they respectable people? So-so people [*gente regular*]? Bad people? How do you see them?

*Julián:* I think they're people like us. They try to earn a little more money without having to fight so hard for it. I put myself in their place and I think if I were them, well, I'd also try to take people across, since if I cross them and they pay me when I get there, I'll be able to save up a lot of money working like that. ...  

*Spener:* And are these people, shall we say, "professionals"? In other words, is this the only thing they do for a living or do they work over there [in the United States] or back here [in Guanajuato] when they're not taking people?

*Julián:* Most of the ones I've known, they start out the same as us. Somebody takes them first. They work over there [in the United States] but from going back and forth so many times, they memorize the route [*se empiezan a grabar el camino*]. Then they start taking companions with them without charging them, since they're going anyway. Then they decide to do it for a living.

*Spener:* So, they're normal people? They're not, like hoodlums [*no son así como cholos gente así mala onda*]?
Julián: No, I believe that they're people like us.
Spener: The times that you've crossed, have they acted right?
Have you seen any abuses? Do they carry pistols, threaten anyone, that type of thing?
Julián: No, not the persons that I've gone with.
Spener: So they've acted right by you?
Julián: They've conducted themselves just like they were one of us [se han portado, pues, como cualquier compañero].

Although Julián and his family members and friends in San Nicolás were perfectly willing to talk with me about their experiences traveling with coyotes and share with me their opinions of them, I was not able to interview any of the local coyotes directly, in spite of my efforts to contact them. Julián was not surprised by this. “No,” he said, “they wouldn't talk with you because they don't know you.” In other words, they were suspicious of me as an obvious outsider to the community and someone who might even work for the U.S. government. I asked him, though, how coyotes knew whether it was safe to talk with fellow Mexicans about what they did for a living and how they went about providing their services to migrants. I wanted to know how they knew who was really a potential client and who might want to get information from them for other purposes. Julián explained to me that the coyotes were somewhat protected from exposure because of the system of word-of-mouth recommendations they used to get customers:

The people they don't know come to them through somebody they do know. It's like a link between people who know one another. You know me, I know another guy, and the other guy knows someone else. So that other guy doesn't know you but he comes to you through this link and says so-and-so sent me. So, they do work with people they don't know but they come to them through somebody they do know. Then they'll tell you how everything works.

In addition to protecting themselves from exposure to the authorities, Julián explained to me that the coyotes had additional reasons to prefer working with customers who had been recommended to them:

Julián: The customer asks them how much it's going to cost and how much he'll have to walk, and when he'll have to pay. And they tell him this number of days and all that. But then if they know you well, like on this last occasion with me, we didn't speak with one another but we knew each other by sight, so when I tell him I don't have enough money he said, we could work something out. He could wait for me to pay him later, you know? And with other persons he didn't know, they demand the money right now. They'd better have the money as soon as they get
there since they don’t know them and they know there are a lot of people out there who can’t pay. ... I’ve heard of cases where they won’t let people go until they’ve paid a certain amount. But these are people that they are more mistrustful of [que les tienen un poco más desconfianza].

Spener: So, they don’t negotiate so much with people they don’t know?
Julián: No, because they want to choose people that pay like they say. I haven’t seen it myself, but they say that when they get there a lot of people don’t pay or don’t want to pay.

Julián said he had heard about coyotes elsewhere committing many abuses against their customers but had not had any problems himself or heard about any local coyotes doing such things to people from around San Nicolás. He explained that the in-group system of word-of-mouth recommendations protected both migrants and coyotes alike, at least to a certain extent:

Julián: In any event you try to go with people you already know for the same reason that if they know you they have more hope that someone will be waiting for you with some money. When I went with that first coyote, I didn’t know him, but I went with him because I knew that I had all the money I needed waiting for me once I got there.

Spener: So, it was a good deal for him to work with you.
Julián: Right. It was good for him because I had all my money ready over there. I believe that anyone who is a pollero11 likes working with people they know have their money lined up. They won’t have to wait at all. And if they know the person, they’re willing to take more of a chance.

In spite of the fact that both migrants and their local coyotes in rural Guanajuato were well-known to one another and had a long history of more-or-less mutually-beneficial collaboration, tragedies occasionally befell migrants from the San Nicolás area as they travelled to the United States with their coyotes. Such a tragedy had recently befallen a man from a neighboring town and Julián offered his surprising assessment of who was responsible for what had happened.

Abandonment and death on the trail

Julián’s brother José had told me that the coyotes from El Alto had recently left behind a man on the trail who was traveling with them. The man had died from heat and dehydration. I asked Julián if he had heard about this incident and what he thought about it. I was surprised that he did not blame the coyotes for what had happened to the man. As can be seen in the
transcript below, Julián had thought about this issue and had some specific reasons as to why he did not think the coyotes were to blame:

Spener: Your brother was telling me last night that word was going around that some coyotes [from around here] had left somebody behind on the trail not too long ago. Did you hear that, too?

Julián: Yes, I heard about that when I was up north.

Spener: Where?

Julián: I was in Dallas when I found out about that, but I didn't believe that they would have left him behind. It was the coyote that I crossed with the last time I went, so I didn't believe it. Then I began asking around, and according to the conversations I had, I'm not sure if it's true, but according to what they say, this person couldn't walk any more and felt real sick. He just couldn't do it any more. And they say that they tried to help him and move him along, but he said he didn't want to go any further. So the guide didn't know what to do. He said, “I have the obligation to take these other persons, but I've also got a commitment to him.” And according to what I was able to find out, one of the man's companions said [to the coyote], “You go on ahead with those persons and I’ll stay back with him.” And that's what I heard they did.

Spener: In other words, another member of the group stayed back with him?

Julián: Yes, he stayed back with him. Then when the guide got to where they were picked up, he told the other guy who was going to drive them, that he should stop a little further down the road to call the Border Patrol to tell them to go look for them back down the trail. And when they found them, the muchacho had already died.

Spener: So it was a young guy, a boy that had died?

Julián: Right, he was young.

Spener: So, how do people react to this event? What is your reaction?

Julián: Well, I did react.

Spener: Is anyone at fault?

Julián: Well, no. My reaction, like I said, I don't know. I don't think it was their fault. It's just a question of whether your body will take it or not. Because I've told people that the first time I went that I felt tired. But I didn't know anyone else on that trip. I'd never laid eyes on any of them before. So I thought to myself, if I decide to stay behind because I don't have the strength to go on, I'm going to be left alone because none of the others knows me. Nobody is going to stay back with me. So I tried to find the strength from I-don't-know-where to keep up with them. So I think that if that person [the young man who died] had really
gotten weak, I don’t know, it might just be that his own body just couldn’t take it. So I believe, in my theory it’s not anyone’s fault.

**Spener:** Might this event have a negative impact [puede perjudicarle] on the coyote?

**Julián:** Well, yeah. But it’s like I’ve been trying to explain to you, if it’s true what they told me, it wasn’t his fault because he was trying to save the ones he took on ahead with him and he was sending help for the ones they’d left behind. So I think he tried to help them equally. He’d lose a bit more credibility in my eyes if he hadn’t tried to help the people who stayed behind.

**Spener:** You told me before that sometimes the coyotes lie about how far you’re going to have to walk. In this case, would your opinion be different if the coyote had lied about how far they were going to walk?

**Julián:** No, because like I told you, it’s happened to me almost every time I’ve gone that they tell you it’ll just be one day and really it’s two. So practically everyone has in their mind that it’s going to be more than they tell you. Almost all of us are aware of this.

Julián offered some additional information that was especially telling. The coyotes in El Alto continued to take people from the region across the border and continued to receive new customers. And if Julián decided to go back to Texas, he would probably travel with these coyotes again. When I asked him, somewhat incredulously, if he would ask the coyotes about the man’s death to get a more complete explanation before heading north with them, he had the following to say:

Well, I’d have to go with them to know for sure, to see. I probably wouldn’t ask them about it here. I’d probably ask that they tell me about it out in the monte, because that’s when you talk most about these kinds of things. Like what happened that time with the guy who was with you? Things like that. Out in the monte [brush] is when I’d ask them. But if I see that people keep going with them, then what they’ve said about them isn’t necessarily true.

Julián’s hesitancy to blame his coyotes for the death of the man from a neighboring village runs contrary to the way that coyotes are typically portrayed by government authorities and the press as ruthless criminals who operate with little regard for the health and well-being of the migrants that travel with them. Julián was not the only migrant I interviewed who were reluctant to hold coyotes uniquely responsible for migrant deaths on the trail, contrary to repeated assertions by the authorities that such deaths resulted directly from the callousness with which “smugglers” treated their “merchandise.”
**On the price of clandestine travel to the United States**

One of the open questions about U.S. policing of its border with Mexico has to do with how far the costs of entering the country clandestinely will have to rise before migrants will desist from making the attempt. The costs of hiring a coyote to get across the border grew dramatically for Julián between the time he made his first trip to Texas in the mid 1990s and when he made his most recent trip in 2004. In 1994, his brother had paid a coyote just $500 to take him to Dallas. On his last trip he had paid $1,400, nearly three times as much. When I asked Julián how much money he would be willing to pay the next time he had to go to the United States, he had the following to say:

**Spener:** How much would you be able to pay? The Chinese, for example, sometimes pay as much as $50,000 to be taken to the United States. Right now, you’re not even paying one-tenth of that amount.

**Julián:** I would never pay that much. I’d only pay as much as I’d have to, depending upon my need. Right now it seems a lot to me to pay even $1,000 because, thank goodness, I don’t really need to go up there now. The last time I needed to go, $1,400 didn’t seem like that much to pay, first because I really had to go and second, I had some money owed to me and I wasn’t going to have to go into debt to make the trip.

**Spener:** So far, then, you’ve been able to pay whatever they’ve charged you. So, do you think that people will keep going in spite of the cost?

**Julián:** I do. I just think it depends on how badly the person needs to go.

One of the main things that Julián and Hilda’s experiences demonstrated was that the nearly threefold increase in coyote fees over the course of a decade had not yet produced a situation that prevented Julián from traveling to the United States to work when family finances required him to do so. The informal system of kin-based credit available to them owing to the presence of close relatives in the United States was still capable of lending money in sufficient quantity and on favorable enough terms to meet the increased costs of clandestine travel.

**On the possibility of participating in a guest-worker program**

Although coyotaje continued to work as a viable migration strategy in spite of the build-up of U.S. force at the border, Julián made clear that some form of legal migration option would be vastly preferable to the way he and his family had been managing their cross-border existence to date. He was familiar with the existence of the H-2 agricultural guest worker program
and of the proposals that were being made in the United States to have some sort of new, larger scale temporary work visa program for Mexicans like him. Not surprisingly, he found the idea of participating in a program like this to be an appealing alternative to the precarious sojourns he had been making north of the border as an *indocumentado*. He saw it as a way for him to make sufficient money to support his family without having to be away from them for such long and uncertain periods of time.

**Spener:** They’re proposing a new kind of bracero program so that Mexicans could go to the United States with a three-year contract or something like that. Would you be interested in this kind of a program?

**Julián:** Sure, I’d be interested in something like that. Like I was telling you, I was very happy to be working up there. I remember when I was doing yard work, a friend told me that people were getting these permits to go work up there for nine months. And I said that’s what I wanted to do, to be able to go there and work for a while and then come back here to rest for a while. I’m always going to be working to support my family. I’d rather have some kind of permit so I could go up there for seven, eight, or nine months and then be back here with my family for three or four months without having to work. It’d be great to have a permit that would let you go back and forth without any problems. I’m really envious of the people I know who have papers. It only costs them $100 to make the trip. And even if I have $200, what am I going to do with that? That’s not nearly enough for me to make the trip! I really wished I could have had one of those permits so I could come down here to see my family for the week-end and then be able to go right back to work up there.

**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 Julián’s experiences appear in *Clandestine Crossings* on pages 7-9 and 225. 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 Hilda and Julián, their town, and other people discussed in this story are all pseudonyms.
3 *Pateros* is the name given in Tamaulipas and South Texas to men and women who ferry undocumented migrants across the Río Bravo/Río Grande away from the international bridges that connect the two states. For more information on the origins of this term, see Spener, David. 2009. “Some Reflections on the Language of Clandestine Migration on the Mexico-U.S. Border.” Paper presented on June 11 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil to the XXVII Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Panel CSM034 “Migration, Religion and Language.” Available online at http://lasa.international.pitt.edu/members/congress-papers/lasa2009/files/SpenerDavid.pdf.

4 The state of Texas had not yet begun to require applicants for a driver’s license to present a valid Social Security number and other documents demonstrating their right to reside in the United States.

5 Undocumented Mexicans and their coyotes in Ciudad Juárez had long ago mastered “the look” that was most likely to make U.S. immigration authorities mistake them for U.S.-born Mexican Americans. See Debbie Nathan’s essay “The Eyes of Texas Are upon You” in her book *Women and Other Aliens: Essays from the U.S.-Mexico Border* (1991, Cinco Puntos Press, El Paso, Texas).

6 It was not until 2008 that all persons entering the United States at a land port of entry had to show identification to immigration inspectors. Prior to that time, it was left to the discretion of individual inspectors whether or not to require entrants to produce documentation that demonstrated their legal right to enter the country.

7 The documents that they coyote had provided them were the so-called laser visas, the updated version of the old border-crossing card that now had biometric data embedded in it. At the time Hilda and Julián were arrested on this occasion, agents were not yet checking the fingerprints of all non-citizen entrants at land ports. That would not happen until later in the decade with the implementation of the U.S. Visit program.


20, online edition.

10 From the website of the Texas Department of State Health Services: “WIC is a nutrition program that helps pregnant women, new mothers, and young children eat well, learn about nutrition, and stay healthy. Nutrition education and counseling, nutritious foods, and help accessing health care are provided to low-income women, infants, and children through the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program, popularly known as WIC. Retrieved on October 31, 2009 from http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/wichd/.

11 Literally, a “chicken grower” or “chicken farmer.” Originally used on the western stretches of the U.S.-Mexico border as a synonym for coyote, today it is widely used throughout Mexico and Central America to refer to the service-providers hired by migrants to help them enter the United States. For a more complete explanation of the origins and use of this term See Spener 2009, “Some Reflections on the Language of Clandestine Migration on the Mexico-U.S. Border.”