

The violent, hopeful world of
children who smuggle people



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The violent, hopeful world of children
who smuggle people

Gabriella Sanchez and Cameron Thibos (Eds.)

Foreword

There are dynamics that are specific to borderland regions. The region constituted by the sister cities of El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua on the US-Mexico border is no exception. Today, the mix of poverty, lack of opportunities, gender-based violence, organised crime, impunity, and migration creates an incubator of sorts for secondary phenomena to emerge which impact the most vulnerable groups of our community.

This collection, derived from a collaboration between Beyond Trafficking and Slavery and DHIA (Derechos Humanos Integrales en Acción) brings together the testimonies of teenagers from Ciudad Juárez and their families who become involved in the facilitation of migrant smuggling. We do not seek to focus on the crime. We instead emphasise how young people's historical lack of access to the most basic of rights, like health, education, safety and care, along borderlands makes their lives and those of their families systemically precarious. In this context, informal labour, high risk activities, and forced recruitment at the hands of organised crime have become both the main sources of employment opportunities and the grantors of economic and nutritional security for thousands of teenagers in our community and many others along the migration pathway.

The present collection brings together the experiences of some of these young people and their families, and showcases their voices first-hand. It describes the opportunities that they are able to secure on their own within this extremely precarious context, while raising urgent questions concerning their rights, freedoms, opportunities and dreams. But most importantly, these texts stand as testimony of the endless courage of the young people of the borderlands who seek to subsist and thrive in a landscape nothing less than adverse.

—Blanca Navarrete & Fernando Loera, Derechos Humanos Integrales en Acción

Prefacio

Hay dinámicas que son específicas de las regiones fronterizas. La región formada por las ciudades hermanas de El Paso, Texas y Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua en la frontera entre Estados Unidos y México no es una excepción. Hoy, la mezcla de pobreza, falta de oportunidades, violencia basada en género, crimen organizado, impunidad y migración, crean una especie de incubadora para que surjan fenómenos secundarios que impactan a las poblaciones más vulnerables de nuestra comunidad.

Esta colección, derivada de una colaboración entre Beyond Trafficking and Slavery y DHIA (Derechos Humanos Integrales en Acción), reúne los testimonios de adolescentes de Ciudad Juárez que se involucran en la facilitación del tráfico de migrantes. A diferencia de otras publicaciones, no buscamos enfocarnos en el delito mismo. Enfatizamos cómo la histórica falta de acceso de la juventud a los derechos más básicos, como la salud, la educación, la seguridad y la atención en las zonas fronterizas, ha hecho que sus vidas y las de sus familias sean sistemáticamente precarias. En este contexto, el trabajo informal, las actividades de alto riesgo y el reclutamiento forzado a manos del crimen organizado, se han convertido tanto en la principal fuente de oportunidades laborales, como en garantías de seguridad económica y alimentaria para miles de adolescentes de nuestra comunidad y en muchas otras a lo largo de la ruta migratoria.

La presente colección reúne las experiencias de algunos de estos jóvenes y sus familias, y muestra sus voces de primera mano. Describe las oportunidades que en este contexto de extrema precariedad logran conquistar por sí mismas, en medio de urgentes interrogantes sobre sus derechos, libertades, oportunidades y sueños. Pero lo más importante es que estos textos son testimonio del coraje inagotable de la juventud fronteriza, que busca subsistir y prosperar bajo condiciones nada menos que adversas.

—Blanca Navarrete y Fernando Loera, *Derechos Humanos Integrales en Acción*

Introduction

Children on both sides of the US-Mexico border help smuggle people and drugs into the United States. For most of them, it's an occasional job that they do alongside many others. These same teenagers sell goods in the markets, clean tables in restaurants, apprentice in workshops, and labour on construction sites.

When asked why, they usually say they need money yet lack opportunities to earn it. They are poor. They live in distant parts of the city where public transportation is scant. They face stigma due to their poverty and the darkness of their skin. And they have left or been pushed out of school. These characteristics narrow their employment options. They know that smuggling is illegal, but on the border it is one of the few ways that young, marginalised people can effectively convert their knowledge into profit. Their earnings, while limited, benefit them and their families, so for them smuggling is a legitimate, albeit criminalised, form of labour.

It is also a dangerous one. Children can get lost in the desert or drown in the Rio Grande. They can be bitten by animals or apprehended by US immigration authorities. Yet some of the most severe violence they face comes from within: from other teenagers involved in the smuggling of people and drugs. Despite the stories of indomitable drug mafias operating in the borderlands, border children's testimonies make clear that those recruiting them as guides, runners, and lookouts are often no more than loosely organised groups of young people like themselves. Some are even recruited as enforcers and make a living by punishing others. Violence among young men in this setting has become normalised. To a degree it is even expected.

Girls, in contrast, only rarely become involved in smuggling. One reason for this sheds light on why so many boys do: a large part of the labour market near the border relies on the work of women and girls. These employers are the *maquiladoras*. They are foreign-owned manufacturing centres producing goods for export, and they systematically rely on

what is believed to be a more docile, more manageable, female workforce. As a result, men and boys have been largely excluded from a major source of employment in an area where there is precious little to be had.

This shift has affected more than just labour dynamics. Social scientists [have long argued](#) that the displacement of the male workforce by an industry that privileges female labour has helped foster sexual and gender-based violence in border communities. The murder of women is rife, and disappearances in connection with long histories of intimate partner violence are a widespread phenomenon. And all along, one of the [leading causes](#) of death among young men is homicide by deadly weapon.

Growing up on the border

This is the background for the collection of testimonials from border children and their families that we will be releasing over the next two weeks. All of the children you will hear from have crossed the border irregularly, either pursuing their own migratory aspirations or to smuggle other people. They also all come from Ciudad Juárez, the Mexican sister city to El Paso on the western-most tip of Texas. The two places are so close that if no border ran between them they would be a single community.

Juárez has long lived in the collective consciousness thanks to Hollywood, mainstream media, and organised crime literature. It's known as a battleground for Mexican drug *cartels*; as a world capital of femicide; and, thanks to the Trump and Biden administrations' efforts to contain migration, as a massive refugee camp.

Juárez is also where an NGO called Derechos Humanos Integrales en Acción ([DHIA](#)) launched Mexico's first effort to address the challenges faced by [children](#) involved in smuggling. The project started in 2016, and the local child protection agency quickly began to refer children caught crossing the border to DHIA for restorative justice services. Today, DHIA is still the only non-profit in the coun-



try providing legal, educational and psychological assistance to this population.

The testimonies in this series were prepared alongside DHIA's advocates, with the support of the children and mothers who come to DHIA to receive services. They were compiled during the height of the pandemic in 2021. Businesses were closed, employment options were reduced, and many families were suffering scarcity of basic goods and services. At the same time, the closure of the US border to asylum seekers was increasing the demand for border crossing services in communities like Juárez. It was a busy time for smuggling facilitators.

The testimonies revolve around a central moment of violence: the murder of a young man who crossed people into the US. We learn what happened, why, and what the consequences of his death were from those who were closest to him.

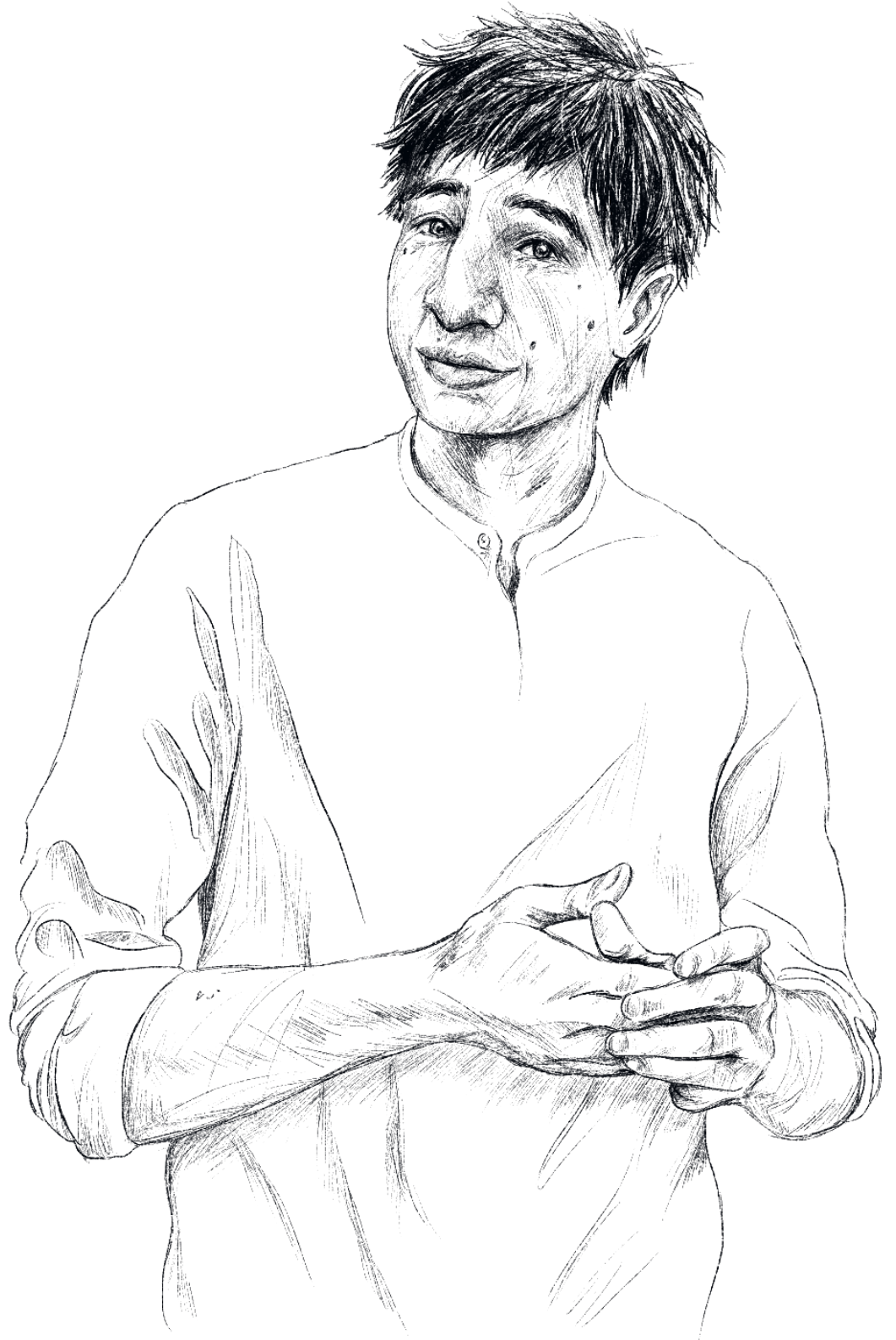
The stories told by his family and friends not only describe this death but also place it in context. They

throw light on the crude mechanics of smuggling, the social and economic pressures of this community, and the burdens and aspirations of its inhabitants. To flesh this picture out further, five others from the DHIA community were interviewed as well.

Together these testimonies paint a fractured yet detailed picture of how lives unfold in the shadow of the border wall. They foreground the people, not the crime, and they communicate the complexities faced by a specific group of young people in a city like Juárez. In many ways, these complexities are not that different from those faced by young people elsewhere. Boredom. The longing for travel and adventure. A desire for self-improvement. The love for parents despite the constant imposition of rules. These stories show the often devastating consequences of young people's choices amid youth criminalisation, border militarisation and migration control, but also the love and determination of a community seeking to achieve change.

—*Gabriella Sanchez and Cameron Thibos*

George



Sometimes I think about the people who have died crossing from Mexico into the US. They have drowned, gotten lost, or been killed. But they wanted to try it. Crossing: that was their dream.

I remember the time I took a man across the border. Some men had come by looking for somebody else; a guy they knew who worked as a guide. They couldn't find him so they asked me if I wanted to go. I didn't have a job and they offered me US\$150. I said yes.

You risk a lot by crossing. Anything could happen along the way. You might get caught, but that's not too much of a risk because if you are under 18 then US immigration lets you go. Much worse are the ways you can die. Sometimes the men you're taking across want to kill you. Soldiers can also kill you if they see you.

Just in time too. The door came down and they grabbed Marcos. I heard them say 'you know why,' and then they killed him. They shot him, he fell to the floor, and they shot him twice more.

Luís was on the floor shouting. They grabbed him by the head and shot him as well. He fell over but did not die. After they left I wrapped my sweater around his neck and told him not to faint. Then I ran.

So that's the problem. It's not just that you can get in trouble with the police. It's the gangs. You have to do as you are told or they'll kill you.

I've only gone over the border that one time. I wanted to know what it was like. I didn't know what I was doing though. They just told me, 'Go from here to there. You will see the houses. Then hide.'

"Hiding isn't normal."

One of my friends – Marcos, Luís' brother – was killed because he stole from the people he was taking across. He used to take their cell phones and their money. Mexican cell phones are useless over there anyway; phones from the USA are the only ones that work. But the migrants complained and Marcos' bosses found out. They didn't like it, so they sent some people to kill him.

We were at a girl's house when they came. They shouted 'open up!' and my first thought was: it is the cops. Then the door broke and they started shooting. I have a scratch here from a bullet – just a little higher and it would have hit me.

We were in the bedroom and Marcos, Luís and I were trying to hold the door shut. It wasn't working, so I left them at the door and ran into the bathroom.

I went with a friend. I was responsible for one migrant and he had two others. US Immigration saw us through their cameras as we crossed. They came on horses and motorbikes and caught my friend, but missed me because I had hid us in the canal. After that we managed to make it to the meeting point on the outskirts of El Paso, where some men picked us up. The guy I was crossing went to a hotel. I went to the bridge to get back into Juárez.

That's where they caught me. I went the wrong way and they saw me on the cameras. My shoes were full of mud, my pants were full of mud, and my jacket was full of thorns. A guy called me into the booth by the bridge, where immigration officers surrounded me and searched me. They took my cap, my shirt, everything. Then they started asking questions: where I lived, where I came from, why I was there,

why I crossed, what I wanted to do there, if I had relatives or not, if I came to work, steal, or something else. They ask you all that.

I told them that I was helped across, because it is a bigger crime if you're the one moving people across the border. Besides, they will also look for the people you got across the border if you tell them you're a guide. I was locked up for a day and a half before a Mexican officer came to get me. They do not let underage people leave unaccompanied. It's worse when you're over 18. Adults can be put in jail for years, but underage people get sent back home.

My mother scolded me, but I still got paid. The man I got across even gave me an extra 500 pesos (US\$24) for the help. He had needed a lot of it. He was crying as we were going through the desert. He said he couldn't do it anymore – couldn't hold on any longer. But I waited for him, helped him get up, and told him that he could not stay where he was. In the end we managed to cross. They caught me, but he managed to get there. He arrived.

The people who hired me paid me all my money when I got back. When I got out, I told them, 'immigration caught me, but I sent him in the car. I do not know anything else.' They told me, 'That is your job. The rest is theirs. If they are caught, that is their problem. You have already done your job.' They asked me to continue working but I refused. I want to get a visa to the USA someday, and if I get caught again I won't be able to go for a long time. It takes years to clean your record.

I want to go, but I want to do things the right way.

Why risk being caught? A friend of mine has no documents and has been there for years. He says it's cool, but he can't actually go out like a normal person. He is locked in a room. He only goes out to eat or work, and he can only work in places that accept him. He can still easily lose everything. The places that will give him jobs are also places that immigration officers might check. If the boss doesn't hide him in the kitchen or something, they will take him.

That hiding isn't normal. So I'm going to get my visa to make sure, and then I can go there. Imagine you go there and start a family. You marry a girl, you build a family, but then they come after you and send you back. You lose everything.

##

I haven't gone out much since Marcos was shot. During the day I look after my nephew while my mom and sister are at work. And if I do go out at night I stay near home and make sure to come back early. I also don't hang out with people in the business anymore; people who are being looked for. You never know. If they come looking for someone and I am there, they will kill us both. Or, if I hang around with the wrong people, they might mistake me for someone else. That happened once. A man in a car once pulled up and pointed a gun at me. 'Come here', he said, 'let me see you.'

I took off my cap. He looked at me for a moment, and then he said to the driver: 'This is not the one. Let's go.'



Melly



I left home at 15. It was one of those crazy situations where I just had to get out. I first found a job in a fabric store and for a little while lived with an aunt. Then, at 16, I moved to Juárez and entered the *maquiladora* (assembly factory). Back then you could get a factory job with just a primary school diploma and a birth certificate.

I started out in the warehouse of a plastic lens factory. We packed the lenses up and sent them off to China, where the frames were added. It was light, office-like work. I liked it. Since then I've worked in a lot of different *maquiladoras*, always *maquiladoras*. The pandemic changed that. At first they made me take unpaid leave. Then they asked me to work but didn't pay the full amount – sometimes half, sometimes even less. Finally I quit.

I was up all night, but it wasn't until the next afternoon that I got the call to go pick him up. God, I was angry – mainly because he hadn't told me anything. If he had told me, 'Mommy, I want to go over the border,' maybe I would have said yes. It made me sad that he didn't trust me. And I did feel anger. But I was also glad that he was fine. For him it was all over pretty quick, but my former son-in-law was put in jail because he'd been caught crossing several times before. They just recently released him.

Omar was a very rebellious kid, but recently he's become calmer. I've asked him if he's going to leave again and he says he's not. But who knows. He has older brothers who've made it to Texas and they tell him it's very nice over there.

“You are going to work all your life.”

I now work at DHIA, an NGO working with children who have been caught crossing the border to the US. My son Omar is one of them. I was at work the day he tried. I came home and couldn't find him. At about midnight a neighbour told me, 'He left with a boy. They were going to jump the wall.'

The guy he left with was my daughter's ex-husband, who had wanted to leave very badly. Omar had admired him greatly for some reason. They did a lot of crazy things together – drugs, drinking, etc. I think he made my son feel free. So when he decided to leave Omar went with him. My son was 16 at the time. A little boy from the neighbourhood showed them the way apparently; didn't even charge them because they knew each other. A couple other kids tagged along as well. Only one managed to stay in Texas. The rest were sent back.

I would like him to finish school. He says he wants to learn how to fix home appliances, and I hope he does. It won't give him a great career, but he's good with his hands and it will help him get a job in a *maquiladora*. Somebody who understands electronics earns more than an operator on the line. An ordinary operator barely earns enough to survive.

His dad died when he was eight, and since then I've worked seven days a week. Why? Because I didn't study. Not because I didn't want to, but because I didn't have the opportunity. I somehow managed to provide for my children on the salary of an ordinary operator. But I ask him if he really wants to be like me. Study, I say, so you have the chance to earn a little more. He's a first-rate slacker, so I also make sure he understands the facts. 'Some women get a break by marrying someone,' I say, 'But you are a man. You are going to work all your life.'

Omar



I had never really thought about crossing the border to Texas. But in that moment, I changed my mind. I wanted to know how it felt to be there. To know that place. I wasn't planning to stay there; just to go in and out. I wanted to see.

At first I felt scared. But once I was at the crossing I felt excited. I felt an adrenaline rush. There were four of us: me, my brother-in-law, and two others. It took us three hours to cross. We were waiting for my brother-in-law's mother to pick us up, but she was hiding from Border Patrol herself and never made it. We eventually tried to move forward anyway and that's when US Immigration caught us. They were riding horses.

(US\$25) a week. So little in fact that I sometimes had to buy my lunch burritos on credit. I liked the job, but I didn't like the pay.

After that I got a job in the maquiladora (assembly factory) where my mom worked. They paid a little more, around 1250 pesos a week (US\$63). The benefits were also good: they included food and transportation. The bus came at 5 a.m. and we worked until 8 p.m. I spent the money I earned on clothes, other things I needed, and sometimes on household expenses. I enjoyed the job at the maquiladora. Since I was the youngest, I became friends with everyone. It was fun. I made it all the way to machine operator, handling a big metal flattening machine.

“It is not that I was afraid. It was just not what I wanted to do.”

I didn't panic when they saw me. I thought, if they catch us, it's ok. I knew that because I was underage they would send me back here. And the men on the horses behaved well. They gave us something to eat and blankets. They asked us questions about how many times we've crossed, how old we were, etc. And they took our fingerprints and photos. They treated us well.

I have never crossed people myself. It never attracted me. I had a friend who offered me 400 pesos (US\$20) to help him hold the ladders that they use to climb. But I said no. It is not that I was afraid. And nobody tried to force me. It was just not what I wanted to do.

My first job was with my brother in a workshop repairing drills, polishers, and other tools. I was 15 and it was just supposed to be a summer job. But I liked it more than school, and I ended up staying for more than a year. I earned little: 500 pesos

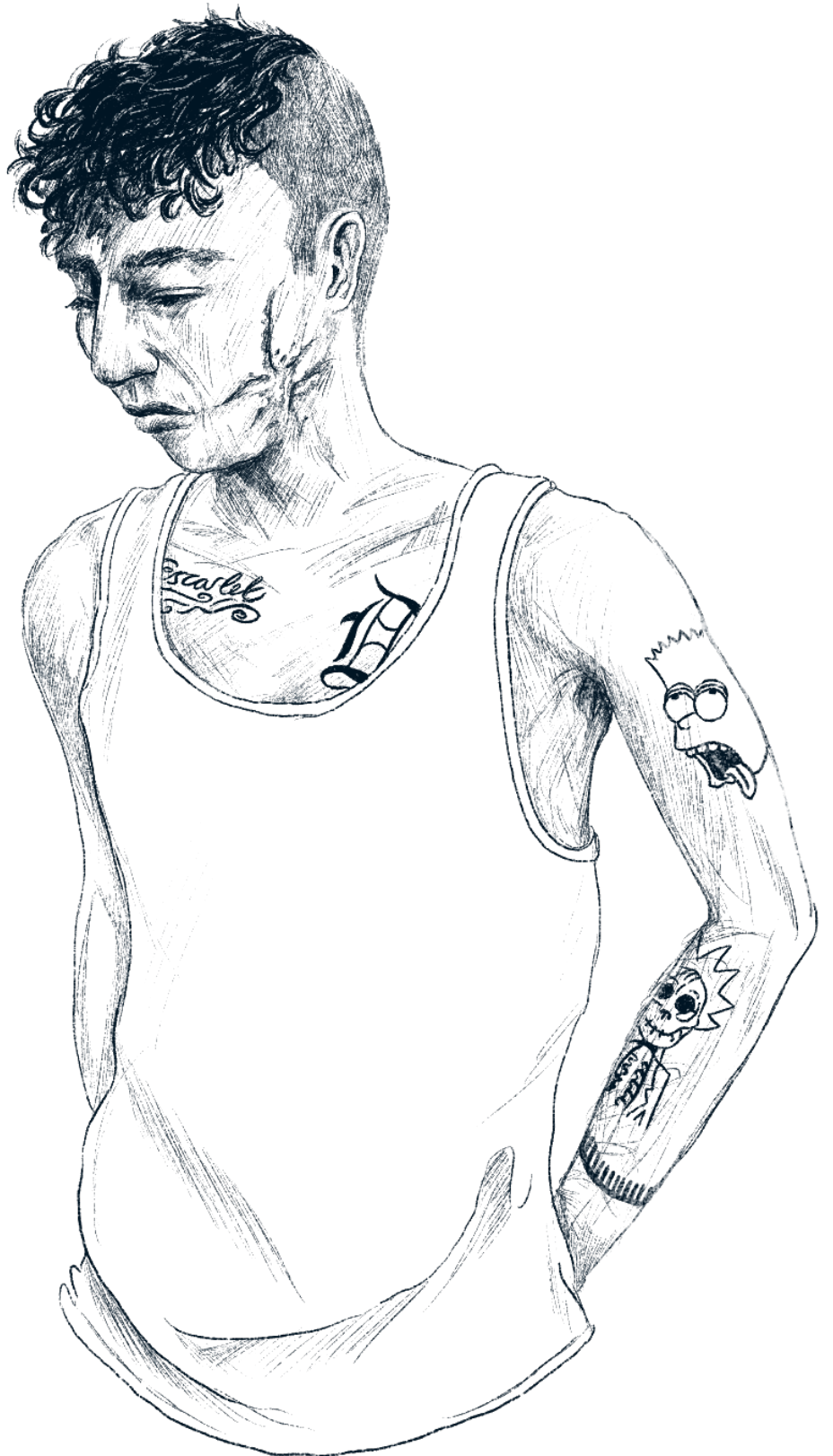
But that job eventually ended. I've done a few things since then. I helped renovate an AutoZone for two weeks. I didn't like that job though. They had us working seven days a week and getting there was hard – unlike at the maquiladora where they pick you up and feed you. So I left that job. Now I need to find something new.

I re-enrolled in an open high school a little while ago and got my high school diploma. It only took a couple months. After that I tried studying auto-body work, but Covid got in the way. I'm going to try again, this time with electronics. I like repairing things, and if I study then I could get a new job in the factory that's related to electronics. That's really all that I have in mind.





Luis



I have worked doing a lot of things. I've installed internet cables and electricity. Done construction work and sold clothing downtown. One time I even helped tear down a hill with one of those huge machines that you use to make holes.

I started looking for a job when I was 14, maybe 15. I wasn't studying – I wasn't doing anything – and I didn't want to be wasting time. I wanted to buy things for myself. The first thing I bought was a pair of sneakers and some clothes. I gave the rest to my mother. Whenever I got paid I'd give some to La Jefa – my mom – and whatever I had left I spent on what I wanted.

Construction is the hardest work I've ever done. You spend a lot of time under the sun and all you do is heavy-duty work. You mix concrete, carry it around in buckets, stuff like that. The heat of the

would come home Saturday and go out the rest of the weekend. But I don't do that anymore after what happened to my brother. I do not leave the house.

Immigration caught us the first time we went over the border to El Chuco (El Paso, TX). A friend from there invited me and my brother to come. His father works in construction. My friend offered us a job and a place to stay, so that's why we wanted to leave.

I thought I'd find work there and come back to Juárez sometime later with my own car. And I thought I'd make some money from whatever I could do over there. But to be quite honest, the environment in El Chuco is nasty. Over there you don't have a life. You can't go outside, especially if you are a migrant. Just from home to work and that's it. You live like a prisoner. You can't live there the way you live here. The only reason I was going was for the job.

“They asked why I'd be searching for the American dream if I lived so close.”

desert makes it worse. You can easily get heat stroke because there is no shade whatsoever. It's also dangerous. I've seen people fall from scaffolds because the planks come loose or a rotary hammer throws them backwards. I saw some guys fall from about three metres up. It was nasty. There's no insurance or anything, so if you get injured the most the foremen do for you is let you go.

I started to work construction with my brothers. A man who lived near my house would come pick us up every day at 7 a.m. and take us to the site. Some guys were my age, the others were older men. Most days we'd come back around five but it could be as late as eight or nine at night. We worked five days a week and half a day on Saturdays, so it was a lot of time under the sun. For all that we were paid 1800 Mexican pesos a week (US\$88). Back then I

That first time there were about six of us trying to cross. The others had come from different places, like Honduras. We were ... we were nervous. You are scared. You are just really scared.

We walked to the spot where there was no more fence. We managed to cross the border, and we also crossed the tracks. We reached the meeting point all right, but it took a while for the transporter to arrive so la migra (US immigration police) caught us. They arrived in their big trucks. They treated us bad. Especially when you're born here, from the neighbourhoods close to the border, they immediately think you are the one who is guiding the people.

I told them I wasn't a guide, of course. I said sarcastically that 'I was after the American dream'. They said I should already know how things worked, and

asked why I'd be searching for the American dream if I lived so close. I got upset. They locked me up in a cell they call the icebox. It was cold in there and they refused to give me a blanket. When I asked for one they said it wasn't a hotel. I wasn't there long, though. They kicked me out overnight and sent me back to Mexico.

US immigration didn't ask me questions, but the staff who interrogated us once we were sent back to Juárez did. They wanted to know how many migrants we were crossing. They asked that over and over again. I told them I was going on my own. Otherwise they treated me well. At the place there were bunkbeds and a TV and I got to eat some noodles. My parents scolded me once they arrived to pick me up, of course. They kept saying I should never cross again. They said I had to listen to them – the usual boring stuff.

I tried taking people over about a month or two ago. This time it was different. I wanted to make some money, and the offer was US\$300 per person. There were four in all, and I led the group on my own. Immigration caught them as we were coming in, but I made it all the way to the meeting spot. I waited for about five hours in hiding. The people on the Texas side never sent the transporter so I had to surrender myself. I spent three days locked up in the shelter that time around.

There's a lot of this kind of work right now, but it's really hot everywhere. The national guard have been deployed alongside the police to contain the migrants. The towns and the border are really fortified. I think it helps the gringos to have many policemen there. But people will always find a way to get through.

##

I got all of these tattoos. This is from a cartoon. This is from the Simpsons. This is my mom's name. This other one I got because they said that if I could handle the pain I could get it for free. And this one I got for my brother, the one who was murdered.

My mom worries because the tattoos make people treat us like criminals. The other day I went out to see a girl and my mobile stopped working. I asked a few people if I could borrow their phone to call my mom and everyone said they had no credit. They feared I would steal their phones or something like it.

Same with the police. They see my tattoos and they think I am a criminal. They pick me up – once they took me to a police station, another time to the prosecutor's office. One time they found me with a bit of weed and wrote down that I had like 10 or 15 packages on me – I had to spend three days in there for that. Other times they just drive me around the neighbourhood in their patrol cars and then let me go.

I worry about my parents when this happens. It is messed up to be locked up without knowing anything, without your family knowing what happened to you. And the food the police give you sucks. That last time I was there they gave me a piece of hard bread with mayo. I did not tell the guards anything, but I did not eat it. Other people ate it. Not me.

##

I do not know how to explain how I feel these days. I really don't know how to put it into words. I was shot in the face at the same time my brother was killed, and ended up in the hospital for 12 days. I'm ok now – it's just the pain of the teeth. My gums hurt, everything hurts. There are many things I can't do anymore. I've got a plate in my jaw, and I could get hurt again if somebody hit me or if I fall. Then I'd have to pay for more treatment. My first surgery was very expensive and my parents still haven't finished paying for everything. They had to get a loan to get the loan. But they do everything they can.

Thank God I'm still here. I barely go out anymore since the accident. I just sit around and watch TV. At some point I'm going to find work in a maquiladora, and once that happens I can start building my own house. We have a lot of land and I'll put my house right next to my mother's. I've already started collecting bricks to build some rooms and live there.



Teresa



It wasn't my idea to try to cross the border into the US. It was a friend's. She said, 'Let's go see what's in the hills.' I didn't want to but she insisted. She said somebody had told her how to do it. So we went. We laughed all the way.

I got scared when it got dark. I didn't know the area and was afraid we could get lost, or that someone would jump out and do something to us. It's very dangerous up there. So I started joking that we should let US Immigration catch us.

Then they did. When my friend first saw them coming she started to run. I ran after her but we didn't get very far. They caught us, asked us a bunch of questions, and then put us in a car and took us to an office. After a little while they brought us to the bridge to be picked up. They treated us well.

I now live with my parents. I haven't worked since my daughter was born and that's been causing problems. My dad says that since I don't have a job I need to wash their clothes, cook for all of them, etc. I help them of course but he wants me to do more than I'm able to. My mom defends me. She tells him he can't talk to me like that, that she's there to do the things that he's wanting me to do. In moments like that he talks about kicking us all out. My mom is the one who helps me the most. She even stopped work at the maquiladora (assembly factory) to help me take care of the children.

I've worked since I was 14. I started as a waitress, but left because my shifts were ending really late. I then worked at Movistar (a mobile phone provider) for a year, offering promotions and trying to get people to switch. I got fired because of the pandemic, but

"I'd like to build something that I can leave for my kids."

My mother grounded me for two months after that. She said we were crazy, but it made me laugh. You know, near where I live lots of people cross or work smuggling other people. They're mostly young – 15 to 20 years old. It's part of life here.

I finished middle school but I was already four months pregnant with my son when I started high school. It became very difficult to do the activities so I dropped out. We also had to save up for the birth. It cost about 12,000 pesos (US\$600), and we had to sell our stove and fridge to get the money.

I have two children now: a baby daughter and a two-year-old son. The boy's father is dead. Some men came by his house one day looking for one of his friends. The guy wasn't there, but the men still shot my ex-boyfriend and both his parents before they left.

I really liked that job. I got to be outside and work with a friend. He's dead too now. He was crossing the street when somebody started shooting at a car. A bullet hit him in the face.

My boyfriend and I would like to get a place, but he doesn't earn much and we have two children to take care of. He finished high school with an apprenticeship in construction, but right now he's working as a builder fixing a house. I would like to live on my own and start studying again. I'd like to finish high school, get a job to help my partner, and build something that I can leave for my kids. I don't want them to struggle like I have.

María



I came to Ciudad Juárez with my dad after my parents went their separate ways. It was just the two of us and he had relatives here. My father was a merchant, you could say. He sold chicharones laguneros (fried pork rinds) in the streets.

My dad brought me here, but he didn't raise me. I didn't grow up with him. I lived with an aunt for a while, then I lived with another aunt, and so on. I went to school, I played, everything that happens during childhood. I started working when I was 14 years old.

I began in a maquiladora (assembly factory) assembling vacuum cleaners. At the time it was easier to forge your documents, and I started working there by showing the birth certificate of one of my aunts. It was my first job and my first salary, and I felt truly proud of what I earned. It was, as they say, my first triumph. I was working, I was earning my money, and I could buy what I wanted. The first thing I bought was shoes.

I started to work because there were always needs at home. Always. Although our uncles and our parents tried to give us the best they could, it was obvious that, even if they tried, there would always be need. My uncles didn't want me to work. They said that I was very young and should be studying. 'You have to go to school, darling,' they said. 'You have to work hard so that in the future nobody bosses you around.' But it's always the need that makes you work. They had children of their own, and though they were helping my dad raise me they weren't obliged to support me.

I didn't finish elementary school in a normal school. I finished it after studying independently. The same with high school. I got married at 18, and at least I graduated before then. I wouldn't have been able to do it afterwards. I had duties to fulfil. I needed to buy my own things and help my husband. My priorities were my children and my home.

I stopped working in the maquiladora because my son was killed six months ago. He had been involved

in people smuggling. I was depressed, and life didn't make any sense. But the need is always there. I now clean houses once or twice a week. One way or another you have to get by. You never stop working.

The only thing that motivates me now is my grandchildren – my son's children. One is two and the other is four. Sometimes I don't feel like taking a shower or getting up, but they make me get up. When they ask about their father, it makes me get going because I tell myself, 'Their father is not here anymore. I have to keep going for them.' My daughter-in-law lives with me. She's 20 and works in a maquiladora, but those two children have a lot of needs.

I don't have words to explain my son's death. When my grandchildren ask when their father will wake up, it hurts so much. Some of my friends' children have died and that felt horrible as a human being. But now that I'm going through it, it's inexplicable. I feel mutilated, as if part of my body is missing. As if I'm incomplete.

No matter how hard you work, you never manage to give them all they need. They hang out with boys with nice clothes and shoes, and they also want those things. Sometimes they make bad decisions because of that. I gave birth to five children, and now I only have four – twin boys, another boy, and a girl. One of the twins got shot at the same incident where my son was murdered. The bullet cracked his jaw in five places. I had to borrow money to pay for both the funeral and the surgery. There was no option but to take out a loan from one of those banks that lend money at high rates to people like us. My son now he has a scar where the bullet went in, and he tells me he has no feeling in his mouth. He needs more medical attention, but Mr. Money is always the one who stops us.

The first time my sons tried to cross the border to make money they were 14 or 15 years old. They wanted, as they say, the 'American dream.' They wanted to dress in nice clothes, to look like they belong. They wanted to help me because they saw the need at home. I told them I preferred to work

myself, or that they should wait until they have reached the age to work because they could be risking their lives. But they have aspirations.

They didn't tell me they were going to cross the border. If they had I wouldn't have let them. I woke up that morning and went into their room looking for them, but they were not around. After a while I got a call. They had been detained by US immigration and repatriated. The local welfare office called to say I had to go pick them up.

I thanked God when I saw them again. I asked them why they had done it, and they said to help me. I then looked at their feet. 'I need shoes, mom,' they said. 'I don't have any shoes. I wanted to buy new shoes.' It makes me feel bad to say it, but they

They're also judged when they aren't involved in smuggling. My children have worked many jobs. They have done construction work. They've worked 9, 10 hours a day under the sun. They come back with dark skin, and then other employers won't hire them because of their tattoos and the colour of their skin. It's hard for them, and none of it is easy money.

It makes me angry as a mother, and it makes me angry with my children. I tell them, 'Soon you will be able to work. There is work here in Juarez too. You don't have to run before you know how to walk. Not everything in life is achieved from one day to the next. I didn't have shoes before, but now, thank God, I do. One day you too will achieve your dream.'

"I feel mutilated, as if part of my body is missing."

really were not wearing shoes – they were all worn out. As a mom, it hurts. You feel guilty because you could not give them what they need in the moment. It's easy to point fingers, for the child protection advocates to say, 'You, madam, don't take care of them.' They don't know what I have to do, what my husband has to do, to support our children. If I were with them all the time I could not work. And if I did not work, I could not feed them.

People judge children like my sons. When they do smuggling, people say 'Oh, they're just looking for an easy way to make money.' They see the tattoos and think my sons are criminals. But smuggling is not easy money. They could fall or drown, or run into somebody who just leaves them in the desert. They're risking their lives.

My son, the one who was murdered, worked crossing people over. He told me that the US immigration agents put him in a room with a really hot, bright light. He said that he sweated and sweated, and then all of a sudden they put him in a freezing room with the air conditioning at full blast. He used to get sick because of those things, but he didn't abandon the dream. He used to say, 'I'm going to earn good money there, and I'm going to give it to you.'

I am always worried about my children when they are not at home. Always. I fear that they won't come back. I see on Facebook how many kids go missing here in Juarez and I feel the pain of those mothers. At least I saw my son again after he was killed. Those mothers who never see their children again will feel dead all their lives.



Norma



I think people work to get ahead. To get a house. To buy food and clothes for their families. I have never had a paying job, but I help a disabled lady nearby clean her house. I also fix her meals because she can't do it herself. She reminds me of my grandmother, who lacks strength in one arm and can't lift heavy stuff. She didn't get some vaccine when she was little and now needs crutches to move around.

My grandmother used to work at the maquiladora (assembly factory), and when my mom was old enough she worked there as well. Back then they didn't ask you for papers. I have pictures of the two of them working together; mom was about 15 or 17. The job was not so bad. My grandmother wasn't on crutches yet, but over time she lost strength and had to stop.

We went to live with an aunt when my mom died, but soon we will move in with my grandmother. There will be six of us together: my grandparents, my two sisters, a 16-year-old brother, and myself. I have three brothers in all. The youngest has worked in construction since he was 14 or 15. The other two are married and live elsewhere. The eldest is 19. He is the one who wanted to cross the border so that we could all have a good life.

He was 15 or 16 when he first said he was going to cross. He was already working in construction, but he wanted to make more money so that he could help us. Mom told him not to go; that he wouldn't get a job anyway because he was underage. But one night, after we had all gone to bed, he met up with two friends and they tried to cross through the mountains. It was his decision. He got caught and my parents had to pick him up from child protection services. They were mad – since he was underage they could have gotten in trouble.

They told him not to do it again, but a few years later he tried anyway. That time he went with my youngest brother and an uncle. They nearly got there. My brothers had already made it over the railway tracks, but my uncle has diabetes and can't

run very fast. My uncle told them to go ahead and leave him. But my brothers said, 'No, we came together so we go back together. We are not going to leave you here on your own.'

US Immigration separated them when they caught them. Immigration sent my older brother and my uncle back, but not before throwing away their backpacks and my uncle's cellphone. We had a very hard time getting my little brother out. We looked for him all over. We didn't know where he was until we got the call from child protection to go pick him up at the bridge.

That was two or three months ago and now they are back working in construction. None of my brothers have gone back to school. My mom had wanted them to study, but they wanted to do their own thing and work. I think in part it's because my dad was in construction; he had taught them many things before he died. I used to feel bad knowing that they were working instead of going to school. But then I realised they simply wanted to help my mom. These days they buy us everything we need: shoes, trousers, shirts, everything.

My brothers never tell me their plans, or what they want to do next. We hang out as a family but we don't talk about the future. Instead we talk a lot about mom and dad, of the things we used to do when we were little. We look at pictures, we laugh a lot. I really like my life. Eventually I want to go back to school and study business administration. I want to go to a real school, with real teachers. I think I learn better that way.

It's funny. When I was younger I felt happy about what my brothers were doing. I used to think, 'Cool, they're going to get to know the other side.' But now that I'm older I don't feel the same way. I'm afraid somebody might do something to them if they keep trying to cross. Or that, because we no longer have our parents, child protection might decide to simply take all of us away.

Erik



Since I was six, my mom taught me to assume responsibility. She just died, but before she went she said, 'You know what is needed. I'm leaving you in charge.' We were four, now we are three; I live with my grandfather and girlfriend. She takes care of him and tends the little shop my mom left us while I work. We look after each other.

I only tried crossing the border to the US once. It was because my mom was sick with a heart disease. She needed medication, and we needed more money. She had that shop and I have worked selling bulk dog food since I was 13, but we still didn't have enough to pay her bills. My friends in El Paso told me I could make good money there, so I went.

long days. I would get up at 7:30, work until school started at 1, and then get back at 6:30. I then ate, did my homework, and went to sleep. Every day was like that. My mom told me to leave my job rather than school but that's not what I wanted back then.

Choosing work over school is something I regret and don't regret at the same time. I started working because I wanted to buy my own stuff: jewellery, nice clothes, things like that. Then we needed money because my mom was sick. It was ugly back then. We had nothing: sometimes we didn't have anything to eat. If I had stayed in school I would have already graduated by now. But because I worked we are at least all doing well. I'm 18, and my work helps me cover my needs and those of my family.

"She needed medication, and we needed more money."

I went late at night, but US Immigration caught me right after I got to the other side. They asked me lots of questions about whether I was alone, or if I was a smuggler. They then sent me to a shelter for the night. In the morning I was transferred to child protection services in Juárez, where my mom picked me up. They treated me pretty well actually. But I decided never to do that again. I never want to be locked up like that ever again.

I recently started studying again to finish high school. I dropped out a couple years ago because work and school had become too much. They were

I went back to school because I've decided to become a cop. For that I have to finish high school. I have many cousins in the police force, and they told me that if I studied they would help me find a job. I like the idea of being involved with the government. They're very respected, so I'm going to work towards it. My mom wanted me to make something of myself. 'I'm leaving you,' she said. 'Keep going forward.'

Rodrigo



The first time we crossed over to the US we took a chicken with us. That's what they call migrants on the border: chickens. The guy who organised it was a friend of ours, and the migrant was a relative of his who had just shown up. Five of us left, to start over. We made it to Clint (a suburb of El Paso) and rented a little mobile home there. We stayed for about three weeks, but my brothers and I couldn't find jobs so we came back.

After that I crossed the border another five or six times. I 'crowned', meaning I successfully got the migrants I was bringing over to the other side. I only did it for the money. I didn't have any, and when you're on your last legs you make money however you can. I took them to El Paso and then came back. It'd be cool to live there myself someday. It would be another life. There'd still be crime and

come back and report to us, we are going to kill you.' A little while later four or five guys showed up outside the house with weapons. I locked the door and managed to get out the back. I called a relative who knew that world and asked for help. He sorted it out for us, but for a long time we couldn't set foot downtown. Selling clothes was the only job I had where somebody wanted to kill me. The other jobs ... they were normal jobs.

Crossing chickens is risky, of course. It is dangerous out in the desert when you're moving people across. There are snakes and things. The police can hurt you. There are also thugs out there trying to catch you. They're young like us, but they have no heart, no soul. Not too long ago they killed another kid who was crossing people into El Paso. They're killing many people.

"Our tattoos don't make us bad people."

criminals of course, but not like here in Juárez. As a migrant without papers in Texas you never get to go out – you just go to work and return home. In Juárez problems come to your house by themselves.

I've worked both crossing migrants and in other jobs: on construction sites, in restaurants, and so on. I sold clothes downtown for a little while, but gang members tried to kill my brother (Luis) and me there. A tattooed man came one day – very tall, very big. He told us, 'You are going to work for me. You are going to sell coke, rock and weed.' We got scared. The same thing had happened to a kid like us a little while earlier. They killed him the same day that they demanded he work for them. We were worried the same would happen to us.

We went home, but they had found our number and kept calling us on the phone. They said, 'If you don't

I haven't crossed in over a year, but there are a lot of people trying right now. Our neighbourhood is full of people who want to migrate and people who work to get them across the border. The cops recently caught over 100 migrants near where we live as they waited to cross. Down the hill they caught even more. It's dangerous when the cops catch you because they beat you. There is risk everywhere.

People sometimes see my tattoos and think I'm like those guys killing people in the desert. But I just get tattoos because I like them. They tell my story. Others don't understand that. Somebody beat me up because of them not too long ago. He said my tattoos were from some gang or another and hit me with brass knuckles. When I got home I could barely breathe.

My brothers and I are always getting harassed and discriminated against. My older brother has tat-

toos on his face, neck, back, hands, feet, legs, belly – everywhere. He's always getting stopped by the cops. He tried to rent a house not long ago, but the landlord said, 'We do not want people like you here – people on the wrong path.' The same thing happened at the maquiladora (assembly factory). We applied for jobs, but at the screening they asked my brother Luís if he had ever had surgery. He said yes, because he had been shot in the jaw. They never called us back. I think the story scared them, or maybe they thought he was just applying to get the medical insurance. People don't understand that our tattoos don't make us bad people.

I wasn't there when my brother Marcos was killed, but I could have been. I had gone home not even 20 minutes earlier. I couldn't believe it. I still can't believe it. I wasn't able to cry when we buried him. I

was still in shock. Now, whenever I remember him, I feel like crying. It is even harder when I dream. I dream that we're hanging out, that everything is normal. Then I wake up and go looking for him, but he's not there. That's even worse. Many of my tattoos relate to him. I have his name, another one says 'Only those we forget die.' Near there is a cross and the date he was killed. I've got another one that says 'My mother is her love, her kisses, her prayers, and her blessing.' My mom, she's not doing well. She falls apart every month on the date of my brother's death.

I wish that none of this had happened. I just want to live in a better place. Without any problems, without being surrounded by evil people. I wish we could go back to being the way we were. All of us, just being dumb, but together.







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