

A REPORTER AT LARGE
APRIL 27, 2015 ISSUE

WHERE ARE THE CHILDREN?

For extortionists, undocumented migrants have become big business.

BY SARAH STILLMAN

Tougher border security has made migrants more vulnerable. Routes are more perilous, and organized crime controls many smuggling operations. One activist says, “The harder you make it to cross, the more people can charge, the more dangerous the trip becomes.”

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATIE ORLINSKY



The kidnapper sounded polite, even deferential, when she called on a Tuesday afternoon last May. Melida Lemus and Alfredo Godoy had left their clapboard house in Trenton, New Jersey, to pick up their two daughters from school. Godoy, who works in construction, was late to meet a client for whom he was building a home extension, and his family accompanied him to the project site. Melida and the girls—Kathryn, twelve, and Jennifer, seventeen—waited in the client’s living room, snacking on cookies and checking Instagram, while Alfredo walked through the house, taking specs: how much Sheetrock he’d need, how much spackle, how many two-by-fours. In the middle of the tour, his cell phone rang. The call came from a Texas area code.

“Are you the father of two boys?” a woman asked.

“Yes,” Godoy replied. “Is everything O.K.?”

“I have them here at my house,” she said.

The Godoys’ younger son, Brayan, had just turned fourteen. Small for his age, he was greatly impressed by icons of the strength he hoped someday to possess: the Incredible Hulk, Spider-Man, Stone Cold Steve Austin. Robinson, a year older, was reflective and soft-spoken, a soccer player and aspiring mechanic. They had grown up in Guatemala, raised by their grandparents.

In the mid-nineties, Alfredo had been working as a security guard at Exclusivas, an upscale supermarket in Guatemala City that sold name-brand U.S. goods, when he met and courted Melida, a round-faced cashier of eighteen. Jennifer was born in 1996, and Robinson followed, in 1998. Both Alfredo and Melida dreamed of heading north, to seek

out decent-paying work that would fund their children's education. The prospect of leaving the kids behind was anguishing, but they'd be well cared for until Alfredo and Melida returned with a nest egg, a few years later. In 2000, the couple agreed that Alfredo would embark first on the journey to Trenton, where he had a relative who could find him a job. Melida was pregnant with Brayan; she'd wait to give birth before joining Alfredo, the next year. "That's what we decided," Alfredo told me, "with all the pain in our hearts."

In New Jersey, Alfredo got steady work as a builder. Melida had a series of jobs: making cold medicine in a local pharmaceutical factory, cleaning rooms at a Best Western, and making fries at two fast-food franchises. Kathryn was born after their arrival in the United States. Meanwhile, the boys thrived in a private school in Guatemala City.

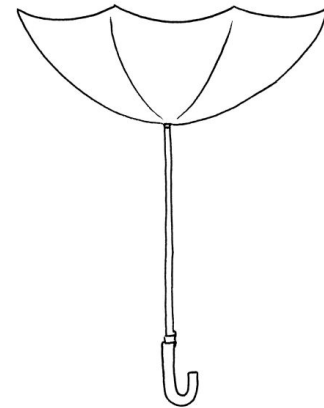
Melida and Alfredo sent money back to Guatemala to build a house for the family to live in upon their return. But life there was growing perilous. Fuelled by gang rivalries, homicide rates hovered at six times the global average, and people were dying at a faster rate than they had during much of the country's three and a half decades of civil war. On their way home from school one day, Brayan and Robinson saw four children gunned down in the street while playing soccer, by men in a black truck. Later, Robinson was on a local bus when it was hijacked; a cop chased the teen-age culprit and shot him dead as Robinson watched. Melida's father had been brutally robbed at gunpoint, and Alfredo's father, a cabbage and corn farmer in the state of Jalapa, fielded phone calls from a group of local extortionists who threatened to kill his family if he didn't pay the equivalent of four thousand dollars. When Brayan and Robinson visited Jalapa, the same men—recent U.S. deportees—stalked Brayan for his parents' numbers in Trenton. The news heightened Alfredo's anxiety, which worsened further when his father filed a police report, raising the risk of retribution. He called his sons and set down rules: "Don't leave the house unless you have to." "Don't ever give out our phone number in the U.S." And, as hard as it might be to follow, "Focus on your education."

As conditions in Guatemala changed, so did Melida and Alfredo's plans. In 2008, Jennifer crossed the border with an aunt to join them in New Jersey. Last spring, the couple decided that the time had come to send for their sons, too. They found a network of coyotes—couriers who transport migrants—recommended by friends and relatives, and settled on a fee of fourteen thousand dollars to get the boys safely to Trenton. Anticipating the reunion, the couple arranged to trade their cramped apartment for an airier place next door, where the four children could sleep in a pale-yellow attic, surrounded by the girls' art projects. Melida got a job at a cosmetics factory that made products for a Sephora supplier—a night shift, so that she could pick up her sons from school. In March, she wrote to Brayan and Robinson on Facebook, "Soon, we will be together again—I miss you so much."

She and Alfredo were aware of the journey's dangers. They'd been tracking the boys through frequent phone calls, but hadn't heard from them in three days; the last call had come just before the boys were supposed to cross the Rio Grande into Texas.

"They were lost, and I found them," the woman on the phone told Alfredo, as he paced around his client's living room. She allowed the boys to speak briefly with Melida. Then she said, "My brother will call you with instructions."

America's migrant-extortion market remains in the shadows of our fierce immigration debate. One reason is that the crime targets those who are least likely to report it. Another is that the victims of ransom kidnappings are sometimes twice disappeared: after being rescued from the stash houses where they are kept, they are often detained long enough to testify against their captors and then are swiftly deported. Some of them are informed of the possibility to seek legal relief, generally in the form of a U visa, designated for victims of crime who help law enforcement or prosecutors, or a T visa, for survivors of trafficking. Still, such protections are hard to obtain, and the price for speaking out against captors can be steep.



California Umbrella

Shortly before Alfredo Godoy received the phone call about his sons, two men in Trenton faced trial for kidnapping a fifteen-year-old girl in Texas while she made her way from Guatemala to New Jersey, where her mother lived. The mother told police that the kidnappers had starved and abused her. "They caused so much pain for my daughter that she does not live a normal life," she wrote to the judge. The girl would not be able to testify, "due to fear that they will see us, follow us, and do us harm."

Fear of the police can loom as large as fear of captors, particularly in parts of the country where law enforcement is believed to detain undocumented people who come forward to report a crime. One person who did contact the police was Sonia Avila, a woman living in Texas whose teen-age son, Franklin, reached Arizona from Honduras in 2011, only to be abducted by men posing as good Samaritans and held captive in a stash-house bedroom. Franklin's kidnappers phoned Avila, demanding fifteen hundred dollars. Otherwise, they told her, they would chop off Franklin's ears, or kill him.

Avila called 911. When Franklin was rescued by federal agents, she agreed to testify against the culprits. The prosecutor's last question to her on the witness stand made clear what she had put at stake by speaking out: "Now, do you realize you might have to face

an immigration judge?”

“The kidnapping victims are treated the same as the extortioners,” Stephanie Taylor, an immigration attorney based in Texas, told me. “They’re considered willing participants.” Some undocumented family members who report that their loved ones were sexually assaulted or held captive for profit have been punished, rather than told of their potential right to legal protection, she said. Taylor spent the past five years at American Gateways, an Austin nonprofit that provides legal aid to immigrants, where her clients included kidnapping and trafficking victims. In one of her cases, a mother called the police in the hope that they would rescue her three children from a Houston stash house, where they were being held by a smuggler who had jacked up his fees. After apprehending the captors, authorities detained the mother and the children and placed them in deportation proceedings.

Alfredo Godoy wasn’t thinking about kidnapers when he made the crossing, in 2000. He had signed up to travel in a group of seventy-five people in April, before the summer heat cranked up, but, as they made their way from Guatemala to Mexico to southern Arizona, the scrubland felt like a kiln, while the nights were frigid. At one point, Alfredo bedded down beside a cactus in the dark; when the sun rose, he saw that he had slept next to several corpses, “just a bunch of bones inside their T-shirts.” On another night, an elderly migrant demanded that Alfredo give him his jacket: “You’re young. You’re not going to feel the cold.” Alfredo was indignant. He wasn’t sure if he could survive. But he took off the jacket and gave it to the man, convinced that God would return it someday.

Alfredo’s trip followed one of the most significant shifts in U.S. border policy in decades: the implementation of a strategy known as “deterrence through prevention.” In the early nineteen-nineties, programs such as Operation Hold-the-Line, in El Paso, attempted to block undocumented migrants’ access to traditional crossing routes. But, rather than give up, most migrants simply adapted. Instead of approaching dense cities directly, they resorted to harsher, ever more circuitous routes, increasing their exposure, along the way, to lethal threats like sunstroke, dehydration, and snakebites.

A second major change took effect in the decade following Alfredo and Melida’s arrival in Trenton. In the aftermath of 9/11, the border with Mexico came to be viewed as the site of three distinct U.S. policy wars—on drugs, on illicit immigration, and on terrorism—all intertwined in the notion of “border security.” The country built some six hundred miles of border fence, and deployed Predator drones and other instruments of aerial surveillance. The ranks of Border Patrol more than doubled, to twenty-one thousand. By last spring, as Brayan and Robinson prepared to leave Guatemala, the U.S. was devoting more money annually to border- and immigration-enforcement agencies than to every other federal law-enforcement agency combined, including the F.B.I. and the D.E.A.

One consequence of the heightened border-security measures in the past two decades is that far more border crossers have died. Between 1998 and 2012, fatalities nearly doubled, reaching a peak of four hundred and seventy-seven even as Mexican migration dipped to its lowest level in four decades. These deaths have started to decline only recently, as border authorities and volunteer groups work to rescue a greater number of stranded migrants.

Kidnapped: Brayan Godoy (left) and his brother, Robinson, were travelling from Guatemala to join their parents, in Trenton. In Texas, a woman in a white car said, "Get in!"



Another consequence has been the concentration of human smuggling under the aegis of organized crime. According to Michelle Brané, who has interviewed more than a hundred Central American migrants for the Women's Refugee Commission, "The harder you make it to cross, the more people can charge, the more dangerous the trip becomes." The country's current approach to border security has made coyotes more indispensable to migrants than ever, Brané told me, and has led to the replacement of small-time smuggling operations—lone guides, in many cases, bringing migrants across the border—with sophisticated, and increasingly brutal, transnational networks. "Smuggling is not the same as trafficking," she said. Migrants pay smugglers to transport them; traffickers are in the business of moving or holding people against their will. "But as the border becomes militarized the differences become blurred."

Predatory groups seeking to profit from migrants' vulnerability have flourished along the border. In 2007, a spokesman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement noted an uptick in immigrant kidnappings in Arizona "related to the fact that it's tougher to get across the border" which "makes people vulnerable to exploitation." Opportunists known as *bajadores* have thrived by seeking out lost, exhausted migrants to rob or lock up in stash houses for the purpose of extortion; they have even raided stash houses to seize human loot for ransom.

"It's exactly like Prohibition—exactly like bootlegging," Terry Goddard told me recently. As the mayor of Phoenix during the nineteen-eighties and Arizona's attorney general from 2003 to 2011, Goddard had presided over the explosion in border-security measures, aggressively seeking to eliminate stash houses where migrants were held for ransom. But he discovered that the source of the problem went much deeper than individual smugglers. Arizona's harsh anti-immigrant laws made undocumented victims afraid to cooperate with law enforcement on prosecutions, and, as long as the country continued to rely on immigrant labor while giving workers few avenues for legal entry, extortionists would have access to a consistent supply of prey. "You can push down the

practice in Arizona,” he said, of stash-house extortions, “and it will pop up elsewhere.” In recent years, “elsewhere” has come to mean the Rio Grande Valley, in Texas—the Godoy boys’ planned point of entry into the country.

Targeting migrants for extortion has its roots south of the border. For years, Mexico’s ransom industry thrived by focussing on the rich. In 2006, the Mexican military, with American support, began to battle the country’s drug cartels, with the paradoxical result that the strongest cartels, like the Zetas, consolidated their power. Even as they continued to traffic in lucrative specialties—cocaine, marijuana, meth—the Zetas sought out additional criminal ventures, pursuing everything from pirated oil to bootlegged DVDs. Migrants were easy prey. The cartel took over northbound migration routes, charged fees to coyotes, and began snatching migrants from the tops of freight trains riding north; they extorted victims’ families with near-total impunity.

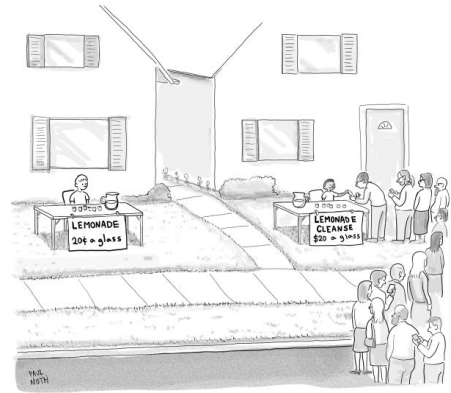
A year and a half before Brayan and Robinson Godoy travelled north, I arrived at Mexico’s border with Guatemala, in the state of Tabasco, to join a group of nearly forty Central American women on a bus trip to search for their children, spouses, and relatives, many of whom had vanished en route to the U.S. During the next three weeks, we travelled three thousand miles along Mexico’s migrant trail, tracing the same path north to Texas that awaited the Godoys, before we looped back south, through the country’s interior kidnapping hubs. At morgues, hospitals, shelters, and mass graves, we looked for clues to the whereabouts of the missing.

In the borderlands of Tamaulipas, police in black balaclavas surreptitiously snapped photographs of us. It was here, in 2010, that seventy-two Central and South American migrants headed for the U.S. were kidnapped by members of the Zetas, then bound, blindfolded, and executed on a ranch in San Fernando, ninety miles south of Brownsville, Texas. The following year, some of the women on our trip had ventured to the ranch to search for evidence left behind by police. (Officials investigating the case had been assassinated, stalling progress.) Other women travelling with us hoped to trace ransom calls and clues they’d received from places such as Puerto Vallarta, on the country’s west coast, where a Honduran woman’s son had made his last call home, and Tapachula, in the state of Chiapas, where a mother from Nicaragua believed that her daughter was being held by a sex trafficker.

On the first day of the journey, I sat beside Virginia Olcot, a Kaqchikel speaker from the rural northern highlands of Guatemala. Around her neck, she wore a photograph of her husband, Carlos Enrique Xajpot, in the hope that one of the strangers we encountered would recognize him. In August, 2009, after his work as a cobbler dried up, Xajpot left home to seek short-term employment in New York. He called his wife from Mexico’s border with Arizona just before crossing: “My love, I’m good.”

Days passed, then months, but Virginia heard nothing from Carlos. Finally, in February, she got a call. “They left your husband abandoned in the desert, but thank God we have him with us,” a man said. He demanded five thousand dollars for Carlos’s return. Virginia begged to speak with her husband. A voice cried out, “Please, help me, I’m kidnapped!” followed by the sounds of a man being beaten. Virginia, who sold tortillas from her home, found a way to pay the sum, only to be met by silence. Nearly three years later, she had left her small children in the care of relatives to try to learn what had happened to their father.

“The Zetas’ strategy, it’s classic wholesale,” Marta Sánchez Soler, the director of the Mesoamerican Migrant Movement and the trip’s coördinator, told me. “When organized crime kidnaps somebody rich, the media and police mobilize. Then the criminals feel the heat. So they realized that, rather than doing one big, flashy kidnapping of someone rich and powerful, it would be better to do a hundred small kidnappings of migrants whom nobody pays attention to.” Together, we did the arithmetic: by recent estimates, at least eighteen thousand migrants are seized in Mexico each year. If a third of their families pay a lowball ransom of four thousand dollars, that’s twenty-four million dollars, with minimal risk or labor.



Soler noted that these kidnapers are often aided by the same Mexican authorities who benefit from U.S. drug-war funds. Many local police, she said, have been known to take a cut of the ransom. Last December, a document obtained by the National Security Archive, in Washington, D.C., revealed that, during confidential questioning by Mexican prosecutors, a local law-enforcement officer said that San Fernando police had helped turn migrants over to the cartel in exchange for payoffs.

The authorities we encountered on our trip were generally indifferent, and on occasion hostile, toward the mothers. At a morgue in central Mexico, a forensics specialist suggested that Virginia and several other mothers could have come to steal corpses. In Saltillo, a Zetas stronghold, the entrance to the city’s morgue was blocked by a shootout between police and cartel gunmen, so we spent the day at a shelter for migrants that had recently been visited by researchers for migrants’-rights organizations. Police complicity was a recurrent theme in the abduction accounts that they collected. A typical story began, “My name is Nancy. I am Salvadoran and I was kidnapped from April 13 to June 22, 2009.” Federal police, Nancy said, “took the money that was given to them as a bribe to keep silent. The kidnapers told us to pay attention so that we would see that they had

paid for everything. One of the men began to bother us women and sexually abuse us. Then one of our male companions got angry and tried to defend us, but he couldn't, because they raped him, too, and then they beat him to death."

Along the journey, in the Catholic migrant shelters where the mothers and I slept in large, open rooms, we noticed many children travelling north without parents or guardians. Shelter volunteers told us that the children were the youngest they had ever seen. Later, I got in touch with dozens of advocates and attorneys who worked with unaccompanied migrant kids in the U.S. They described a spike in caseloads, with an unusually high proportion of girls among them. Nationally, the number of unaccompanied migrant children from countries other than Mexico had increased from an annual rate of eight thousand to more than thirteen thousand in 2012.

"We're completely overwhelmed," Cheryl Little, the executive director of the nonprofit Americans for Immigrant Justice, in Miami, told me in the fall of 2013. She explained that undocumented children have no right to free legal counsel in court, and that the government had been slow to act in response to the new numbers. "And now we're turning away kids who we believe do have compelling cases, and they're ordered to be deported," she said.

By last summer, the number of child migrants travelling alone had soared above fifty thousand, straining the capacity of the systems put in place to deal with them. The vast majority were fleeing the violence and poverty of Central America's Northern Triangle: El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. President Obama declared an "urgent humanitarian situation" and directed the Secretary of Homeland Security to create an interagency task force, led by the head of FEMA, to provide relief. As the governments of the Northern Triangle sought to stanch the exodus, a U.S.-funded public-service campaign flooded Honduran and El Salvadoran radio stations with songs set to marimba beats, to discourage children from crossing: "Hanging on the railcars / Of this iron beast / Migrants go as cattle / To the slaughterhouse." In Guatemala, TV ads designed in Washington showed a teen-age boy with dreams of heading north, despite his mother's warnings. "He who doesn't take a chance doesn't win," the young man writes to his uncle before departing. In the ad's final frame, his skinny corpse is shown sprawled on the cracked desert earth.

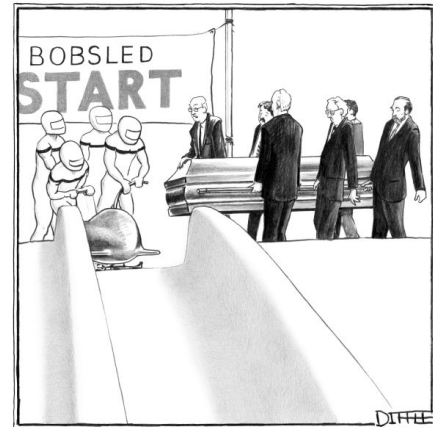
On the morning of May 5, 2014, a coyote picked up Brayan and Robinson at their grandparents' home, in Jalapa. The first leg of the boys' journey proved to be far more comfortable than their father's. They rode in buses through the forests of Guatemala's western highlands until they reached a hilly border town called Gracias a Dios. There, they slipped into Chiapas, changing hands to a new coyote, and called their mother to let her know that all was well. From the windows of successive vehicles, the brothers got an education in Mexican geography: the busy streets of Tuxtla Gutiérrez; the turquoise expanse of the Veracruz coastline, flanked by sugarcane fields; the bleak

cityscape of Reynosa. Finally, after a week on the road, they arrived in Camargo, Tamaulipas, a small city tucked between cornfields, nearly touching Texas. The boys felt hopeful; they'd made it through the *zona roja*, Mexico's danger zone. In the morning, they'd cross the Rio Grande.

The last of their coyotes explained what would happen next. In a group of half a dozen migrants, including an El Salvadoran brother and sister around their age whom they'd befriended on the journey, Brayan and Robinson would climb onto a black inflatable raft pushed by men with sugarcane poles. When they reached the outskirts of Rio Grande City, in Texas, they would look for their next guide.

"Hope you don't mind—it was his last request."

"Just walk straight for ten minutes," the coyote told them. But, he explained, if they ran into Border Patrol agents first, they shouldn't be afraid. A 2008 federal anti-trafficking statute allows child migrants travelling without parents or legal guardians to make their case before an immigration judge, rather than face immediate deportation. (The statute excludes minors from Mexico or Canada.) According to Border Patrol, some ten thousand unaccompanied children were apprehended after crossing over from Mexico in the month that Brayan and Robinson did, many of them from the Northern Triangle. If the boys were apprehended by Border Patrol, they would simply tell the truth: that they had fled from Guatemala and hoped to be reunited with their parents.



Around eleven the next morning, the children climbed from their deflating raft—it had sprung a leak, alarming the brothers, who couldn't swim—onto Texas soil. Along with the siblings from El Salvador, who were on their way to Maryland to reunite with their parents, the boys walked through an expanse of prickly pear and cat's claw to reach the road.

A white car pulled up, and a heavyset woman with long brown hair rolled down the window. "Children, get in!" she called. The Godoys exchanged glances with the other sibling pair. They didn't know what their new coyote was supposed to look like, and the driver seemed insistent. All four kids climbed into the car.

Minutes later, they arrived at a single-story house with an imposing gate. The driver left the children with a man in his early twenties named Pedro and his sister, who collected their soiled clothes for the laundry and fixed them plates of chicken with rice. The kids passed the afternoon watching TV, but they soon grew anxious. They noticed that the

house was outfitted with surveillance cameras, and they counted four pit bulls. Used to checking in with their parents at stops on their trip, they told the woman that they wanted to call Trenton. She asked for the number, and Brayan, breaking his father's rule, gave it to her.

At home in Trenton, Alfredo and Melida lay awake for most of the night after speaking with the kidnapper. Per her instructions, they had wired two hundred dollars to a man named Pedro Alonso Mendez at an address in Rio Grande City, to make sure that the children would be properly fed. The next morning, Alfredo received another call from a Texas area code. It was Mendez.

"Listen," he said. "The coyotes you hired back in Guatemala? We have nothing to do with that. This is another business." As Alfredo recalls, Mendez went on, "I need you to give me five thousand dollars, to get this conversation started." A wire transfer would have to be sent within the next hour.

"But I don't have that kind of money," Alfredo said. "I'll have to go knock on doors."

"I don't care what you need to do," Mendez told him. "If you don't send the money, I don't know what will happen."

Alfredo required little coaxing to take the demands seriously. The week that Brayan and Robinson set off, word reached Jalapa of two teen-age brothers who had departed from a small farming town there to reach their parents, in Virginia. They were kidnapped in Mexico and held for ransom in a stash house. When the parents were unable to pay, the boys were shot.

Melida and Alfredo exhausted their savings and called their siblings for loans. Still, they fell short. Their daughter Jennifer, an honor-roll student who worked at a fast-food restaurant after school, offered her savings. At 4:35 P.M., Alfredo wired two thousand dollars from a local MoneyGram to the same address in Rio Grande City.

Meanwhile, Melida reported to her shift at the cosmetics factory, 4 P.M. to midnight on the assembly line. During her break, she rushed to the factory's courtyard to negotiate with the strangers who held her sons. Mendez's sister answered the phone. The two thousand dollars was not enough, she informed Melida. Mendez had been arrested, she said; cops had seized the cash. (Federal court records show that, on May 14th, Pedro Alonso Mendez was arrested in connection with a different stash house, in McAllen, Texas.) She instructed the Godoys to pay fifty-six hundred dollars more that night.

As Melida returned to the factory line, with its thousands of bottles of opalescent anti-aging serum for "Beauty Emergencies," an idea struck her. On her next break, she called Alfredo. "Stay up and wait for me," she told him. "You're not going to work tomorrow."

Around this time, Juan Gonzalez, the police chief of San Juan, Texas, spurred by the region's rash of migrant kidnappings, formed the Rio Grande Valley's first stash-house unit. It was run from an improvised office in a shack behind his station. The unit's operating theory was simple: smugglers were rational businessmen. "You can make more money in the human-smuggling business than in the drug business," Gonzalez told me when we met in his office last fall. He thought that he could put a dent in the smugglers' business model, increasing risks and reducing profits. He would teach members of the community how to spot signs of a stash house, and train his officers to recognize and help potential victims of trafficking. And he would increase police presence in trouble spots. "If you want crime to stop in an area, you saturate that area with police," he said. The stash-house unit was planning a raid the following afternoon, and Gonzalez suggested that I go along.

"Hauling ass north," Sergeant Rolando Garcia, the unit's lead officer, shouted into his radio the next day, as we hurtled past orange groves at a hundred and fifteen miles an hour in his black S.U.V. We were headed to a nearby town called Donna. Garcia turned right onto a dirt road, then came to a halt outside a mobile home with a pink baby stroller out front. A full-force interagency raid was under way: armed officers from Homeland Security Investigations, Border Patrol, the sheriff's office, and Gonzalez's unit had just closed in on the trailer.



VIEW FULL SCREEN

A stash house across the Rio Grande in Reynosa, Mexico, as viewed from La Joya, a town in Texas. The term "stash house" is an elastic designation. It is sometimes used to refer to a site where people are held against their will, often in abysmal conditions. But it can also refer to a house where coyotes—couriers who transport migrants—pay for them to eat, rest, or await their next guide as they head north.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KATIE ORLINSKY

Migrants dashed into nearby cornfields and the pines beyond as agents gave chase. Garcia joined them, a rifle strapped to his chest. This was police militarization, border-style: a surveillance helicopter beat the air overhead (a department drone had recently

crashed), and a Ballistic Armored Tactical Transport vehicle waited back at the station, should matters escalate.

As the team fanned the perimeter, a school bus pulled up and a boy of about seven, wearing a small blue backpack, stepped out. He looked at his home, then at the agents, and kicked the dirt. For a moment, the operation paused as the child wove between the men to reach the front door. Then he slipped inside, and the raid resumed.

“Stash house” is an elastic designation. Often, the term is used to refer to a site where people are held against their will in abysmal conditions. Later, Garcia took me to one such place, a cottage that had recently been busted, and where dozens of migrants had been found locked inside. The windows were barred, and bottles of urine and women’s underwear were scattered over the mold-crusting floor, along with debris from the collapsing ceiling. But “stash house” can also refer to homes where coyotes pay for migrants to eat, rest, or await their next guide as they head north. Like most of the stash houses in the valley, the trailer in Donna was one of these. Its occupants were looking for work, family, and safety; they didn’t want to be discovered by police.

Garcia returned after ten minutes with two handcuffed men in tow. When I asked them how they were, they shrugged. “Tired,” one said. They had come from Mexico in search of farm jobs. Now they would be sent back and take the risk again.

“A lot of times, they ask me, ‘How could you do this, when you look just like us?’” Garcia told me, of the migrants he apprehends. “They’ve got a point.”

Chief Gonzalez doesn’t dismiss the criticism that increased militarization puts the police at odds with members of the community they intend to protect, making it harder to gain their cooperation. When we spoke, he had a copy of Radley Balko’s “Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America’s Police Forces” on his desk. “There’s always room to improve,” he said.

But concerns about law-enforcement tactics in the area extend beyond stash-house operations. Advocates speak of the dramatic expansion of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection in the Rio Grande Valley and its effect on local residents, citizens and non-citizens alike. In nearby San Benito, Texas, one of the valley’s poorer towns, I met with a group of women who run “Know Your Rights” nights in their neighbors’ living rooms. They discussed the region’s so-called “hundred-mile exemption,” a policy that grants expanded powers to border agents within a hundred miles of official entry points. One of the women, who was undocumented, described her eight-year-old son’s panic attacks. Whenever he hears a siren or sees a checkpoint on his way back from school, he fears that his parents will be sent away, as many of his classmates’ have been, and runs for cover, although he is himself a U.S. citizen.

Others spoke of verbal harassment at routine traffic stops. Sometimes, the harassment is of a more serious kind. Authorities in the border region have stopped vehicles and ordered anal and vaginal searches of drivers when they suspect them of concealing drugs. In one high-profile case in New Mexico, law enforcement pulled over and searched a fifty-three-year-old man for drugs. Finding none, they drove him to a hospital, where he was given three enemas, two anal probes, and a colonoscopy. No drugs were found, and the man was saddled with a six-thousand-dollar hospital bill.

Gonzalez, Garcia, and other law-enforcement officials from the border region feel beleaguered in their own ways. At a time when private defense firms have been awarded munificent border contracts—a hundred and forty-five million dollars to the subsidiary of an Israeli contractor, for instance, to help fortify the border fence with surveillance equipment—many local police and sheriff's departments have struggled to obtain funds, causing them to rely heavily on asset-forfeiture money seized in drug and human-smuggling raids. As migration patterns reroute through the Rio Grande Valley, counties with few resources and little experience have been forced to shoulder remarkable burdens. In Brooks County, just seventy miles north of the Rio Grande, the sheriff's department doesn't qualify for border-specific federal funds, despite the large number of migrants who have died there in recent years while trying to circumvent an inland Border Patrol checkpoint. The department spends nearly half its annual budget on recovering migrants' corpses, providing autopsies, and transporting the dead, the *Texas Observer* reported last year. As tax revenues have declined, deputies' salaries have taken a hit, and volunteers have helped scour for bodies in the brush.

The attention brought by last summer's child-migrant surge, Garcia believes, further politicized the battle. In parts of the valley, vigilante militiamen began arriving from as far away as Alabama, Indiana, and Missouri to patrol the border. The Obama Administration increased aid to Central America, in an attempt to combat the problem at its source. Other people claimed that much of the blame should be placed on the parents who chose to put their children into the hands of smugglers.

This was the view of Andrew Hanen, a prominent judge in the U.S. Southern District of Texas. In December, 2013, he issued a notable ruling concerning the smuggling of a ten-year-old girl from El Salvador who was trying to reach her mother, in Virginia. The judge listed the dangers the girl might have faced in the hands of extortionists, and argued that the government, instead of arresting the child's mother "for instigating the conspiracy to violate our border security laws," had "delivered the child to her—thus successfully completing the mission of the criminal conspiracy." This, he said, was "unconscionable." Rather than apprehending only smugglers and kidnappers, the

Department of Homeland Security should arrest, detain, and deport undocumented parents who, he believed, had put their children in harm's way—parents like Melida and Alfredo.

The morning after the kidnapers demanded more money, Melida and Alfredo woke up early and saw their daughters off to school. Then they drove to the home of their pastor, the Reverend José Rodríguez. In his living room, they told him everything: about the dangers their two sons faced back in Guatemala, their decision to send the boys north, and the boys' kidnapping in Texas.

The couple had long placed great faith in Rodríguez. At their large Pentecostal church downtown—Trenton's first evangelical Hispanic congregation, where Rodríguez had preached for more than thirty years—they had seen him come to the aid of other families in crisis. Now Rodríguez had an answer for them, too: "We can't waste a second. I'm calling the director." He was speaking of his friend Ralph Rivera, Jr., who ran Trenton's police department.

In recent years, many of the country's police departments have operated as dragnets for immigration enforcement. A federal deportation program, Secure Communities, encouraged collaborations between local police and Immigration and Customs Enforcement on an unprecedented scale until President Obama called for it to be dismantled, in November; the program was responsible for the majority of his Administration's 2.3 million deportations. Trenton, however, has taken a different approach. In 2010, it became one of the first cities in the country to issue community-I.D. cards to unauthorized immigrants, and police have long been under orders not to question residents about their legal status, except when they are investigating a serious offense.

Carrying the receipts from their ransom payments, Alfredo and Melida followed Rodríguez to police headquarters, where they were met by a young detective named Jose Acosta. Ever since working the case of a Honduran mother of three who was murdered and found in a dumpster, he has been one of Trenton's leading officers for cases involving the traumas of immigrant youth. Acosta is sensitive to the dangers faced by undocumented locals, and to their concerns about speaking with law enforcement. Recently, in the Godoy's neighborhood, there had been a string of attacks on day laborers and other undocumented Latino workers who are paid in cash; in February, an eighteen-year-old, just arrived from Guatemala, had been walking back from the grocery store on the Godoy's street when he was slammed to the ground, pummelled, and robbed as he bled to death. "All the time—robberies or stolen property—they don't call, nothing can



be done,” Acosta told me. “We see ten or twelve people living in one apartment, curtains separating the rooms, no bank accounts. We need them to know that we are here to help them.”

Acosta called a contact at the Department of Homeland Security in New Jersey, who, in turn, called a Homeland Security Investigations (H.S.I.) team in the Rio Grande Valley. Within an hour, they had begun assembling a search squad to find the boys. Melida and Alfredo were given instructions on how to prepare for the kidnappers’ next move. “Stay by the phone,” Rivera told Alfredo. “Wait for them to call.”

An agent coached Melida on how to handle any future calls: how to string the conversation along, how to elicit mentions of local landmarks. Soon, the Godoys’ phone rang. It was the woman who had spoken to Melida the day before. “Did you send the money?” she asked.

Melida stalled, begging for more time. The woman accused Melida and Alfredo of going to the police; her mother knew how to read fortune-teller’s cards, she said. Moments later, a second woman called, and demanded immediate delivery of the cash. Otherwise, she said, “who knows where we’ll take the kids?”

Meanwhile, H.S.I. agents tracked down Mendez, the man to whom the Godoys had wired ransom money. They found him in the custody of Border Patrol. Mendez said that Brayan and Robinson were with his family in Rio Grande City. The agents contacted Mendez’s mother, who agreed to surrender the Godoy boys, as well as the two siblings from El Salvador, in a nearby parking lot.

Later that afternoon, Detective Acosta, in Trenton, called Alfredo. “Does Robinson have any distinguishing marks?”

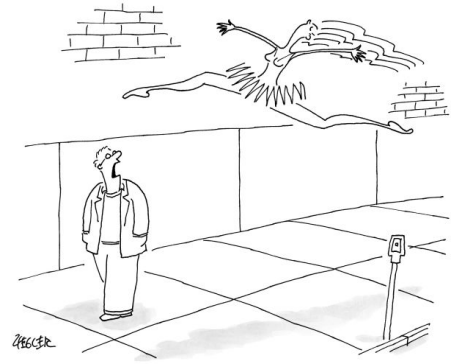
“Yes, a little one right above his eye—he fell off a horse on his grandfather’s farm,” Alfredo said.

And Brayan? Alfredo described a mark beneath the younger boy’s thick black hair.

Around 4 P.M., Mendez’s mother drove the four children to the parking lot of a local church. As police surrounded the perimeter, a contingent of armed agents from H.S.I. and Border Patrol descended on the block. The car pulled into the parking lot and came to a halt. A cluster of agents approached, and one flung open the door and asked the children, “Are you O.K.? Did they hurt you?”

The kids tumbled out into the valley sun. Once the scene was secured, one of the agents dialled Trenton. “Congratulations,” he told Melida. “We have the kids.” He put Robinson on the phone with his mother, to tell her that they were all right.

“Can you just once get to the damn point without the usual embellishments?”



Although Mendez’s mother was questioned at length, nobody has been charged in the case. Mendez is serving two years in federal prison, after pleading guilty to “conspiracy to transport aliens” to the stash house in McAllen. When I recently spoke with him by phone, he described himself as a savior rather than a kidnapper. “Yeah, money was asked, but we were doing it to protect” the children, he said, noting that the kids had risked exposure to insects and animals when they were found by the road. He told me that he had asked the Godoys for only two thousand dollars.

In the bustling migration–extortion economy of the Rio Grande Valley, Mendez seems to have been a bit player. According to Michelle Barth, a lawyer who has represented smugglers in federal court, those who profit most from ransom extraction and routine smuggling are, by contrast, masters of risk mitigation. Through elaborate supply chains, they recruit their cooks, caretakers, and drivers from “the homeless, the mentally ill, and people who have drug problems,” she told me. They also court local mothers who are strapped for cash. These small fish are the ones most likely to face arrest.

Later, I asked the boys about the rescue. They must have felt relieved, I said. “No,” Brayan told me. “I felt scared.” The next phase of their journey, in the hands of the government, turned out to be the most gruelling.

The afternoon of Brayan and Robinson’s rescue, federal agents moved them to a holding cell of the kind known as *hieleras*, or “iceboxes,” for their often frigid temperatures. The brothers sat on the cell’s concrete floor beneath fluorescent lights. An official came around with frozen bologna sandwiches. The *hieleras*, run by U.S. Customs and Border Protection, are meant to be short-term processing facilities; often, the rooms have no beds, mattresses, or chairs. In one corner of the cell was an exposed toilet, which the boys shared with numerous other children. (A spokesman for U.S. Customs and Border Protection said that the agency “took extraordinary measures to care for” children in “overcrowded facilities” during last summer’s migrant surge.)

By law, Border Patrol is required to turn over unaccompanied minors to the Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Refugee Resettlement within seventy-two hours. Then they are placed in a regulated system of shelters, and authorities must seek to reunite them with parents or relatives when possible, or place them in foster care to await federal immigration hearings. Instead, the Godoy boys were held in a *hielera* for a week and a half, packed on the floor each night beneath bright lights.

“No one slept,” Brayan recalls. “There were no windows, so you didn’t know when it was day or night.” The kidnappers had at least given them warm food and a soft couch. At the *hielera*, blisters formed on their feet, and they lost weight.

The boys weren’t alone in their experience of Border Patrol custody. “The whole *hielera* system shook me to my core,” Jonathan Ryan, the executive director of RAICES, a nonprofit organization that provides civil legal aid to immigrant kids and families, told me. His staff of attorneys have offered advice to thousands of unaccompanied kids in nonprofit shelters across Texas, as well as to thousands more at Lackland Air Force Base, where migrant children slept in barracks last spring after shelters overflowed.

Last June, five immigrants’-rights groups across the country filed an official complaint on behalf of a hundred and sixteen children alleging mistreatment in U.S. Customs and Border Protection custody—from sexual assault or physical abuse (reported by a quarter of the kids) to inadequate food and water (reported by eighty per cent). The nonprofit shelters often seem like a big improvement. Alfredo called Detective Acosta, in Trenton, and pleaded with him to intervene. The children were transferred to a shelter operated by a nonprofit government contractor, Southwest Key Programs.

In August, I visited Ryan at his office in San Antonio. A lean thirty-seven-year-old, he was wearing sagging slacks cinched by a weathered belt. “Forgive my pants,” he said. “I’ve been on the Lackland diet”—shorthand for working sixteen-hour, Ensure-for-dinner days doing legal-rights presentations for migrant kids at the Air Force base. He had taken to sleeping in a shack behind his offices.

Together, we went to San Antonio’s immigration court, where deportation proceedings on the children’s docket were under way. Just after we got there, a prosecutor slipped Ryan a sheaf of papers. They turned out to be a new Immigration and Customs Enforcement memo, soon to become public, which argued that women and children who arrived together at the border should be held, without bond, in secure detention facilities, because of potential “threats to our public safety, including national security threats.” For years, such migrants had often been released (sometimes with electronic monitoring) pending hearings. Now they would be held in for-profit family-detention centers, at an estimated cost to the government of two hundred and sixty dollars a night, for the duration of their cases.

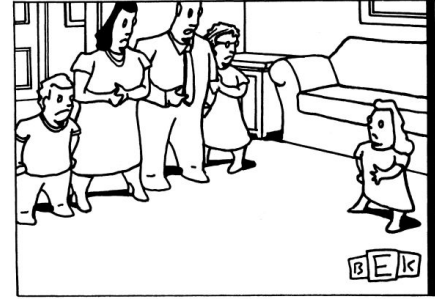
“That was the pivotal moment,” Ryan said later. “The shift from the kids to the families.” After a summer of dealing non-stop with children like Brayan and Robinson, he began taking mother-child clients at Karnes County Residential Center, a detention camp in rural Texas run by the private prison company GEO Group. Ryan helped win the right for some of the detainees to be released on bond, only to find that the amounts, which could be set as high as fifteen thousand dollars, were often too great for the women to afford.

“Let it be the Zetas, or let it be GEO Group,” Ryan told me. “It’s a for-profit enterprise that makes its money by holding people in boxes until they pay.”

“Bad news—we’re all out of our minds. You’re going to have to be the lone healthy person in this family.”

DECEMBER 21, 1998

In February, a federal judge in Washington, D.C., citing “irreparable harm to mothers and children seeking asylum,” moved to block detention as deterrence for certain families. But the family-detention industry has continued to thrive. In December, the Department of Homeland Security opened the largest for-profit family-detention site in the country: the South Texas Family Residential Center, in the oil town of Dilley. At capacity, it will hold up to twenty-four hundred women and children.



On June 5th, after three weeks in custody, Brayan and Robinson were put on a flight, paid for by Melida and Alfredo, to Newark Liberty International Airport. Their parents and their sisters met them at the American Airlines gate. Melida ecstatically snapped photographs as Alfredo promised to take them to a Burlington Coat Factory for a proper New Jersey wardrobe.

Brayan and Robinson quickly adjusted to life in Trenton. On Sunday nights, the family attended church; afterward, the boys ate chicken nuggets at the local diner, then jockeyed with their sisters over the Throne, the front seat of the family Jeep. In early September, the brothers enrolled at the local public school, where a banner in the main hallway read “Welcome to Your Future.” Brayan earned a certificate for generosity to his peers in his English-as-a-second-language class—“Caught Doing Good,” it read—and Robinson learned to play badminton. Alfredo, to help his sons with homework, started taking literacy lessons from a Guatemalan friend. Melida taped English words to the walls: “notebook,” “school,” “together.”

Then, one afternoon in late September, a letter arrived for Brayan. Jennifer translated it: he was being summoned to Newark immigration court, to face federal removal proceedings. If he failed to appear, he could be “taken into custody by the Department of Homeland Security and held for further action.” Brayan’s case was slated for the “rocket dockets,” a system, put into place by the Obama Administration, to deal with the volume of child-migrant cases in backlogged immigration courts. Judges are ordered to speed up children’s hearings, often catapulting them ahead of those of adults who have waited for months, or even years.

The deportation hearing came at an uneasy time. Melida had just learned that a close friend of the boys, a teen-ager named Jefferson, had been shot to death several blocks from her mother's house, in Guatemala City. Melida's brother witnessed the gunman fleeing on a motorbike, and was being urged to testify in court. Now he feared for his life.

There were other reasons for concern. Police in Trenton had held a ceremony to celebrate the boys' safe return, and the local paper ran an article about their rescue, with a photograph of them with Ralph Rivera, Trenton's police director. The news had appeared in the Guatemalan press, and Alfredo worried that if the boys were sent back they would face retaliation from smugglers for the family's collaboration with police.

At six-thirty on a Friday morning in October, Brayan boarded a train to Newark with his parents. He and his mother wore matching Livestrong bracelets. "Are you nervous?" Melida asked, when they arrived at the courthouse.

"No," Brayan said.

"That's because you don't know what's going on," Melida said, laughing gently.

The fact that children are not entitled to free legal counsel in immigration court has serious consequences. According to Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, eighty-five per cent of kids who face immigration proceedings without a lawyer are ordered to be deported, compared with just under thirty per cent of those who have representation. As of last October, less than a third of unaccompanied immigrant children in removal proceedings had lawyers; since then, the federal government has worked to allocate legal aid to more children through generous grants to nonprofits like Cheryl Little's Americans for Immigrant Justice. Other groups, like Kids in Need of Defense, which has established a network of pro-bono representation through offices in eight cities, have sought to pick up the slack. But, considering the pressure created by the fast-tracked dockets, even families willing to pay for legal help can't always find it in time, and the most experienced attorneys often lack sufficient resources to put together a strong case against deportation.

At 9 A.M., Brayan and his parents took the elevator to the courthouse's twelfth floor. Alfredo had hustled to hire last-minute counsel, even though the ransom had left him in debt. Of the twenty or so children at the hearing, only Brayan and another child had a lawyer. For Alfredo, the investment paid off. When Brayan was called to the bench, his lawyer persuaded the judge to give him more time. Melida and Alfredo could begin preparing their sons' applications for U visas, for immigrant victims of crime. On the ride home, Melida told Brayan that a friend of hers "who was horribly beaten" had been able to get a U visa to stay in New Jersey after he helped police catch his assailant.

Brayan turned to his mother. "Do I have to get beaten up to get the visa?"

“No,” Melida said, stroking his hair. You just have to help law enforcement, she told him. You have to get lucky.

On November 20th, President Obama announced a series of executive actions to defer deportations for nearly five million undocumented immigrants now living in the country, including almost four million parents of U.S. citizens and permanent residents. “We’re going to keep focussing enforcement resources on actual threats to our security,” he promised, outlining his plan based on the concept of prosecutorial discretion. “Felons, not families. Criminals, not children. Gang members, not a mom who’s working hard to provide for her kids.”

“I date everything before I freeze it, so I know when to throw it away.”

DECEMBER 8, 2003

Melida and Alfredo were jubilant, but cautiously so. After more than a decade in the country, they would have their first chance to “get right with the law,” as the President put it. When Obama spoke of protections for children, he meant those like Jennifer Godoy, who aspired to attend teacher’s college, and who could now qualify to become a “Dreamer,” taking advantage of an expanded category of relief for youths who had arrived in the country before 2010. He was also speaking of children like her younger sister, Kathryn, who, as U.S. citizens, have had to worry that their undocumented mothers or fathers might not return after a routine traffic stop or a workplace raid. But the reforms didn’t apply to the recent surge of children who had arrived in the country fleeing violence. The Godoy boys still face the prospect of deportation. All the U visas for this fiscal year—the number has been capped by Congress at ten thousand—have been given out, and the waiting list now has a waiting list.



The legal status of Obama’s actions is itself uncertain. Twenty-six states sued in federal court to block deportation relief; their case appeared before Andrew Hanen, of Brownsville, the judge who complained about the failure to prosecute parents who brought their children north with smugglers. In February, Hanen issued a preliminary injunction against the President’s plan. (The Obama Administration has filed an appeal.)

On the Saturday night following Obama’s speech, Melida and Alfredo hosted a prayer circle in their living room. As Melida prepared horchata in a big aluminum pan, she reflected on what the reform measures could mean for the country’s extortion epidemic. “The kidnappers thought they could do whatever they wanted,” she said. Alfredo added,

“No one does what we did”—seek out the police. For months, he had heard from colleagues and friends with their own stories of kidnaps for ransom, mostly endured in silence.

At around 7 P.M., nearly two dozen church friends arrived. A neighbor set up a table in the living room for the service, and couples squeezed onto two small couches or stood against the wall, their kids sprawling on the carpet. After a brief sermon on the theme of generosity, the members of the group stood to pray aloud, each adding private prayers to the collective swell.

Melida entered from the kitchen, murmuring a stream of benedictions that she’d begun reciting months before, as her children set off from Jalapa, and which she planned to carry forward always, wherever she found herself: a prayer—arms raised, head bowed—for teen-agers like Jefferson, gunned down by a masked man in Guatemala City; like Gilberto Francisco Ramos Juarez, who collapsed of heatstroke in the Texas brush of the Rio Grande Valley on his journey north, his corpse found a few miles from where Brayan and Robinson had crossed weeks before; like Julio Cesar Cruz, who’d made it safely to Trenton from Guatemala’s highlands, a few weeks earlier, only to be beaten to death in front of a deli, a spot that Melida had recently pointed out to her sons.

Soon the guests would go home, and the kids would scatter to Facebook and bingo. Melida and Alfredo would discuss contingency plans should the boys get deported—whether they’d uproot Kathryn and Jennifer and return to Guatemala City as a family. But, for this brief moment, the house still smelling of cinnamon, all six members of the Godoy family sat together.

“Psalm 37,” the evening’s prayer leader called out, and the family recited in unison, “Do not fret because of evildoers, nor be envious of the workers of iniquity. For they shall soon be cut down like the grass.” God, Alfredo later reflected, had found a way to return the warm jacket that he’d given up on his journey north. The stranger who had taken it had left him with a promise: “You’re going to suffer, you’re going to suffer a lot. But you’re going to make it.” ♦



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