

## **“A place without family.”**

### **Children who cross the border, in their own words**

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Since the beginning of 2017, immigration authorities have apprehended nearly 140,000 unaccompanied migrant children at the U.S.-Mexico border. Many more have been detained with their families. Some are separated from their parents for months at a time, others for just a few days, and some not at all. They are held in outdoor facilities and mammoth detention centers; they are sent to churches and shelters, group homes and foster families. The majority are eventually released to the custody of a parent, a relative who lives in the States, or a sponsor family — but without knowing whether they’ll be able to remain in the country. Here are some of their stories.

**RICARDO, 9, GUATEMALA.** He and his father were held in a detention facility for five days. I was tired. My feet were hot. I was afraid when immigration came. I thought they were going to kill me.

**DOLMAR, 17, GUATEMALA.** Immigration authorities detained him for 38 days. I made the trip with two men and a lady. When we walked across the border, immigration arrived. They didn’t speak Spanish well. They checked us to make sure we were not drug traffickers, and then they brought us in. I was afraid, but I felt good because they were people from America.

I was locked up for four days without seeing any sunlight. Where I was, there were only children. We got to know each other until we became friends. Some children cried because they had been locked up for more than ten days and could not communicate with their families. I would tell them not to cry, that everything would be fine, that we wouldn’t be locked in there all our lives.

They took me to a shelter in Miami. A lady took care of 11 children and told us we couldn’t greet anyone with a hug because we would be scolded. They said they were going to let us make phone calls after a week, but it didn’t happen. After ten days, I went to ask again. The other kids were able to make the call without waiting long. I was a little jealous. I finally got to call my sister in Guatemala after 15 days.

Even today, I feel sad that I had left my family in Guatemala.

**JOSEFINA\*, 9, HONDURAS.** She and her little sister didn’t see their mother for three months after Border Patrol picked them up. A woman told us that she was going to separate me and my sister from my mother and asked us to come with her to a little jail for kids. She said we were only going to be there for one day, but we were tricked. Three days passed.

They told us we were going to board a plane to New York. From the window, I saw lots and lots of little houses and cars.

In school, I made friends with girls named Katherine, Esperanza, and Carlita. One was from Guatemala, one was from El Salvador, and the other was from Honduras. We played tag, and we

also talked about how much we had suffered when they separated us from our parents and what was happening in our houses where we were being taken care of. On weekends we would go to church. We sang a lot of songs. There were people there who knew we had been separated from our relatives, and they brought us things to cheer us up. In New York, there seemed to be a lot of kids who had been separated from their parents, shopping for things with their host moms. Our host mom would point them out to us.

I went with my sister to an airport. From there we took two planes to Texas, where my mom had been all along. There were a lot of kids there, and they called us out by name to be reunited. It frightened me because they called my name separately from my sister's, but I told them that we would only go together. The three of us stayed at a family center. Usually we were stuck inside our rooms between lunch and dinner. We would watch TV or paint little pictures of Tinker Bell. We were there for 26 days. On the day we left the center, we woke up at 4 a.m., and our lawyer was there to meet us. A friend of his took us in a car to where my dad was staying. I was so happy to see him again. He hadn't really changed much. He's a bit plump.

**JULIO\*, 17, GUATEMALA.** He made the journey with his mother and two siblings, ages 5 and 3. After they caught us, they put us together with others. This was outdoors, and there was no roof, only umbrellas that covered women and children. It was very hot. The floor was made of dirt. I couldn't sleep there. When we arrived, no one told us what was going on or for how long we would stay in this place. My siblings were sitting inside the fence and played a little with other children. I was just taking care of them. We were there for about 31 hours locked up, and then they moved us to a house.

I still talk to my friends in Guatemala on Facebook — they ask me where I am. The last time I talked to them before I left, I told them I was going to run some errands, so they were worried when I didn't come back. They asked me why I didn't tell them I was leaving. I didn't tell them because I didn't know if I was going to make it.

**SISY, 16, HONDURAS.** Crossing the desert, she and her mother got lost and separated from her stepfather and sister. Twenty days into detention, the family was reunited. We arrived at the "icebox" without knowing anything about my little sister and my stepfather. We were there for four days. My mom got a severe headache. I was very scared, so the immigration paramedics took care of her. Then we were put in another icebox at another immigration place. There were many fathers and mothers with their children, and we slept with aluminum blankets. We were like this for 11 days, and I couldn't stand it. My mom didn't eat.

**CARLA\*, 17, AND ALEJANDRO\*, 14, HONDURAS.** The siblings crossed into the U.S. unaccompanied. The agents took us to the migration station, where my brother and I were separated, girls from boys, for four days. On the way to the bathroom, we were able to see each other, but we were too far to even talk. We were just motioning.

Even though I was tired, I couldn't sleep because I didn't know when we were going to be released.

**HECTOR\*, 14, GUATEMALA.** He was kept in a different cell from his father for five hours.

We took a plane to Oakland. It was a regular plane with normal people, not just migrants. It was my first time on a plane, so I didn't feel very well. I was afraid.

I've been here a year — it's all right. I talk to my mom. She asks me if I'm OK. She tells me to study and not do bad things. I listen to her. Maybe she'll come someday.

**CAROLINA\*, 15, GUATEMALA.** She and her mother were separated for seven months. When my mom and I got to the border, we had to cross a river and walk for a bit in the desert. Then immigration arrived, and we tried to run, but they caught us and loaded us into a car. While we drove, there was total silence. None of us spoke.

They told me that they were going to send me to a group home in Texas. I was crying because it was really quiet and I was all alone. They hadn't told my mom and me they were going to separate us, so we couldn't say goodbye. One of the agents, a woman, told me not to be sad because they were going to bring me to a better place. But it would be a place without family.

When I arrived at the group home, they brought me to a room with three other girls. When I crossed, I had a backpack, but they threw it out at the group home. I had a cellphone, headphones, and toothpaste, but they took that as well. I also had a crucifix, which I hid from them because otherwise maybe they would have told me to get rid of it, too. When I could distract myself, I would forget I didn't know where my mom was.

I found out that I could ask for art materials, and a teacher taught me how to draw different parts of the face — noses, eyes, mouths. The faces were pure inventions. They didn't belong to anyone I knew. I would also make bracelets by hand from thread. We couldn't give them to each other because we weren't allowed to have physical contact with other kids because they might say it's abuse.

We couldn't really say goodbye to people, either. Once, a girl told me she was leaving the next day, but we couldn't hug or anything, otherwise they might cancel her flight. There was one girl I got along with really well, and when she left the group home, she wrote me a note with a drawing. It said, "Thanks for your friendship. I love you a lot." A teacher ripped it out of my notebook.

Soon after, lawyers came and told me I couldn't stay at the group home anymore because more people were coming and there wouldn't be space. So one of the teachers brought me to Michigan, where I would stay with a foster mom. I was a little nervous when I first boarded the plane — I had never been on one — but I calmed down by the last hour. It was April, and snow was falling heavily. I thought it was incredible.

When we landed, my foster mom brought me in a car to her house. She showed me some things, but I didn't really understand her because she spoke to me in English, and I only knew basic words. I was comforted by the fact that there was a dog there. So I petted him, and it made me feel better.

My first morning in Michigan, I woke up, and I thought that I was back with my family. But when I realized that I was in a different place, I got sad again. My foster mom treated me really well. She brought me to buy some new clothes and told me that I could get anything I wanted — that it would all be paid for. But I was too ashamed to buy anything. She kept lots of books in my

room and bought me drawing materials. I would help her cook, and slowly I learned more English. She would make hamburgers and lasagna, but also enchiladas.

After I had been in Michigan for two months, my mom was released from detention. To be honest, I didn't want to leave. I thought I was going to be there for more time, and I wanted to explore more and learn more English. I got to L.A. in the afternoon. When we landed, a social worker asked me what I thought — and I said it felt a lot like Guatemala because everyone spoke Spanish. I broke down when I saw my mom and my sister, who I hadn't seen in five years. We signed papers affirming that we had been reunited. I spent that day unpacking and showing them photos of where I had been in Michigan. We didn't really go out to explore because people had to work — that was one big difference. My foster mom had lots of time to spend with me.

Sometimes people ask me if I want to go to Guatemala, and I say no. People are more taken care of here. I feel safe.

\* Name has been changed.