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The Dallas Morning News

'God, why won't you kill him?'

Girl's rape begins hidden, too-common form of abuse

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Published: 17 December 2006
01:42 PM

Note: This article originally appeared in the December 17, 2006, edition of The Dallas Morning News.

First of a seven-part series.

LA BARRA del POTRERO, Mexico – She should be getting back to the cornmeal left unattended in the kitchen. These muddy river banks, cloaked by banana trees and a half-hour walk from the house, are no place for a young girl after dark.

But the woman who brought her to bathe is insistent.

Stay.

More than an hour passes as night settles on the coastal village in southern Mexico. Earth-worn men walk through fields of peanut and corn to primitive homes where children orbit barefoot in the dirt around their mothers. Sea turtles nest in the nearby beach, and hawks make final surveys inland.

A man emerges by the river near where he fishes for shrimp. The girl knows him. She lives with him and his wife, a cousin on her mother's side, in a home up the hill. Tonight he has come to claim her, a virgin, as his other woman. He grabs the girl by the arm as the older woman scuttles away. He muffles her screams with his hand, strips her sleeveless blue dress, pushes her against a rock and rapes her.

His name is Juan García Aguilar. He is 38. The girl's name is Yolanda Méndez Torres. She is 11.

It is the summer of 1998. Over the next six years, he will take her over 5,000 miles, from the tropical scrub brush hills of Oaxaca into the Sonoran Desert and to the United States.

To North Carolina, where she will be a child laborer in blueberry fields. To Georgia and Tennessee, where she will live trapped in motel rooms as Juan pours concrete for Wal-Mart gas stations. And to Dallas, where she will sleep in a closet and decide whether to murder him or escape.

At each step, Yolanda will personify a dark migration: domestic abuse victims taken from a region beset with unreported violence against women and children to a country where they become phantoms, fearful of authorities and ignorant of legal protections.

In Mexico and the rest of Latin America, gripped by a centuries-old culture of machismo, rates of physical and sexual abuse against children are some of the highest in the world, according to a recent United Nations study of violence against children.

And the number of minors reported abducted in both directions across the U.S./Mexico border has more than doubled in recent years, from 168 in 2000 to 397 so far in 2006 – though experts warn that most abductions go unreported. Among the estimated 5 million children living in America as undocumented or with undocumented parents, the number of abuse victims cannot be known. They are largely invisible, unseen until they surface with their stories.

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They call the town La Barra del Potrero, named for the ranchland where the river meets the Pacific Ocean. In all, there are fewer than 100 homes, most with walls stitched from tree branches and tin roofs held together with rusted bottle caps and pieces of found rubber. The land is raw and lush, its heavy tropical air spiked with smells of sweet flowers and burning trash.

At the west end of the village lives Yolanda's grandmother, Juana Alonzo Pedro. To the east, just before the river bridge, stays Juan's family, including his mother and father.

Nearby stands a small wood church on a hill, a community center, a health clinic, an iguana farm and a few small food stands along about a mile of asphalt highway.

Many elders cannot write their own names, and few children finish high school. Husbands and sons fish, tend to crops and migrate back and forth to work in America. Girls wed as young teenagers, families are knit tight and the local history is barbed with machismo and violence. Juan's cousin, Simona Aguilar Torres, runs a roadside store with her husband. She once watched as a man killed her father and Yolanda's uncle after a girl's *quinceañera*. Down the road, a man shot Juan's aunt in the back as she stood in the kitchen.

Yolanda knows little of the history.

She was born in a still smaller and poorer community called San José, a short walk up into the hills where villagers dipped rags in petrol and lit them for heat.

Her mother was Francisca Torres Alonzo, the oldest child of Juana Alonzo. Yolanda's father, Artemio Méndez Martínez, worked as a common laborer.

When Yolanda was small, her parents fought bitterly and split. Artemio took the children. Her mother moved to La Barra to live in a one-room adobe house with Juana Alonzo. Her mother was sick and bone thin. She ate dirt, ash and mineral lime.

Her body swelled from her toes to her head. She died Dec. 9, 1994, when she was 27 and Yolanda was 7. The medical examiner found she suffered from chronic malnutrition, intestinal parasites and an internal infection.

The family prayed over her body all night. Yolanda's grandmother Juana Alonzo had no money and borrowed 3,000 pesos, or less than $900, from a neighbor for a wood coffin and proper burial for her daughter. The next morning, Yolanda joined the funeral procession, six miles along a dirt road into the countryside, to a red-earth cemetery at San Francisco Cozoaltepec. Francisca was entombed under a

raised rectangle of unadorned concrete, with a small wood cross at its head that bore her name. For one year, the family regularly brought flowers and candles.

Yolanda does not remember the funeral, only that her mother was gone.

She moved to La Barra after the services, living with her father and paternal grandmother in the adobe home where her mother died.

Some said the grandmother was bewitched by a *curandero* named Jesús. She began vomiting and died. Yolanda moved down the road with her father in a stick shack. She stopped going to school. She could barely read or write. Her older sister Gabriela ran away with a boyfriend. Her father was not equipped to raise a young girl alone.

In early 1998, Efigenia, Yolanda's cousin, found her walking through the village. She asked her to come live and work in the home with her, her husband, Juan, and their children.

At first, Yolanda liked life there. She slept in a room with one of the young girls. The boys slept next door. The oldest son, Bertín García López, had already left for America as a teenager. Juan was a construction worker in the U.S.

He was a largely unexceptional man, known as quiet, serious and friendly. Short with rounded indigenous features, he had a wide forehead and a groomed black mustache. His family owned much of the land in the village, hundreds of acres where they raised goats and mangos and corn.

He sent money to his mother while working in America. He drank, but no more than most, and had few enemies.

Then he came home from *el Norte*.

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By the time Juan finishes with her by the river, Yolanda does not know if the feeling is pain or fear as she struggles in sweet, sticky darkness. She is a tiny girl with delicate features, inky black eyes and straight black hair that cascades down her back. Crying, she puts on her panties and dress, and the two walk up the rocky hill. Juan leaves her outside the house and goes down the road to visit family.

Inside, Efigenia notices Yolanda is wet and dirty, her knees all sandy. She touches her forehead and thinks she has a fever.

What's wrong, what's wrong? Why are you crying? Why are you all wet?

Because your husband forced himself on me, Yolanda says, explaining the night's events as best a child can.

Efigenia can't believe it. She confronts Juan when he returns.

Do you realize what you did? You took advantage of a little girl?

At first defiant, he denies it. Pressed, he becomes angry. He calls them to his room and closes the door. He grabs Efigenia by the hair and beats her bloody. He beckons Yolanda.

Look at her closely, because this is what's going to happen to your family if you say something more.

That threat will be her prison. She won't tell. Not directly anyway.

This has to be accepted. Speaking up won't do any good. There are stories of what happens to women who turn in their husbands. These stories generally end the same way.

Yolanda, this is the way things have to be, Efigenia tells her. Years later, Efigenia would say that even if her own daughter was raped, she would tell her to not report the crime.

They live like this for a few months in the village. Yolanda tends the home, helps cook tamales and tortillas and stays as a kept woman. Juan rapes her daily, sometimes in the afternoon while his children are at school, sometimes out in the countryside or by the river. She has few friends and rarely ventures outside, except to be with her confidant, a mutt she named Daisy.

Juan's son found the dog abandoned in the village as a puppy and gave her to Yolanda as a gift. Yolanda always liked the name Daisy. She fills up large plastic bottles with rocks and dirt and drags them for her to chase. She bathes her with shampoo, sometimes twice a day, causing the dog's fur to fall out. She tries keeping her inside so she won't get pregnant. On some days they sit under the banana trees, the dog at Yolanda's feet.

If you eat one of the rabbits, they're going to kill you or hit you, she tells the dog. *I don't want them to hit you.*

The dog complies.

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Around town, rumors of the older man and young girl spread. Neighbors say they have heard Yolanda's cries coming from the countryside. Simona, the shopkeeper, notices changes in her body, her hips and the way she walks. More like a woman, less like a girl, she says.

A few family members say that Artemio has sold his daughter for 2,000 pesos, about $200, to Efigenia and Juan. Others say that he gave her to them to pay off a small debt. Artemio denies all of this. Yolanda has gone to live with them of her own free will, he says.

Yolanda won't acknowledge her relationship with Juan.

Gabi, who are you going to believe – other people or me, Yolanda tells her sister Gabriela one day when confronted with the rumors.

No, Yola, I believe you, but I don't know the truth. I have doubts about whether it's true.

No, Gabi, it's not true. People are just talking, but it's not true.

Yolanda cries and leaves. They never speak about it again.

Yolanda's grandmother, however, can't shake her suspicions.

In early June 2000, she walks down the highway, around a curve to Efigenia's house and finds Yolanda in the kitchen. She says she doesn't want people talking about her granddaughter the way they are around the village.

Did he grab you? Tell me, what did he do to you? You can confide in me. I'm going to press charges against him because this isn't right for him to be abusing you.

No, it's not true. It's just a rumor. It's not true.

She cannot tell, but her eyes again betray her.

Why are you crying?

It's that I don't want to hear you say that he is abusing me.

The grandmother leaves unconvinced. She finds Yolanda's father and convinces him to come with her to file a judicial complaint at the Agencia del Ministerio Público in Pochutla, A 30-minute bus ride away. If they file a complaint, authorities can open an investigation, get a doctor to examine Yolanda for signs of rape, and interview Juan. Yolanda will be safe and can move into Juana Alonzo's home down the road, the grandmother thinks.

On June 6, she and Artemio enter the agency housed in a spartan building with dirty white walls, naked light bulbs and shelves that bulge with crusty manila files of rapes and murders and robberies.

In a large book with lined pages, the accusation is handwritten.

Privacion ilegal de la Libertad.

Illegal privation of freedom, or being kept as a de facto slave.

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Juan knows. He has caught wind of the grandmother's plans.

He tells his family that they are leaving. Within days, the family flees the village, taking only what they can carry – leaving furniture and Daisy behind. They travel by bus along the winding highway to Oaxaca City, more than six hours away. Yolanda's grandmother comes for her but finds only an empty house.

Yolanda has never been across those hills and has never seen a city. They arrive by day in the valley where the city of more than 250,000 people sits surrounded by the Sierra Madre del Sur mountains.

They show up at the metal door of Juan's brother, Eucebio García Aguilar, on a dusty street called Calle Monterrey in a Third-World neighborhood called Ejido Santa María.

Surprised by his visitors, Eucebio welcomes them in and offers the kitchen as a place to sleep. Juan tells him they plan to live and work in Oaxaca. He does not share that Yolanda is his woman.

Within weeks, however, Eucebio's wife, Epifanía, finds out about the girl and tells her husband.

It's true, Juan says when confronted by his brother.

But she's too young.

What's wrong with that?

Eucebio was a boy when he watched his dad hit his mom. When he married – he was 17 and she was 15 – he told his wife he would never treat her like that. He knows of a village over the hills where young girls are sold to older men. He wants better for his children.

Leave it alone, Juan tells him when pressed.

You're an adult. You're the oldest. You should be the one to set the example for all of us.

I can't set the example, so why don't you do it?

Most, however, don't share the suspicions of their new neighbors.

Down the street, a coyote's mother looks out her convenience store with the Coca-Cola sign out front. She sees Juan and Yolanda walking some days. She thinks they are father and daughter.

It is not until much later that she and her son, the immigrant smuggler, will find out otherwise.

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In 1543, after the Spanish conquest of Oaxaca, locals found a box abandoned near a rock outcropping, legend tells. They opened it, and the image of a virgin appeared. The Virgin of Solitude. She would become Oaxaca's patron saint.

The ground became righteous space. By 1690, the Catholic Church finished building a temple on the land with an imposing array of domes and bells and rough hewn stone, with virgins and saints and skulls carved into the façade.

On some Sundays, Juan takes the family here. The meaning is not lost on Yolanda, surrounded by images of martyred suffering inside – faded oil paintings of Christ on the cross, angels in perpetual peace, and a bearded God in a blood red robe looking down at the Virgin from above. On the ceiling, a Latin inscription reads:

O all you who pass by this way, look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow. Yolanda prays. The sanctuary fills with the rhythmic chants of priests and the tolling of bells and the singing of the flock.

God, why won't you kill him? He's hurting me so much. Why don't you kill him if he's hurting a child?

She then asks for forgiveness. She believes in God and knows you cannot pray for him to murder. Still, she doesn't understand.

God, why do you let this animal inside your house?

FOOTNOTES

Yolanda's rape by the river: From Yolanda Méndez Torres, Juan García Aguilar, court documents in the U.S. and reporter observation of the village and river. Juan acknowledges that their first sexual encounter was by the river, but will not provide details. The date is from a timeline of Yolanda's early life constructed from interviews with Yolanda, her grandmother Juana Alonzo Pedro, her sister Gabriela Méndez Torres, Juan's son Bertín García López, his cousin Simona Aguilar Torres, other residents of La Barra del Potrero and government documents in Mexico and the U.S.

Data on abused children in Latin America and abductions to the United States: From the UN secretary- general's Study on Violence against Children, UNICEF's Mexico office, and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Abduction data includes movement from Mexico to the U.S. and the U.S. to Mexico. The data may understate the number of reported abductions from the U.S. to Mexico, due to U.S. State Department numbers that are not necessarily contained in the NCMEC statistics. The estimate of the number of children in the U.S. who are undocumented or living with an undocumented parent is from Pew Hispanic Center data.

Background on La Barra del Potrero: From Simona, Juana and her sons Aquilino "Quile" Torres and Rodrigo Torres, Juan's mother Jacinta Aguilar Borques, his brother Eucebio García Aguilar, iguana farm operator Ruperto Ortega Lesama, Gabriela, background research and reporter observation of the village.

Details on violence in the village come from interviews and document research in Pochutla, Mexico. Details of the murder of Yolanda's uncle and Simona's father are from Simona. Details of the murder of Juan's aunt are from Jacinta.

The death of Yolanda's mother: From Francisca Torres Alonzo's death certificate, Juana and her husband, Gabriela and reporter observation of the cemetery in San Francisco Cozoaltepec. Details of Francisca eating dirt, ash and mineral lime are from Juana and her husband, Gabriela and Yolanda's father, Artemio Méndez Martínez.

Yolanda moves in with Juan's family: From Yolanda, Artemio, Bertín, Juana and Simona.

Aftermath of the initial rape: From Yolanda, reporter observation and court documents in the U.S. Juan denies beating his wife. His abuse of Efigenia, however, was confirmed by Eucebio, Juana and Juan's son Juan Carlos García López.

Details on the dog named Daisy: From Yolanda and Juan Carlos.

Rumors around town: From Yolanda, Gabriela, Juana, Artemio and Simona. Dialogue between Gabriela and Yolanda is from Gabriela, corroborated by Yolanda. Dialogue between Yolanda and Juana is from Yolanda, corroborated by Juana. Rumors that Yolanda's father sold her are corroborated by Juana and her husband, Jacinta and Simona.

Grandmother's judicial complaint: From Juana, Yolanda and reporter observation of the complaint in a logbook in the Pochutla, Mexico, ministry.

Flight to Oaxaca City: From Juana, Yolanda, Juan Carlos and Eucebio.

Details from Eucebio's home in Oaxaca: From Eucebio, the coyote Abel's family and reporter observation of the home and neighborhood.

Inside the Oaxaca church: From Yolanda and reporter observation of the Basílica Menor de Nuestra Señora de la Soledad.

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The Dallas Morning News

A girl in the desert

Girl in tow, abuser flees to U.S.

By PAUL MEYER and STELLA M. CHÁVEZ

Staff Writers

Published: 18 December 2006
11:29 AM

Note: This article originally appeared in the December 18, 2006, edition of The Dallas Morning News.

Second in a seven-part series.

ALTAR, Mexico – The mayor watches the abuses arrive at his city in the Sonoran Desert, the illicit gateway to Arizona.

There was the man who forced his sister to sleep with their *coyote*. The mother who put her young girl to work selling roses down by the railroad tracks. The 6-month-old baby smuggled into a land that has reduced thousands of men to sun-scorched remains.

Francisco García Aten, a man of deep religious conviction, walks the streets of Altar. He sees older men with young girls. Sometimes he confronts them, but they just say the girl is a daughter or family, and there's no way to prove otherwise. There is no way for one man to stop any of this, but he tries as thousands pass through each week, drawn into the desert by the promise that pulls from the other side.

This year, 2002, the number of deaths is rising again. It is a journey, the mayor knows, that no child wants to undertake.

More than 1,200 miles to the south, in the city of Oaxaca, Juan has moved Yolanda and the family out of his brother's kitchen into a shack on a rocky street that runs into the hills. Juan's young children go to school. Yolanda stays inside with his wife, Efigenia, cooking and cleaning. They do not speak much of the past.

It is spring, but the neighborhood stands in contrast to the electric greens and blues of the village from where they fled – from the banana trees, the iguana farm and the Pacific Ocean. Here, men build homes from flattened metal cans. Dogs dance with flies, and children kick frayed balls in the dirt.

Next door to the family's new home, Margarita runs a yellow-painted store, selling beer and sodas and cigarettes and food. Yolanda, she thinks at first, is a simple, quiet girl. But she never sees her leave home

to play or go to school.

Now 14, Yolanda is no longer a girl. Not since that summer night almost four years ago when Juan raped her by the river and claimed her as his other woman.

There were never those frivolous, fantastic dreams of imaginary lands. Or invented games, nascent crushes, role-playing, adolescent first kisses and birthday parties. She is a woman in a tiny body, standing less than 4 feet, 9 inches, maybe 80 pounds, with hips and shoulder blades that stretch her skin. She is a girl filled with anger, pain and resignation.

Margarita begins to learn more. She hears that Yolanda has been sold to Juan and Efigenia. One day, Juan's son comes to her store to buy Chiclets gum and tells her that Yolanda is sleeping with his father.

She hears arguments coming from inside the house, but she never intervenes.

Outside, a young girl named Jessica plays with her friends. She is about Yolanda's age and sometimes asks her to play, only to be told that Juan would get angry. And occasionally when she goes over to the house to play with Juan's children, she can hear Yolanda crying. On one such day, while Juan is at work, the teenager tells her about the rapes and threats and captivity.

Nothing is done. Violence against women and children often goes unreported in parts of Mexico.

Juan's mother, Jacinta, meanwhile, has developed a heart condition, and he decides to take his family back to the village for a couple of days. Jacinta knows of Yolanda and has chastised her son. Juan, however, told her that his wife, Efigenia, is fine with the arrangement. Efigenia has said little to others about the relationship.

But in town, Yolanda runs into her uncle Quile. He is her mother's brother and has heard of Juan's abuses.

Your mother died, and you know you can count on me, he tells her.

He asks her questions about her relationship with Juan. She cries tears of acknowledgment, but says little. Quile erupts.

Let me kill him.

Later, he is drunk when he finds Juan. They argue angrily. But if Quile had tried to fight him then, Yolanda is confident he would have lost on account of the mescal. Quile returns to his mother's home without incident.

Yolanda and Efigenia return to Oaxaca the next day, joined by Juan about a day later.

Who told Quile? he demands to know.

They both deny it.

Who the devil told him? Tell me, which one of you two told him. If it was one of you and you don't tell me, your uncle is going to die.

Nobody tells. Soon, Juan begins making plans to take Yolanda to America. She suspects he is afraid of

being turned in if they stay in Mexico. She knows she has no choice in any of this. She does not think about escaping. There is nowhere to go, and Juan has threatened to kill her family if she tries.

A couple of miles away, on the street where they first stayed with Juan's brother, lives a coyote named Abel and his family.

Abel is 19 or 20, stocky and tattooed with a buzz cut. He started working the border only recently. His mom runs a store from the front of the home under a white, green and black awning with a Coca-Cola sign on the wall.

She once watched Yolanda and Juan in the neighborhood and thought they were father and daughter.

Juan approaches Abel and asks him if he can organize a trip to Arizona. He plans to take Yolanda to Dallas, where he has relatives and where his son Bertín can help him get an apartment. He already has job contacts, and a former boss lives in Oak Cliff.He will leave Efigenia and his family behind.

Within days, the trip is arranged. In addition to Yolanda and Juan, the traveling group includes a man named Emerson, a young teenager named Amber and his older brother Manuel. They are going to America to work, send money home, maybe help their mother build a new house. Nobody knows about Juan's relationship with Yolanda. He tells Abel she is his niece. Juan promises to pay the *coyote* the cost for both of them when they reach the United States and he can get help from relatives.

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It is late spring 2002 when they begin their trip on the ADO bus line in Oaxaca. Yolanda wears faded blue jeans and a shirt with purple straps. She carries only water, a change of clothes and a birth certificate.

The only thing I can tell you is to take very good care of yourself and think very carefully about what you do over there, Efigenia tells her.

They head north.

Juan is quiet. Maybe he is thinking about what will happen if they don't make it across the desert. Or about immigration agents, the military or the dangers of bringing an underage girl with him. He has made this journey before, and Yolanda knows he has been turned back. She secretly hopes agents will stop them. At least in Oaxaca she has family. America means nothing to her. She sits by the window and fantasizes about being a bird or a tree.

North.

They transfer at a Mexico City station, a glassy modern building where they can stock up on water and have one last chance to play the lottery before boarding their futures. From here, the names of bus companies are advertisements for a better life: Futura, Transportes Frontera, Transportes del Norte. ...

They get on the Estrella Blanca, the White Star, for the 40-plus-hour ride to Altar, the bus brimming with a mottled mix of *coyotes* and migrants, of rusty, reliable men and fresh-faced youths ready for adventure.

North.

They trace the Pacific Coast, watching bad American movies on mounted televisions.

At a stop in Tepic, authorities have posted photos of missing women and children behind glass. At Mazatlán, they would later post signs with death statistics from the Arizona desert along with stories of murder and migrants who bake to death in the back of tractor trailers.

As the bus crawls to the border, men in military fatigues board. They start searching bags and asking questions.

How old are you?

Yolanda answers.

Who are you with?

What is he to you?

She's my niece, Juan says. He says they are going to visit family. After almost four years of intimidation, Yolanda has learned to stay silent.

The officer examines their documents and lets them continue.

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By day, they arrive in Altar, Francisco García Aten's town where the local population swells with the tides of immigrants and commodities.

There used to be 200 daily crossings, the mayor recalls. By 2001, that had increased to 1,200. The town itself has little reason to exist apart from the traffic. There is the main drag with the Pollo Feliz restaurant, the town square and dozens of hotels and small lodges where migrants can rest. At the square, Ford Econoline vans line up from morning until sundown, packing people 20 deep for the hour-plus trip to Sasabe, where most of the desert crossings begin. Nearby, a church offers one last chance for prayer.

Jesus' heart, full of love and mercy, I want to pray to you for my fellow migrants, a message inside reads. Have pity on them and protect them, because they suffer from mistreatment and humiliation on their journey, and they are known by many as dangerous and marginalized because they are foreigners.

At the back is a space to post photos of missing men and women.

Abel takes his group to a small inn, where they sleep on mattresses on the floor in a large room. The next afternoon, they leave for the desert. Yolanda carries chips, a few small bottles of water and a ragged birth certificate. It is her only form of identification.

They pack into a van at the square, drive out of town and turn onto a dirt road toward Sasabe where white crosses rise from the sand and drivers make the sign of the cross on their chests. Saguaro cacti point prickly fingers out into the emptiness.

Just southwest of Sasabe, many immigrants jump off in a junkyard of rusted trucks, hypodermic needles and a few homes, where trash and used toilet paper hang from cactus spikes. These are the last residues of life in Mexico. From there, they transfer to trucks that carry them off road along dry creek beds. They arrive at a barbed wire fence, hop across and begin walking into the Sonoran.

Simple, unless you get lost.

In 2001, 78 people died in the Tucson sector, which includes the Sasabe crossing. The number will reach 134 in 2002.

It is a terrifying experience for a child. Apart from the heat that can push 110 degrees, there are the rattlesnakes and desert tarantulas and giant hairy scorpions and cacti with funny-sounding names like prickly pear and hedgehog and fishhook.

Abel's group transfers from the van to a truck that takes them off road in the desert, where they cross a fence and walk half an hour to a creek bed. There, they wait for night to fall and listen to passing helicopters.

What's Don Juan to you? Amber, the young teenage boy, asks Yolanda.

Nothing. It's that her father doesn't want her to be in Mexico, Juan says. *He wants her to be with her aunts and uncles in the United States.*

Yolanda is silent. Night comes. Abel begins leading the way to a place he knows as the Indian's house. Once they reach that house, they will be safe. The Indian will drive them into Arizona.

They walk for several hours in silence, dodging the spotlights of the border patrol. Abel puts branches on the ground where border patrol vehicles have left tire tracks in the sand, walking atop them to prevent leaving footprints that can be tracked. Yolanda thinks she sees human bodies and snakes. Strange things brush up against her, and thorns lodge in her clothes.

Suddenly, Abel calls out from ahead. *Don't come any farther.*

He has fallen down a steep embankment. One by one, the men carefully climb down. Yolanda is left alone on the top. There is the fleeting thought.

If only I could run away now.

She knows it would mean sure death. She climbs down in the arms of her devil.

FOOTNOTES

Mayor in Altar: From former Mayor Francisco García Aten, death statistics for 2002 from the U.S. Border Patrol Tucson sector and reporter observation of Altar.

Yolanda in Oaxaca City: From neighbor and shop operator Margarita, neighbor Jessica Casique Espinoza, neighbor Darwin Casique Espinoza, Yolanda, a photograph of Yolanda in Oaxaca and reporter observation of the home and neighborhood.

Return to La Barra del Potrero: From Yolanda, Juan's mother Jacinta Aguilar Borques, his brother Eucebio García Aguilar, Yolanda's grandmother Juana Alonzo Pedro and her uncle Aquilino "Quile" Torres. Details of Jacinta's knowledge of Yolanda's relationship with her son are from Jacinta. The description of the meeting between Quile and Yolanda is from Quile, corroborated by Yolanda.

Flight from Oaxaca City: From the coyote Abel, his mother, his brother-in-law Floriberto, Juan García

Aguilar, Yolanda and reporter observation of the bus ride from Oaxaca to Mexico City.

Trip to the border: From Abel, Yolanda, background research and reporter observation on the Estrella Blanca bus from Mexico City to Altar along the same route taken by Yolanda.

In Altar: From Francisco, Yolanda, Abel, José Noé — an employee at the Pollo Feliz, reporter observation and immigration death statistics.

dallasnews.com
The Dallas Morning News

A shadow in America

On his travels in U.S., abuser tries to keep child's ordeal quiet

By PAUL MEYER and STELLA M. CHÁVEZ

Staff Writers

Published: 19 December 2006
03:21 PM

Note: This article originally appeared in the December 19, 2006, edition of The Dallas Morning News.

Third in a seven-part series.

PHOENIX – Bertín won't send the money.

He expected only his father to cross the desert and says by phone he doesn't have the extra cash for Yolanda. Or maybe that's just an excuse. He blames the 14-year-old girl for getting between his mother and father. He blames his father for bringing her to America.

Either way, there's no money. They can't pay the *coyote*. And Juan is out of options.

They're near Phoenix, living in a halfway house for recent immigrants. Juan has a smuggling debt of at least a couple thousand dollars. He promised to pay their smuggler once they arrived, before heading to Dallas to live and find construction work. But his son won't budge.

So they will go to North Carolina to work off their debt, indentured in the fields.

Within days, Juan and Yolanda get in a minivan with tinted windows and about a dozen other immigrants heading east.

It has been four years since he started abusing her, four years of flight from the small village in southern Mexico to the city of Oaxaca, across the Sonoran Desert and now along an American interstate.

They pass the truck stops selling dream catchers and breakfast burritos. Indian casinos, rust red plateaus and auto dealerships with American flags. The van breaks down, and everybody hides under a bridge until it's fixed.

More than a day later, they arrive just outside of Seven Springs, N.C., in a mobile home park on Cabin Creek Drive.

114 Cabin Creek is a singlewide, two-bedroom trailer with dirty white synthetic siding, backed against a

clothesline and tobacco field. There are sheets on the windows, foam board ceilings, stained mattresses. And thin walls.

Yolanda and as many as 10 men live inside. Everybody knows she is Juan's woman. The two sleep together in a single bed in a room not much bigger than a walk-in closet. Juan's wife and family remain in Mexico.

For the old cat, a tender rat, Yolanda hears the men say.

Anyone could put an end to this with an anonymous phone call to police. But fear keeps people from speaking up. It's the fear that police will come. Then Immigration. Men will be deported. Money will dry up. Families will rupture.

Juan tells Yolanda that if she called police, they would send her back to Mexico. He would follow. She knows what could happen next.

If she was in school, there would be a network of counselors and teachers and friends and parents of friends. If she was a resident or spoke English, she might know about shelters or laws. As it is, she can barely read or write in Spanish.

Here, there is only silence.

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Seven Springs, population 86, is a historic town in eastern North Carolina on the banks of the Neuse River. Its main strip boasts the Seven Springs Restaurant – run by Ola Mae Adams – an antique store, post office and the volunteer fire department. Just to the north, 59 steps up a hill, stands the white wood Methodist church, its dented copper steeple the highest point around. Bobby Mozingo does Civil War re-enactments in these parts, and Jewel Kilpatrick is the silver-haired mayor.

Then there is the migrant town just outside the city limits, fed by the fields of corn, wheat, beans and tobacco. By the Southern Produce plant, Carolina Turkey and a hog plant not far from that.

Limbo King, his belly bulging over his pants with a rat's nest of chest hair and untamed beard, has been property manager at Cabin Creek for more than a decade. He talks, often while chain smoking, in piecemeal Spanish with a North Carolina drawl. He likes the job, he says, because it lets him sleep with Hispanic men.

On the highway and dirt roads, he knows of the brothels and bars that dot the land. Women, he says, come in from New York, among other places. Sex costs about $30, but the rate is negotiable.

As far as labor in the fields is concerned, Ismael Pacheco, known simply as Pacheco, is the man. He owns many of the mobile homes around Cabin Creek. Each morning, trucks and vans show up to take men to farms and packing plants that have made deals with Pacheco's contract labor company. The supply of workers is rarely an issue.

Some come from Florida after orange season. Others come straight from the border.

Logs record names and hours worked, handwritten on notebook paper. $5.15 an hour for work at Lewis

Nursery and Farms picking pickles, with other farms paying per container for sweet potatoes and peppers picked.

When Juan and Yolanda arrive, it's blueberry season.

In the mornings, they wake before sunup for the hourlong ride to the field.

The field is her escape. The heat, she thinks, is unbearable, but there are cows and horses and birds' nests and ants with wings to look at. The bosses give her small containers to put the fruit in. Not too green or too ripe. Remember the gloves. They get coffee and bread and beans at lunch. She tries not to think about the trailer, about what's awaiting her when she returns.

At sundown, on the trip home, she sometimes falls asleep in the van. She rushes to beat the men to the bathroom to shower and wash off the pesticides.

Then it's almost always the same, the dull dread when darkness comes. He comes for her after dinner or when everyone else has gone to sleep. Sometimes she struggles. More often than not, she is resigned to the futility of struggling. Sometimes she goes to the bathroom and cries and vomits. Then back to the mattress for sleep. He tries to press his body against hers. She pushes him away and faces the other way, a small act of rebellion.

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Two blocks away, Laura Hernández sells perfumes door to door. She meets Yolanda one day out on her rounds. There is a mixture of empathy and sadness, seeing the teenage girl in the company of such men. She was about Yolanda's age when she came to America.

Is he your husband?

No, he's my father.

Her intuition tells her it isn't true. Over the next few months, she sees Yolanda a handful of times. Her daughters – Daisy, Diana, Dilayla and Dalia – give her clothes. Laura thinks fleetingly about adopting the girl.

But Juan is already planning to leave. He isn't paying down the debt fast enough. In addition to the smuggling debt, there are the rent and electricity and daily expenses. He decides to run from Seven Springs in the winter of 2002. He calls his friend César Santana and asks if he can line up some work. César is heading a crew of laborers working on Wal-Mart gas stations. He agrees to pick up Juan by night at a McDonald's parking lot in nearby Mount Olive. The Hernándezes drive Juan and Yolanda into town.

César sees the little girl step out of the SUV and thinks it is Juan's daughter. Juan has not told him otherwise.

They drive all night to Bremen, Ga., 50 miles outside of Atlanta. Yolanda notices César examining her through the rearview mirror.

They arrive at the Days Inn near the interstate in the morning and move into their hotel rooms. Juan gets to work with César pouring concrete for a Wal-Mart gas station down the road.

In the mornings, Juan takes the key card with him, leaving Yolanda alone. She has nothing to eat except a bag of chips on some days, until Juan brings her dinner. Hour on hour, she watches television. *Terminator. RoboCop. Stuart Little.*

Why don't you take her some food, César asks Juan at a Mexican restaurant.

No, she's already eaten.

César knows it isn't true. His workers soon tell him that Yolanda is Juan's woman.

César understands the kind of trouble he could be in. About three days after they arrive, he goes to Yolanda's room while Juan works.

Yolanda struggles with the door and looks scared when she gets it open. César tells her something strange is going on inside the hotel and he wants answers.

First of all, how old are you?

18.

César laughs. *Please, little girl, you're lying to me. My daughter's about the same age as you, how can I not know how old you are? I can tell by your face that you're too young to be 18 years old. How old are you?*

Yolanda won't tell.

This man García has a wife. He has five kids. He's three times your age. He's older than me!

Yolanda starts crying and shaking. César tells her to calm down.

You have to promise me that you're not going to tell García anything, she says.

It's not what you think it is. I don't want to be with this man. I know this man is old enough to be my grandfather. But this man has threatened me. That's why I can't say anything. He told me if I said anything to anyone, he would kill my family.

Yolanda tells her real age. César knows he is in a bind. Having this girl here with his crew is dangerous, especially if the police come. He is legal, but his wife and many of his workers are not. He promises not to tell Juan and says they'll find a solution. He calls his wife, Cristina, in Dallas and tells her of the girl.

What should I do? he asks her.

You can't do anything.

Why?

Because she's underage. And if you call the police, everyone could go to jail.

Within days, they finish the job in Bremen and head to another Wal-Mart in Waverly, Tenn.

César gives Yolanda a phone card to call Cristina. The first time they talk, Cristina tells Yolanda she knows about her history and will try to help.

Yolanda hides the card under the TV, pulling it out with a safety pin when Juan leaves. César sneaks her food so she won't starve.

It takes about two weeks to finish the Waverly job. There's no more work. César, Juan and Yolanda head for Texas.

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It has been raining in Dallas, the water still standing on the streets of Oak Cliff.

Cristina looks outside and sees Yolanda jumping in puddles.

And that little girl? she asks of her husband.

That's Juan's woman.

FOOTNOTES

In Phoenix: From Juan's son Bertín García López, the coyote Abel, Juan García Aguilar and Yolanda Méndez Torres.

Trip across U.S. and into Seven Springs: From Yolanda, Abel, reporter observation of the trip and of the mobile home in Seven Springs. Yolanda did not remember the address of the mobile home where she stayed. It was confirmed by neighbor Laura Hernández and her family, who knew and visited Yolanda.

Background on Seven Springs: From U.S. Census data, property manager Limbo King, Andrés Reyes Flores at the Tienda y Taquería Flores, workers at a local fruit stand, Mayor Jewel Kilpatrick and reporter observation. Details about migrant workers in the area are also taken from a review of worker logs over multiple years, including the year when Yolanda lived in the area.

Yolanda living in Seven Springs: From Yolanda, Juan García Aguilar, Laura and her daughters. Dialogue between Laura and Yolanda is from Laura, corroborated by Yolanda.

Flight from Seven Springs: From Laura, Juan's former boss César Santana, his wife Cristina and Yolanda.

César's confrontation of Yolanda at the motel: From César , Cristina and Yolanda. Dialogue between the two is from Yolanda, confirmed by César. Dialogue between César and Juan is from César. Details of the phone conversation between César and Cristina were corroborated by both.

Names and descriptions of the motels and job sites: From César, Cristina, Yolanda and reporter observation at the Imperial Lodge in Waverly, Tenn., and the Days Inn in Bremen, Ga.

Trip to Dallas: From Cristina, César and Yolanda. Dialogue is from Cristina.