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‘This is all one big lie.’ Why this migrant just wishes he could go home

Carlos Joaquin Salinas remembers the lies. Beginning with the coyote. “The smuggler told me this would be like going to Disneyland, and that everyone would greet us with jobs,” the Guatemalan says.

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EL PASO — Carlos Joaquin Salinas remembers the lies. Looking back, they lied to him and his boy. Beginning with the coyote.

“The smuggler told me this would be like going to Disneyland, and that everyone would greet us with jobs,” says Joaquin, 29.

The two men agreed on a price of \$6,000, which included a special deal he couldn't refuse. Two for one. His son, 10-year-old Fernando, would come along for free. They would leave their hometown in the region of Santa Rosa near the Pacific coast of Guatemala and Joaquin would find work in North Texas.

They sold a small family plot of land, the three cows and four chickens. They took out a loan to come up with the money. They traveled by bus, with cushy seats and a TV to watch movies. He and Fernando laughed and bonded and made it to Ciudad Juarez in just five days.

Once in Juarez, the coyote pointed to the Franklin Mountains, emblazoned with a giant star that is brightly lit at night, and said, “That's the United States. Run all the way to the Rio Grande and you're there. Look for the Border Patrol and turn yourself in.”

Father and son ran across a busy highway, dodging traffic. Joaquin held on to his hand as Fernando screamed with joy, “We made it, Papi. Papi, we made it to a new life!”

But their travails had just begun. Over the next few days, Joaquin and his son went from being held under an international bridge like “caged animals, a circus” to living in a shelter and finally waiting for a bus to take them to North Texas.

Seeking asylum, they've been ordered to go before a judge to prove they deserve to be in the promised land. In several interviews in the roughly three weeks since Joaquin arrived, he shared his story with *The Dallas Morning News*, recounting his perilous journey across the border, and the difficulties of adjusting to his new life in North Texas.

Now in Arlington, they wish they could go back home. “I wish I could turn back time,” Joaquin says.

“Had I known what I know now, I never would have made the decision,” he says. “Never.”

But now, he says, he literally can't afford to go back. The trip has left him with years of ballooning debt.

“I'm screwed,” he says. “My message to my fellow Guatemaltecos: Don't come. This is all one big lie.”

North for a new life

Joaquin, a farmer, had long grown small plots of milpas — corn — and beans. But over the last few years, the rain cycles have changed — as has the amount of sun his crops could get. Planting was no longer a sure thing to help him and his family of four put food on the table, or pay for his mother's medication.

Climate change, according to the World Bank, could force more than 1.4 million people to flee their homes in Central America in the decades to come. The change upended Joaquin's life. He noticed fellow farmers were also leaving.

Then, a cousin and a friend were found dead for no known reason, killed by local thugs who held the town hostage.

Joaquin felt the north was his only option.

Determined, and “obsessed,” Joaquin remembers making the decision, along with his wife, in the middle of the night. He remembers the sad goodbyes to his family, their tears.

But he also recalls how excited he was, dreaming of a new future. He prepared for the journey. After selling the land and the animals, he found he was still short of the coyote’s fee by a couple of thousand dollars.

His wife encouraged him to call friends and relatives in Texas. A cousin and a friend near Dallas both agreed to help by being co-signers to his agreement with the coyote. The smuggler would hold them all accountable for the final payment.

Then came the hard part. He looked at his boys and picked the one he thought had the pilas — the wits — to survive the uncertain journey north with him. Joaquin says he picked Fernando, the eldest, not just because he’s wiser, but because, “I just have a gut feeling about him. He’s tenacious, determined. He pushes me even when doubts come over me. ‘Go, Papi, go.’”

Joaquin asked for his mother’s blessing. She didn’t want him to leave for fear that she’d never see him again. The road ahead was perilous, she said. And she had recently suffered a stroke. That’s why he needed to leave, Joaquin told her. To earn money for her medicine and in case she ended up in a hospital. The stroke, he told her, was a sign from God that leaving was his destiny.

Joaquin assured his mother and wife that the coyote said the trip would be a breeze. In a week or so, he’d be in Texas with his cousin. The plan was to be gone only long enough to make money, send remittances home and save to start a new business, away from farming.

Maybe during that time Fernando could learn English, and return to Guatemala to perhaps someday work in the tourism industry, or do something else in life that would break the cycle of poverty that has shadowed Central American families for centuries.

Joaquin told his family he’d be back in two, maybe three years.

His mother asked him to bow his head. She blessed him. They cried.

“Don’t worry, mother. Everything will be fine,” he said, repeating the lines given by the coyote about Disneyland, and a nation where he’d be happily greeted with job offers.

The journey

Joaquin and Fernando left for Mexico. It was a surprise to Joaquin when the coyote they’d carefully selected in Guatemala suddenly passed them on to a Mexican smuggler, part of a network that stretched throughout both countries.

In the days ahead, it seemed like in every region someone new took over. There were new shelters, new bribes to pay.

Mostly, Joaquin and Fernando were relieved that they wouldn't be traveling on the train of death, widely known as La Bestia — the beast. Over the years, many migrants have fallen off the cargo train, losing limbs or their lives. Criminals also prey on the helpless passengers, who face the threat of robbery, rape or death.

Instead, their coyote had arranged it so that they would ride in comfortable buses. Occasionally, men would board during the night and everyone was required to pay \$200 to \$300 bribes so the coaches could be allowed to pass through certain regions controlled by organized crime.

In Puebla, Joaquin and his son got off the bus and rode in a taxi to Mexico City. There, they took a van — a ruterá — to get around the biggest city they'd ever seen. They also slept in a small shelter with dozens of others in a town somewhere in the state of Zacatecas.

The next morning, they loaded into a packed bus and roared all the way to Ciudad Juarez. There, a new coyote met them. He took them to the border, teeming with thousands of other migrants from all over the world, especially Central America.

The journey took a little more than a week. Joaquin remembers driving with the new coyote alongside the Chamizal Park and passing the so-called X, a giant red, iconic landmark sculpture in Juarez, one of the most dangerous cities in Mexico. That was when the coyote pointed to the Franklin Mountains across in El Paso and told them to run for it, across a muddy Rio Grande and then turn themselves in once they were across the river. "It's that simple," said the coyote.

Father and son raced across the highway. One woman screeched the brakes on her car with Texas plates. She pulled to the side and screamed: "Don't turn yourself in. It'll be your worst nightmare."

The pair looked at each other, confused. They continued running. Joaquin held on to Fernando, who had a big, foolish grin on his face and jumped for joy.

It would not be long before Joaquin began to understand the woman's meaning. His voice cracks when he talks about the days that followed.

The America they were told about was a lie. They were not welcomed with open arms.

They spent the next four nights underneath the Paso del Norte international bridge alongside hundreds more migrants in a cramped, temporary corral seen in photos that were published across the U.S. and beyond.

The admittedly hard-pressed Border Patrol has said it faces a humanitarian crisis.

In a statement attributed to Andrew Meehan, assistant commissioner for public affairs of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the agency said "the care of those in our custody is paramount." The agency added that CBP, the Border Patrol and the Department of Homeland Security have been "transparent for several months by conveying the message both publicly, internationally and to Congress that the immigration system is broken and that they are at critical capacity levels across the southwest border."

About 95,000 migrants crossed into the U.S. in March alone. Conditions were so difficult in the temporary shelter that many migrants, including Joaquin and his son, slept on Mylar blankets on gravel.

They were awakened by Border Patrol agents who tossed them cold sandwiches at 3 a.m. The winds of March picked up. Dust swirled. The nights were cold. They stood and stared out at reporters, Joaquin says, who took their pictures, shouted questions as though “we were caged animals at a circus. I had no idea what was going on. Why we were being used as pawns.”

Fernando would look to his father for answers, Joaquin recalls. “I avoided his gaze because I realized I had also lied to him. This was the United States of America and we were treated worse than dogs, and I say that because the dogs with the agents were treated better than we were. They were at least given plates with their food. We had food thrown at us.”

At night, Joaquin says, he sat with his son, wiping away pigeon droppings that fell from under the bridge where the pigeons mated. He remembers staring at his son and asking him for forgiveness. He questioned why he listened to the smuggler who said that bringing his child would help him pave a way into the U.S. easier as he would avoid instant deportation. At that point, he says, all he wanted to do was head back to Guatemala.

But there was that debt, which now felt like a pistol pointed at his head. And then his son’s smile when he’d wake up and say, “No, Papi, let’s try this out. We’ll make it work.”

One morning, Fernando jokingly told his father, “What else do we have to lose? We’ve lost it all. Let’s get it back.”

Into America

On day five, Joaquin was released by government officials to Annunciation House, a non-profit organization that coordinates migrant shelters throughout the region. He was eventually to have his asylum case to make a credible fear claim in the immigration courts, but that would be months or years away.

With the help of volunteers at the nonprofit shelter, he finally made contact with his cousin in Arlington, who had grown worried about him. The cousin paid for two bus tickets from El Paso to Fort Worth.

When Joaquin was told about the tickets, he thanked the volunteer, but quietly mused about whether he wanted to continue the journey. He’d been thinking a lot about his mother. He missed his village, the smell of tortillas, beans on the stove, his wife, his two other sons.

“We don’t have much, and we’ll probably never have anything, but we did have some dignity and respect, politeness from your neighbors,” he said. “All I wanted to do was work. Nothing more. I’m not here for handouts. I just want to work. Not take anyone’s job away. Just work in whatever I’m offered.”

On a Saturday evening, Joaquin waited inside a makeshift bus terminal from which routes spread throughout the U.S.: Denver, Los Angeles, Oklahoma City, Fort Worth, Dallas. He looked around and recognized the faces of many people he met underneath the bridge days before, only a few blocks away from the terminal. All sat glumly, watching television entertainment shows, waiting for their buses to depart. And coughing, like a chorus. Many were sick, including Joaquin and Fernando.

“They say we bring diseases,” he said that day as he and Fernando walked across the street to fetch some water for medicine that volunteers had given them for their colds and rising fevers. “That’s true.

But that is because we were treated so poorly and left outside to sleep on rocks and it was cold. Of course we're sick."

The two boarded the bus for the 12-hour drive to North Texas, where Joaquin's cousin would meet them.

Joaquin and Fernando had their first meeting with ICE officials and now have a court date set for June. He's bored and worried. Despite what his cousin told him about working immediately, he's not supposed to work until his "status" is determined. But if he doesn't work, "I become a burden to this country, and I don't want to do that."

He walks Arlington a lot with his son. They marvel at the colorful Six Flags Over Texas amusement park, the imposing Cowboys Stadium sitting like a huge spaceship on the Texas prairie, and the cranes and rising frame of the new, billion-dollar baseball park going up for the Texas Rangers. His cousin says they're hiring.

"I see jobs everywhere," he says. "I see much opportunity."

Last week, he started accepting small job offers, doing things like helping replace windows at houses. He made \$100 in one day, the kind of money he'd make in two weeks back in Guatemala. He sent some of that money to his wife, mother and children.

He also tried to register his son at an elementary school. Fernando got excited and dressed up. "I even put gel on my hair," Fernando says. But he was told the spring semester is nearly over and was encouraged to return in the fall, "if we're still here," Joaquin adds.

He also used some of his money to buy a phone to reconnect on WhatsApp with friends and relatives back in Guatemala. He had one message. He urged them to stay put: Don't sell your land, your cattle, all you own for this. Don't come.

They were skeptical, Joaquin says, especially after they heard about the money he'd sent his wife. Are you trying to prevent us from coming so you can keep the jobs all to yourself?

"They think I'm lying to them," he says.

Joaquin pushed back. The government is making things more and more difficult, he told them. The journey is not worth it. But he says no one listens. By Tuesday of last week, he'd heard from two more of his cousins. They were in Veracruz, Mexico, and headed for El Paso and eventually North Texas. They had to cross now, they explained, before the U.S. government makes it even more difficult.

"All we live on is a glimpse of hope," he says. "Even when that hope is based on a lie."