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SEEKING REFUGE

STORY BY DYLAN MCAULEY AND JENNIE TREJO
“You have ten seconds to get across.”

That was all the man smuggling Silvia Garcia across the Mexican border told her before she crawled under a barbed-wire fence, carefully preparing to run across the highway without police detection. There would be no further instructions and no help; if she was caught she was on her own. As each member of the group, including Silvia and her pregnant sister, made it safely across, they began the ten miles to their final safe house in Mexico, where they would prepare to cross the final border. After over a month of grueling travel, the 16-year-old made it to the United States, but her journey was far from over.
Silvia’s story begins in a small village in Honduras. In a family of eight children, Silvia always kept to herself – the quiet one. From the time she was a small child, Silvia knew pain. Her father left her and her family to work in the United States when she was seven years old - the lives of her five younger siblings were left in her care, and that of their short-tempered and abusive mother.

As a child, Silvia was a daddy’s girl. The yearly phone calls following her father’s move to the US were hardly enough to ease the burden she was left with in Honduras. Silvia’s mother was aggressive and demeaning, often calling her children names and taking her anger out on them with her hands or any other items she could get ahold of. Silvia faced her mother’s threats to kill her as she resorted to tears to escape the fighting.

Silvia began her days at a local plantation, harvesting coffee or tobacco to help support her family. After long mornings of backbreaking labor, she would go to school where, although conditions were not designed to help her succeed, she excelled. When classes finished, Silvia would return to the plantations to finish any incomplete tasks before making her way home to take care of her siblings. Silvia became accustomed to this daily routine, but she committed herself to a brighter future. With all odds against her, she dedicated herself to her studies, becoming a stellar student driven to continue her education as far as possible. Her tireless effort finally paid off, and she was awarded a full scholarship to attend medical school in Cuba at the age of sixteen. Silvia saw this offer as a tremendous honor and privilege, and an opportunity for her life to take a turn for the better. But despite the hope and excitement, Silvia was forced to turn down the offer, as she faced the harsh reality that she could not afford the plane ticket to Cuba. She pleaded with her mother to help her pay for it, but she was refused. In the moment she realized her future was slipping away from her, Silvia decided that it was time to leave. She wanted better for herself, and so began her journey to migrate to the United States.

With no interest in wasting time, Silvia sold her cell phone and her beloved guitar to cover the payment needed for the first leg of her journey: traveling to Guatemala. As she prepared to leave the place that had been home to her for so long, she told her plan only to her older sister. Her sister revealed to Silvia that she was pregnant, and worried that when their mother found out she would be forced out of the house and left to fend for herself once again. Silvia encouraged her sister to come with her to the United States, and together they officially began the journey. The managed to tell their father of the plan and, without a single goodbye to anyone in the village, the two girls paid about 2000 Honduran Lempiras, or about 90 USD, to cross the border into Guatemala.

They boarded a bus, making their way across Guatemala to the Mexican border where a friend of their father’s awaited their arrival. He led Silvia and her sister to the first of many safe houses, where they waited until two unidentified men directed their group of three to go with them. They obediently follow the men - the first of several professional smugglers they would encounter.

As they prepared to cross the border into Mexico the following day, the five join a group of 35 more boarding very small canoes to cross the river that divides the two nations. They floated down the river for hours before reaching a well-known spot to safely enter into Mexico. For six hours group trudged toward their destination: a drop site where a series of trucks waited for those being smuggled across the border.

Silvia joined the mass of 176 people fighting to cram themselves in the truck. With room only to stand and none to move, they spent fourteen long hours in the dark. The conditions in the truck were far from pleasant; pregnant women, screaming children, and when someone had to relieve themselves, they were forced to do so where they stood. As the truck finally pulled to a stop, the crowd piled out of the truck, barely even able to move from the pain and swelling. Yet the trip was far from over, and Silvia and her sister pulled together the energy to walk the remaining three hours.

Once they arrived at the next safe house, the girls waited for three days for enough people to arrive, about 200, to meet the smugglers’ quota to leave. Several teenaged boys were there to look after the group, but Silvia soon realized that they were armed – there to stand guard protect their business and their cargo. They threatened that no one was to leave or scream, or they would be killed. They delegated only one meal to each person for the duration of their three day stay, and the group feared for their lives.

Silvia knew they were constantly in danger.
day of their stay, the smugglers ushered the group to board a closed, windowless truck. With windows or doors, they crawled one by one through a hatch hidden away on the underside of the truck. The holding area was suffocating; with no source of ventilation, they struggled to find enough air to breathe. Under strict instructions to avoid discovery, no one would be allowed to exit the space until they reached their final destination. With seventy travelers on board, once again their was only room to stand during the projected 18 trip. As Silvia stood among the group, bodies pressed together in the cramped enclosure, she began to regret leaving Honduras. She worried that this entire journey was a mistake. She watched as the people surrounding her neared death in the back of the truck, begging for someone to open the hatch and let in a little fresh air so they could breathe. Their requests were denied.

The truck made its way through a number of police checkpoints, designed to thwart any illegal smuggling, and managed to safely avoid detection – until they reach the fourth checkpoint. The police manning the checkpoint, realizing what was truly being housed in the compartment, chased the truck as it fled. For two hours, they were caught in a high-speed chase before the truck managed to lose the officers tailing them. Finally reaching safety, the group stumbled from the truck into the open air. The guides refused to tell them any details of what had happened.

Before they made the trip to the next safe house, Silvia and her sister were given new identities, portraying them as natives of Mexico to avoid police questioning. They were forced to learn Mexican history and music, and memorize every detail on their identification documents. They were told never to disclose the information of their journey, threatened that their friends and family would be killed if they did. Silvia had become accustomed to hearing this threat, as she was constantly reminded of the dangers she had subjected herself to.

Soon, they arrived in Puebla, Mexico, where their father was expected to wire the first half the payment promised to the smugglers, necessary for the girls to continue their travels. Any missed payment would result in one of two punishments: they would be killed or trafficked. The cost to bring one person to the United States was 6000 USD, a total of 12000 USD for Silvia and her sister have a chance of finishing the trip.

Though they were told they would be at the safe house in Puebla for only a few hours, the group spent three days before continuing. Silvia was grateful for the delay, as it was the first house that was able to provide bedding and food to everyone. Though they relished in the short break, the safe house was still dangerous for those being smuggled. It was common for Silvia to witness the terrible crimes of the young guards – including murder and assault – as they targeted the young women in the group. Silvia and her sister were dependent on each other, providing what safety and protection they could to avoid the relentless danger.

At their departure from the safe house in Puebla, the group began the final leg of their journey: the walk through Mexico.

“They don’t do it for the principle. They do it to make money.”

The guides sent each person into the desert, equipped with nothing more than a backpack holding a few apples, a small supply of water, and a pill. The mysterious pill was presented to each person with the instruction: “If you don’t think you can walk anymore, take it.” Silvia never learned what the pill actually was, but it seemed abundantly clear to her that it could be used to kill yourself if there was no hope of reaching their destination. So they began, walking all night and sleeping through the days, along the way finding many lost migrants who would join their group. Silvia was amazed as they passed one- and two-year-old children, who could barely walk, carrying their little backpacks as they walked all night.

There were almost-due pregnant women and mothers with their newborn children walking ten hours a day – all to get to the United States. As they walked, they collected more and more lost travelers. Often, those who had been lost in the desert without food for up to a week would give up, moving in plain sight of the roads the police patrolled just so they would be caught and deported. Many did complete the horrific journey.

As they traveled, they passed crosses – makeshift graves for the dead who perished during the trip. There were bones and corpses littering the earth, from the times the other travelers were too weak to bury their companions. With still a lot more ground to cover, one of the members of Silvia’s group began to turn a purplish-black color, and foamed at the mouth. “Tell my wife I couldn’t make it,” he told them, and before long the group was forced to leave him behind to die in the desert. With just the slightest shred of hope for the man, Silvia left her food and water with him, sacrificing her own nourishment for at least a day.

Silvia and her group came upon a girl whose leg had broken so badly that the bone was visible peering through her torn flesh. Her companions had abandoned her to die even though the help and security of the road was nearby. Silvia and those with her helped the girl to a road with police activity, hoping that she would be picked up and saved.

They encountered a couple, emaciated and sunburned after being lost in the desert for fifteen days, alone with no source of food and no passersby to offer help. Forced to take shelter in a small place they discovered near a body of water, they slept among a mass of bodies – the remains of others who had died there, hoping to seek refuge from the harsh desert conditions.

Days and days passed as they continued walking. Finally, they reached their destination and were relieved for an escape from the torturous walk. They met yet another truck that would drive them further along. The men overseeing the operation passed out food and bottled of water to the group, before allotting them less than one minute to board. They drove for a number of hours, until a police helicopter spotted the suspicious vehicle. The smugglers quickly opened the truck, yelling at everyone to run. They darted off in different directions, scattering as they desperately tried to evade capture. Silvia and her sister ran. They kept going without rest for almost two hours, with no sense of direction and no end in sight. Silvia refused to let her sister fall behind. They ran through thorn bushes, but did not even notice until they were finally able to stop, looking down to find they were left with torn clothing and their bodies drenched with blood. Before boarding the truck, the men shared a safe word with them, to be used in the event that they were pursued and forced to flee. Silvia and her sister hid in the bushes and waited, listening until they heard one of the smugglers
passing by say the safe word, alerting them that it was safe to reveal themselves. Once he found Silvia and her sister, they accompanied him as he collected the others. Only six of the 12 who were with them on the truck were found; Silvia has no idea what happened to the others.

They had to travel by foot for one more full night and day. By this point, many people had developed such horrific blisters that they could no longer walk. Silvia watched as many of the others intentionally burned their feet on the scalding hot rocks, attempting to cauterize the wounds to stop the bleeding. The sight was forever seared into her memory. After another short trip by vehicle, they approached the destination they had been working toward: the border that separated the United States from Mexico. They had ten seconds to cross.

Each member of their group clamored through the barbed wire fencing and darted across the highway. Careful to avoid detection, they safely made it to the other side. After a ten mile drive, they had made it to the final safe house, where they were able to shower and were given new clothes to cover up the harsh journey they had just been through. They were ready to be dispersed across the United States. They were finally in American territory.

After the ordeal of crossing the border into the United States, Silvia and her sister were picked up by yet another stranger and driven hundreds of miles from Arizona to Los Angeles, California. After weeks walking, hunger, and fear, the two girls were allowed to rest. So exhausted from their trip, Silvia was so relieved that she did not even notice the long drive. They were headed to Los Angeles, where the person responsible for transporting the girls to their father ran his operation. They were en route to New Orleans, where their father worked a construction job, but they were in need of a ride, and for that their father would have to pay.

On arriving in Los Angeles, the men escorting Silvia and her sister contacted their father to demand the second half of the payment. He was ready and willing to pay, but now that they were in the United States, the smugglers doubled the price. Silvia’s father now needed to pay 18000 USD in addition to the 6000 USD payment he had made for them in Mexico, in order to secure their release. Because human trafficking is a game with no rules, he had no choice but to pay and began the scramble for the money. Until then, Silvia and her sister sat hostage in a tiny, two-room apartment in Los Angeles where they found others had been trapped for years.

There was not much to do inside of the apartment. Most of those waiting sat about watching television, while the smugglers did little more than order them to stay away from the windows. They were under constant surveillance and told that they had a three-month deadline for their ransom to be paid. If the deadline passed, the hostages would be sold into slavery and forced to work at one of many sites throughout the nation, a fate that for many would be worse than death.

For two months, Silvia and her sister waited in the apartment with 70 other people, all anxiously awaiting for their loved ones to pay for their release. Some were able to conjure up the funds, others were not as lucky. There, Silvia met a woman who had been forced to work in the apartment for three years, as her husband had died before paying her ransom. She was forced to be a slave to the smugglers, never to be allowed any semblance of freedom again.

Others inside the apartment shared the similar stories and sufferings, but they also looked out for each other. Many of the group offered help to Silvia and her sister, giving her sister medicine to help with the pregnancy discomfort, and attempting to ease Silvia’s constant fears. For some time now, Silvia had been pursued by one of the smugglers who was becoming obsessed with her. He and his unwanted advances were unwelcome and the companions she made in the apartment made it clear to Silvia that they would protect her.

As the days turned into weeks, Silvia became accustomed to waiting. She found refuge in the acquaintances she had met in the apartment. Things began to seem almost normal, considering the circumstances, until something unexpected changed the narrative. The hostages began to notice the smugglers constantly on their cell phones, colluding quietly; it was clear that something unusual was going on. Eventually pairs of hostages were being removed from the apartment in a rush, until none were left. They were told that a neighbor had noticed the significant number of people in the apartment and had called the police; they needed to get rid of a lot of people quickly, because they had nowhere to take them.

The smugglers decided to release Silvia’s sister their father’s custody and keep Silvia until the ransom was paid. It was at this moment that Silvia’s sister repaid her for her efforts to get the two out of Honduras. Remembering the smuggler who was fixated on Silvia, her sister decided to stay in her place so that Silvia may be freed, sacrificing her own well being to protect Silvia. Silvia was to be sent to her father immediately.

The smugglers would only take Silvia as far as Oklahoma, here she and her father had an emotional reunion after what felt like an eternity. After months of walking, being held hostage, and constant danger, Silvia finally made it to her father. They departed for New Orleans where Silvia would begin her new life; her sister joined them just three weeks later.

As soon as she arrived in New Orleans, Silvia set out to find a job. As an illegal immigrant unable to speak English and a minor, legitimate, stable work was hard to find. Silvia was able to obtain falsified identification papers to claim she was in the country as a legal adult, helping her find job cleaning oil tanks in cargo ships. She was well skilled for this, because she was small enough to crawl inside while she cleaned. The work was hard, exhausting and endless, but Silvia was willing to do whatever it took to get by.

Three months into her new life, an unexpected event shattered her new world. Silvia’s father, along with her sister, had been in a car accident. Though he was not responsible for the accident, he was arrested as he was in the country illegally and was driving without a license. Her sister was transported to a hospital for concerns about her pregnancy. No one
contacted Silvia to keep her under the radar, knowing that she would be arrested as well if she was discovered. She arrived home the evening of the accident to an empty house, only to discover that someone had broken and stolen nearly everything they owned; even her father’s car was gone, which was strange because borrowed a friend’s car to drive to work that morning.

After a restless night of unanswered questions and fears, there was a knock at the door. Silvia answered it to find her father’s friend, who explained what had happened and that the car was being kept as payment for the one that her father had crashed. Although he never said so, she assumed that he was the one who had broken in the day before.

A long process of confusion and emotion followed, resulting in Silvia’s father being deported. The man whom she had travelled thousands of miles to be with was now gone once again. Silvia had no choice but to leave for New Jersey to find an uncle she had never met, but he was not interested in taking care of her as he had a family of his own to provide for. Silvia was living alone in New Jersey when her father told immigration officials where she was, and they found the factory where Silvia was working and arrested her, along with illegal immigrants working there. She was led out of the factory in handcuffs and shackles and taken to a local jail where she was held for 16 days. Eventually, the police discovered that they had misidentified her as an adult and were forced to release her into the custody of a refugee program for minors, though the trauma of her 16 days in jail stayed with her. Silvia was taken-in by the “Children’s Village,” a charitable organization for struggling youths.

Although she had found help, Silvia was still alone. The refugee program tried to find a relative to release her to, but her sister’s life was not considered stable enough, and she showed little interest in helping anyway. They tried contacting Silvia’s mother in Honduras, who said very clearly that it was Silvia’s decision to leave and that it was up to her to deal with her problems. She did not want to take her. Those closest to Silvia had rejected her, so the program had two options: try to place her in a foster family or wait until she was 18 and deport her to Honduras. The shocking crime rates in Honduras led them to choose the former.

As she waited to be placed with a family, Silvia began to teach herself English. She placed sticky notes around her room to teach herself English vocabulary and practiced writing in notebooks, although she admits that this usually resulted in a mix of English and Spanish that could only be referred to as “Spanish.”

Eventually, “Children’s Village” found a placement for Silvia in Virginia, and she moved in with her new foster family in 2010. She lived with her foster mother for a year and a half before deciding that it would be better for her to live on her own. Before she turned 21, the program helped Silvia to obtain a green card, and thus legal status in the United States.

Silvia eventually returned to Honduras to visit her family after years of separation. At the end of her trip, as she left for the airport to depart for the United States, there were men blocking her way, forcing her to bribe them to let her leave the country. They directed her to an ATM, where she withdrew the necessary funds. Upon her return home, Silvia found that her bank account had been emptied and that her banking information was being used in Mexico and Colombia. In a panic, she reported the crime to the police who told her they would look into it, but never told Silvia their findings.

Having lost all of her money, Silvia decided to enroll in classes at John Tyler Community College. It was here that she met Vicky Muenstermann who works with Great Expectations, and would serve as Silvia’s coach in the program. Muenstermann helped Silvia to raise money to pay for tuition in addition to successfully convincing the college to donate money to pay for Silvia’s books – she even helped her apply to a program that allowed Silvia to shadow a United States Congressman. In awe of Silvia’s accomplishments and awards, of which there have been many, Muenstermann nominated Silvia, who was named one of the top 100 foster children in the United States. After a successful tenure at John Tyler Community College as a 4.0 student, Silvia graduated with her associates degree.

Encouraged to apply to a four-year institution to continue her education, Silvia set her sights on a few Virginia universities before deciding to attend the University of Richmond. As she prepared to take out the loans necessary to pay for room and board, a couple she knew while in foster care offered her the chance to live with them while she got her degree, which she graciously accepted. Although the couple travels frequently and is not around a lot, Silvia sees them as family. The first Christmas that Silvia spent with the couple, she woke up to find 21 presents for her under the tree – one for each Christmas that she did not receive a single gift.

Today, Silvia is 23 years old and can either be found working in a chemistry lab in Gottwald, or at one of her three jobs. Her first few weeks on campus were hard; she remembers crying after almost every class, but she never gives up on anything. She persevered and has found great success and a passion for the sciences. Silvia is on track to graduate and plans on attend school to become a physician’s assistant.

Silvia has experienced more in her short lifetime than most people ever will and she is stronger for it. When asked if she would do it again, she does not hesitate to say yes. Her life at Richmond is just one small step on an unexpected journey that began in a small village in Honduras.

“I think it was worth it, everything I did and everything I went through.”