



Mardoqueo Tian sits with his daughter Ana Lucia in the house they share with Tian's parents in Tecpán, Guatemala. | Photo by Bryson Rosell

'It's worth *dreaming*'

DESPERATE TO PROVIDE FOR THEIR FAMILIES, THREE MEN FROM THE HIGHLANDS OF GUATEMALA ATTEMPT TO REBUILD LIVES AFTER FAILING TO IMMIGRATE TO THE UNITED STATES.

By Soraya Keiser



Mardoqueo Tian was on his knees with 120 other people, head bent to the dirty floor of the abandoned depot in the northern frontier of Mexico. Helicopters swarmed overhead. Dogs snarled. Police yelled. But Tian's hope was gone. After traveling across two countries, spending all his money, eating only one meal a day and sleeping in cramped quarters, he was caught. Three months and all he had to show for it was one quetzal.

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>>> Like hundreds of thousands of others, Tian had attempted to cross the United States-Mexico border to find work as an undocumented immigrant. The 35 quetzales (\$4.50) he received a day for working in the fields was not enough to support his family. In May 2021, Tian left his infant daughter and wife to make the illegal crossing through the desert with the help of a *coyote*, a migrant smuggler.

Vilma, his wife, with nervous hands that fiddle on the loose threads of her Mayan apron and Ana Lucia, his daughter with eyes as big as the orange sucker she carries around, were left alone for three months, every night knowing he was in danger of being deported or dying.

But Vilma understood why Tian had to go. The fear of not having enough money to provide for their children overrode any fear Vilma had of Tian's crossing.

"I knew it would be difficult for me to take care of my children," Vilma said, "but it's worth dreaming."

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When Tian was single, he didn't have the urge to leave, but with a family to provide for, he was desperate. Tian's father Ramiro had unsuccessfully tried to cross the U.S.-Mexico border in 2008, but Tian had also heard success stories about

friends who were making enough to send remittance back to their families in Guatemala. After hearing a *coyote's* ad for a border crossing over the radio, Tian decided to go for it.

But the *coyote* asked for 130,000 quetzales (\$16,900) – money that Tian didn't have, so he put up the deed to his parent's house as collateral to pay for it.

Tian left Wednesday, May 12, 2021 at 6 a.m. His wife was eight months pregnant.

Tian took a bus to Cuatro Caminos, a town in the highlands of Guatemala 103 kilometers, or 64 miles, from his home of Tecpán. From there, he met the *coyote* who would supposedly guide him to his destination.

With 2,000 quetzales (\$260) on him, Tian began the long, stunted journey to the United States. First he crossed the Guatemala-Mexico border and took a bus from Puebla, Mexico to a depot. Then he was told to get into a trailer filled with 300 immigrants. They stood for 18 hours. Some vomited. Others fainted. The *coyote* took everyone's belongings so that they wouldn't take up space.

"It is impressive how far poverty takes us," Tian said.

Tian was used to eating three meals a day back in Tecpán, but while in

Mardoqueo's journey

- 7. Chihuahua, Mexico
- 6. Querétaro, Mexico
- 5. Puebla, Mexico
- 4. San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico
- 3. Gracias a Dios, Mexico
- 2. Huehuetenango, Guatemala
- 1. Tecpán, Guatemala





I have a responsibility to my family. I have to be responsible and I have to see to it that they get ahead.

Ramiro Tian

Mexico he survived on a single egg and a cup of water each day.

The *coyotes* drove Tian and 100 other people from Mexico City to the frontier between Mexico and the United States in the trailer. It took 32 hours. When they got to the depot, some people had already been there for two months.

The *coyotes* would visit the depot at random times but would not give answers about what would happen next. When Tian asked when he was leaving, the *coyote* threatened to kill him if he asked again. The immigrants drank yellow water and were fed twice a day. The ration of food was so low that it was common for people to faint from hunger.

“It is not an easy thing. Of all the brothers who have tried, many have succeeded, many have died,” Tian said. “There is no compassion from anyone.”

Tian was desperate to return to his family in Tecpán, but didn’t know if the *coyotes* would allow it. They wanted the money, and if the crossing wasn’t successful they wouldn’t receive it all. Finally, some people were told it was safe to cross. Tian’s spirits rose a little, in hopes that he could be in the next group.

20 people were allowed out. 10 came back.

Another group of immigrants were set to leave the following day, but it was too late – the police had found the depot, and along with it 120 immigrants from across Central America. Guatemalans. Nicaraguans. Hondurans. All had failed in their goal of crossing the border. Instead, they were forced to their knees and told not to look up at the police.

Tian and the other immigrants were sent to a detention center in Chihuahua, Mexico where Tian was able to

call Vilma. He could only explain that he was deported and then hang up. Vilma wasn’t even able to tell him that that same exact day she had given birth to José Fernando. Tian had a son. It was Wednesday, June 9 — one month since he had left.

While legal immigration to the United States is sometimes possible, people from impoverished backgrounds with little to no education – people like Tian – are rarely ever accepted. Guatemalans often have to pay officials to put in a good word for them to be chosen for visas.

Tian’s brother-in-law José Pablo Sut was chosen from a large pool of applicants from Guatemala. Now he works as a migrant farmer in Canada picking tomatoes.

Because the legal process is often too expensive and disappointing for most,

they look into options for crossing the border on their own or through *coyotes* like Tian did.

13 years before Tian’s attempted crossing, his father Ramiro had a similar journey.

Ramiro started working in the fields when he was 15 years old, first at a coffee farm, then planting wheat. He eventually bought a piece of land for himself and planted broccoli and lettuce to sell. This business became profitable for Ramiro, and eventually he managed to save up 75,000 quetzales (\$9,758). But he didn’t know how to manage the money. Ramiro lost most of it and had to sell his land to pay a loan.

He eventually got a job at a clothing factory but wanted to move to the U.S. for more money. He had four children and a wife to provide for.

“I have a responsibility to my family,” Ramiro said. “I have to be responsible and I have to see to it that they get ahead.”

Ramiro’s attempt to go to the United States was

stopped in Mexico, and he was forced to return home. Now he works at the clothing factory once again.

“I can’t sit at home. It would be unfair,” Ramiro said. “After we fail to get to the U.S., we have to go back to look for work.”

In 2018, Tian’s cousin Mardoqueo Rucuch also attempted to find work in the United States as an undocumented immigrant.

He heard an advertisement on the radio saying that a *coyote* was willing to take people to the United States and they wouldn’t have to pay until they successfully arrived. Rucuch sold his motorcycle for 6,000 quetzales (\$780), left 4,000 quetzales (\$520) with his wife and two young children and took a bus to start his journey.

He was deported back to Guatemala from the Mexican frontier. Unsuccessful.

“I left part of my heart there,” Racuch said. “Whenever I remember myself, I feel in that desert.”



Above: Mardoqueo Racuch walks down a narrow row of rose bushes with a handful of fresh-cut flowers. After his return to Tecpán, Racuch began working with Plantaciones Mavali S.A., a rose farm in Tecpán, Guatemala. | Photo by Bryson Rosell

Left: Ramiro, Juliana and Ana Lucia all hang out in the living room of their home. The cinderblock walls surround three rooms that the entire family share. | Photo by Bryson Rosell

Right: Vilma Tian sits with her two children, Ana Lucia and José Fernando, on the bed they all share. | Photo by Savannah Heeren

Racuch now works at Plantaciones Mavali S.A., a rose farm in Tecpán. Since he was deported back to Guatemala, Racuch is on a government blacklist that makes it hard to get a job. Because working on the rose farm isn't a government-regulated job, Racuch has been able to work there for the past 10 months.

His boss, Kevin Eguizabal, says undocumented immigration has made it difficult to maintain a steady, trained workforce. Often if a man is planning on attempting the border crossing, they will ask for vacation and the company doesn't know if they will return. If they don't, Eguizabal must train more people, which takes up time from other tasks.

To combat this, Eguizabal has implemented a contract system in which workers are contracted for two years to the company. This security system is more appealing to people than work that is only

guaranteed for days or weeks at a time.

This is true for Racuch as well, but he still desires to travel to the United States someday.

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Ramiro thinks Tian should try to find work in the United States again. Tian is not eager to do so.

"Mardoqueo will never go back," Ramiro said. "He's traumatized."

Instead, Tian finds work back home.

It is 7 p.m. and already dark on a Thursday night in January. Thursdays are good for business, so Tian continues to drive people around in his tuk tuk, or motorcycle taxi, late into the night. On nights like these, he can make up to 250 quetzales (\$32).

Behind the cinderblock walls of Tian's house that he shares with his parents, Vilma and Juliana, Tian's

mom, are making tortillas for tonight's dinner.

Through the courtyard of uneven dirt and into the kitchen made of sheet metal and wooden reeds, a soft *pat pat pat* can be heard as tortilla after tortilla is flattened, rounded and laid on the cement stove to cook.

As Vilma feeds José Fernando, Juliana continues the methodical portioning and shaping of the dough that she has made by hand. She has it down to a science because she has been making tortillas since she was 12.

The black corn tortillas will be enough to feed the entire family at every meal for three days. Some nights they won't be able to eat together because Tian is out working late.

Even when he is home, Tian must say goodbye. ☒

(Additional reporting by Majo Díaz.)

I knew it would be difficult for me to take care of my children, but it's worth dreaming.

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Vilma Tian

