



Ana Gabriela Jimenez Canseco (right), 10, plays on a court down the street from the house of Juan's brother, Eucebio García Aguilar, in Oaxaca, Mexico. Juan lived in his brother's house for a while, before renting a home nearby. During her time in Oaxaca, Yolanda rarely was allowed outside to play with other children.

Abuser flees, takes Yolanda

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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.

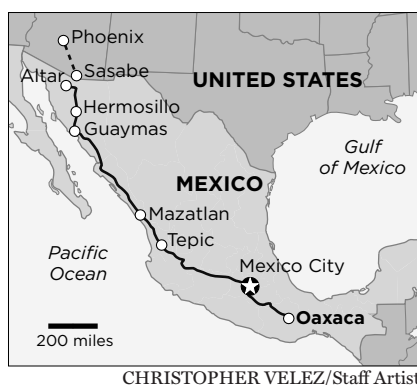
It is spring, but the neighborhood stands in contrast to the electric greens and blues of the village from where they fled — from the banana trees, the iguana farm and the Pacific Ocean. Here, men build homes from flattened metal cans. Dogs dance with flies, and children kick frayed balls in the dirt.

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



CHRISTOPHER VELEZ/Staff Artist

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.

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

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A young girl traces the shape of a heart on a bus window during a trip from Oaxaca to Mexico City. While making the same journey with Juan, Yolanda wished she could fly away like a bird, and she secretly hoped authorities would stop them.

Pictures of missing women and children are posted at a bus station in Tepic, Mexico, one of Yolanda's stops. In Mazatlán, later in the journey, authorities would later post signs warning potential migrants about the dangers ahead.



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