



'The US doesn't want me'

Graduating from college should have been the happiest day of my life.

I was the first in my family to receive a degree, and relatives travelled all the way to the US from central America to celebrate. But after the party and the speeches, I cried myself to sleep.

Most of my life I've been an illegal immigrant. My family came to the US more than a decade ago and we did well here. My parents rent a four-room house, own three cars and have just bought property in North Carolina. Sometimes I think we did too well: if I wanted to wash dishes I wouldn't have a problem. Instead, I'm in my early 20s, and I feel like I've hit a brick wall.

If I stay in the US, it could take another decade before I can put my business degree to use as a legal resident. So, I'm researching a move to Australia. And because I overstayed my original visa as a child, I'll be barred from returning to the US for 10 years.

My mother sobbed all night when I told her I was thinking of going to Australia. The last thing I want to do is hurt her, but there I can live like a normal person. Because I hold an American degree, it shouldn't be too hard for me to get a student visa. I could work legally upon arriving, get a second degree within two years, and soon after become a permanent legal resident.

I think what upsets my mother is that after all her years cleaning houses, she sees it wasn't enough. I can't change my status because I, like the rest of my family, overstayed my tourist visa.

It makes no difference that I was one of the top students in my class, or that I have always been active in community service. Yes, we broke the law, but we're not criminals. My parents came to the US out of financial desperation. In every other way, we respect the law.

When we arrived in the US officials said we'd have to leave within three months. I told my mom that I ought to go back, but she said, "We're going to be a family together. If your dad and me are going to be walking in the snow, then you're going to walk with us."

I AM TEMPTED BY A FAKE MARRIAGE; I THINK ABOUT IT ALL THE TIME. BUT TO ME IT'S SOLVING SOMETHING BY BREAKING ANOTHER LAW

Those first years we all lived in one tiny room and worked non-stop. My mom cleaned houses and my dad laboured in construction and fixed cars. After school my sister and I helped to clean a cosmetics factory. We didn't go out much – we were too afraid immigration would find us and deport us.

Yet my sister and I were happy. Everything seemed so clean and fresh. We were amazed to be learning English, and we both made our school's honour roll. For years it felt that if we

pushed hard enough, doors opened. But now, no matter how hard I push, nothing is budging.

My parents are as desperate as I am. They tell me, "Just get married, just do it, quickly." It's the one way for me to become legal and stay in the US. People pay thousands for fake marriages, but I have friends who are citizens who would marry me for free. I'm very tempted; I think about it all the time. But to me it's solving something by breaking another law.

Meanwhile, although my family has found ways to cope with living illegally, I can't do it any more. The government is raiding homes almost every day. The prospect terrifies me, and I've been having panic attacks.

If I'm deported I'll be sent to Guatemala. I was born there, but my written Spanish is at fifth-grade level. The only family I still have there are my elderly grandparents, and they're leaving for the US soon.

Lots of friends ask why I don't go to Canada. But if I leave I want something new and far away. And I have a few friends, two of them undocumented like me, who also plan on moving to Australia.

The idea of not seeing for years the people I love makes me feel literally sick. But my parents have taught me what it takes to start anew in another country.

Carlos Mendizabal is a pseudonym.

As told to Daniela Gerson.