

How One Illegal Immigrant Makes His Rite of Passage

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Marco was lost in the city. The 19-year-old illegal immigrant, who had reached America 10 days earlier after an arduous border crossing from his native Mexico, was seen last Monday afternoon filling out a job application at an Upper West Side supermarket.

Getting lost is a virtual rite of passage for immigrant newcomers to New York, but most get home before nightfall. That night, as the rain poured down, Marco was nowhere to be found.

Only at 1 a.m. Wednesday, more than 36 hours after he disappeared, did the 19-year-old find his way back to his cousin's house. At midday, his still drenched clothes lay in a pile in the converted one-bedroom apartment he is sharing with eight relatives.

"I was very scared," he said quietly in Spanish, his eyes full of fear. "I don't have my papers, I was in the street, and it was raining."

If bad luck comes in threes, then Marco has paid his dues. The run began nearly two weeks ago when smugglers, known as coyotes, ditched him in the Sonora Desert after three frigid nights along America's southwest border. Lost and alone, Marco was picked up by immigration authorities and dumped back in the border town of Nogales, a jumping-off point for the growing pipeline of illegal Mexican immigrants to New York. There, Marco found a new set of coyotes willing to take him to New York - at an additional cost of \$1,800. This time, he stuck tight to his smugglers, ducking with them into tunnels in the sand when Department of Homeland Security agents came by on patrol.

His troubles were not over when Marco made it across the border. After a cross-country car trip, the new smugglers demanded an additional \$500 from his family in New York, who had already put down more than \$3,000 for his passage. His relatives refused to pay. Marco, not knowing where he was, watched the coyotes drop off the other illegal immigrants in New Jersey and Coney Island. Then the car headed south. All night, his cousin Jorge, who himself crossed the border six years ago at 14, waited in East Harlem for a call from the coyotes. It never came. Instead, the smugglers dumped Marco in a North Carolina stash house.

Two days later, his uncle received a call in New York. It was Marco, who now needed \$900 to reach New York. This time, the family paid. "We don't have anything left," a cousin, Sylvia, said. "We spent it all."

After four days at his cousins' apartment on 116th Street, Marco went off in search of a way to do what he is in America to do: make money. An uncle accompanied him to an interview for a job cleaning the floor of a market on Broadway in the 70s, promising to bring him back to the East Harlem apartment afterward. Then, in a sudden rush to get to work, the uncle left Marco, who had

never been out of the apartment alone, at the market with just \$25 in his pocket, no identification, and no contact information for his family.

What happened next is not even fully clear to his relatives. Marco, soft-spoken to the point of timidity, said he left the market intending to take a train home, but he ended up in Brooklyn. Surprised and scared, he got back on the subway, traveling back to Manhattan and then the Bronx. For hours, Marco walked the streets trying to find the apartment. As it got dark, rather than nearing the apartment on 116th Street, he ended up on 146th Street in the Bronx.

A stranger offered him a place to stay, warning that the city becomes dangerous at night, particularly for illegal immigrants who need to guard not only against criminals but also the police. In fact, it is against city policy to pursue illegal immigrants - that's the job of federal agents - but Marco was afraid. He spent the night with the Bronx man, saying he watched gangs walk the streets.

Meanwhile, his cousin Jorge set off to nearby Central Park with a search group, thinking Marco may have sought refuge there. Uncles took to the subways and other relatives combed El Barrio, asking everyone if they had seen a tall, lost Mexican man. At 2 a.m., rain pouring down, they gave up the search for the night.

A cousin, Sylvia, feared the worst. "I was so worried because he doesn't know the city and he doesn't speak much. Halloween is approaching, and it is dangerous to walk in the city alone," she said in Spanish. "When we arrive from Mexico to here, we don't know what the money is, we don't know anything, anything," Sylvia said. She has watched New York's Mexican community mushroom during the 16 years she has lived in the city, to more than 125,000. "In the village, everyone knows us. Here, that's not the case - there are good people and there are bad people. We can't go out in the street. And we can't always trust the police."

Still, family members went to the police the next day, assuming they would send out a search party. Instead, they were informed that Marco, at 19, is considered an adult, meaning there was nothing the police could do: If he chose to disappear for a few days, it was his choice. Growing desperate, a family member turned to the Casa del Inmigrante Poblano, a community group that alerted the press. It sent out a mailing saying, "Lost immigrant."

While the family searched, Marco walked the streets of New York from the park to the rivers looking for his family. He had spent his \$25 on subway fares and food the first day; the second day, he ate only cookies. As evening turned into night, he paced, tearful, around 125th Street, having recalled that that was where his uncle lived. Terrified of spending a night on the street, he overcame his shyness to ask three Mexican strangers if they knew his family. Through extraordinary luck, the third did, and led him to an uncle's apartment. An hour and a half later, his uncle, Claudio, arrived home to find a soggy Marco sleeping in the foyer of his building.

Grateful to have found his way back to the mattress he shares with his sister on the floor of Jorge's room, Marco realizes his troubles are still not behind him. The Upper West Side market has not called to hire him, and while he is still afraid to go out of the apartment, he is anxious to earn money to pay back his debt and support family in Mexico.

Since his father died five years ago, he has worked construction jobs, building the houses of other

villagers who have moved north of the border. These migrants no longer live in Guerrero, but their dollars are developing his village. As Sylvia and Jorge have already done, it is Marco's dream to build his own home in Mexico, for his mother and three siblings left behind.

Meanwhile, his cousins are determined that Marcos will not get lost a fourth time. "When I arrived, someone told me, 'If you learn the subway map, you'll be able to go wherever you want.' I thought, I am never going to learn that map. But thanks to God, I have mastered New York," Sylvia said with a knowing smile. "I go where I want, and I told him, 'I am going to teach you where to go.'"