

# For the Child of Immigrants, the American Dream Can Be a Nightmare

By Karla Cornejo Villavicencio  
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This is a story about love and sacrifice in the shining city on a hill. It is about the wildest, blindest love story in America, the story of the devotion immigrants have for a country that wants to expel them. This love perseveres past heartbreak; past giving your body, mind, and youth to a country you risked your life to get to, then seeing your own tax money pay for immigration officials to pursue an ambulance carrying a 10-year-old girl with cerebral palsy on the way to emergency surgery just to detain her and send her to a detention shelter without her caretakers. The curly-haired father who faces violent gangs in his home country: gone. The 5-year-old American citizen who believed his father (who is hiding in a church to give his lawyers more time to fight a deportation order) is just at work and he'll come home soon: ICE makes no exception for them either. They used to have the decency of knocking down our doors in the middle of the night. It was scary and humiliating, but it was tonally appropriate—it was violence that felt violent. There was the illusion that the reason they were getting away with it was because it was dark; polite society was asleep. Now they are disappearing us in the middle of the day, in front of schools and hospitals and courthouses. Many of the children of these targeted migrants are American citizens. Do you believe, under the circumstances, that this love story could be true?

For the past year, I've been researching my forthcoming book, *Undocumented America*, in which I recount the intimate stories of undocumented immigrants throughout the United States. Regardless of their circumstances, they all have one thing in common—the looming threat of deportation. In early 2017, John Kelly (now President Trump's chief of staff, but then head of the Department of Homeland Security) issued memos doing away with many Obama-era enforcement priorities, meaning targets for deportation not only included criminals and security risks but overnight became anyone and everyone. Minors and the parents and spouses of American citizens were suddenly in the crosshairs—and it is no exaggeration to say that in this current moment, immigrants are being hunted like animals. Yet when we talk about who deserves protection from this policy, we only talk about Dreamers—undocumented immigrants who arrived in the States as children and who had been

given safe harbor here under DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals). What about those children's parents, the protagonists of that original love story?

I am one of those children. And I know that love story like the back of my hand.

I was 5 years old when I arrived in New York City from Ecuador. During that first summer in America, my undocumented parents took me to Times Square, the Empire State Building, the Twin Towers, Central Park, Bloomingdale's window displays, the Bronx Zoo, Coney Island. "This is America," they said, spreading their arms wide. I learned about America at home, too. Although my family was poor when I was a kid, my mother's closet has always been filled with vintage dresses from secondhand stores. She loves dresses that cinch at the waist and flare out extravagantly, and she collects pillbox hats, mink shawls, white dinner gloves, tiny clutches, and gilded brooches. Before she learned the word *vintage*, she called these dresses "from a time before." In context: "Daughter, I need a floral dress from a time before to wear to church." The vagueness annoyed me. I told her that could mean anything from the early Neanderthal period to the Middle Ages. But she would just hum Frank Sinatra as she twirled in her dresses, because we both knew what she meant. She meant the same thing old white racists who want America to "return" to greatness now mean—an imagined snapshot of an anonymous suburb in the 1950s. A Norman Rockwell painting where a girl in a poodle skirt shares a milkshake with a blond boy with a cowlick. *A time before.*

Once, for a wedding, my mother sewed me into a baby blue chiffon prom dress from the 1960s, hemmed to conceal a stain. I couldn't breathe in the dress, but I looked like a vision of who she wanted me to be. *White.* My mother may not have

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wanted me to *be* white, but she feared what would happen to me when the world realized I wasn't. She had big dreams for me. A stay-at-home mom until recently, she told

me, when I was little, that I needed to be a career woman; that way, I'd never have to extend my hand to a man to ask for money. America for her means fully empowered womanhood. When she sees glamorous, successful women on TV, women like Hillary Clinton or Condoleezza Rice, she whispers, "I wonder what it feels like to be a successful woman." Then she pauses for a moment before she turns to me, her voice turning sharp, as she says: "That's why we stayed, you know. So you could be a successful woman. I live through you."

While my mom stayed at home, my dad was on the front lines of America as an immigrant, working in the restaurant industry. He faced racist abuse, wage theft, devastating humiliation, xenophobia, grueling manual labor, poor pay. My father has always had the rhetorical style of a Latin American dictator, which is to say wordy, and has also been excessively prone to metaphor. America to him has always meant two different sports—baseball, and soccer. He watched Babe Ruth documentaries all the time and sought out biographies about the baseball star from the library. He

admired Ruth for his bootstrap story. Over time, he became obsessed with the New York Yankees and taught himself to understand the rules of baseball. He started taking me to games, buying tickets for seats in the nosebleed section, and once he brought me home a laminated photo of the captain at the time, the legendary No. 2, Derek Jeter, that he purchased from a man on the street. When my little brother was born in November 1998, the Yankees were playing in the World Series. My brother is named Derek.

For my father, baseball seemed like the purest form of assimilation. But he was obsessive about teaching me about another sport, too. He told me that, in America, our family was a soccer team. We all had roles. His position was defense. I was the star kicker. He would protect me and, in turn, I would be my family's face in the world, bearing both of my parents' last names. Cornejo, his. Villavicencio, hers. My mother and father worked hard behind the scenes so I could shine on the field, so I could be a Latin American team making goal after goal against their colonial rulers—Portugal, Spain, or England. In Ecuador, my father had been such a talented soccer player that his nickname was Ronaldinho, after the Brazilian soccer star. In America, he passed on the crown to me. Whenever I had a standardized exam or a job interview or was working on an album review for the local jazz newspaper, he would say, "Your team is behind you. Make the goal." I've made goal after goal for 25 years and it's made my parents proud. But do you want to know something? Pride don't mean shit.

I never identified as a Dreamer. First, I thought the acronym was cheesy. Second, I feel sick at the thought of the American public pitying me for my innocence, my hands clean from my parents' purported sin in bringing me here. It's a self-righteous position I want to kick in the balls—pitying the child while accusing the parents of doing something that any other good parent would have done under the same circumstances. And if American citizens' love of law and order is so pure that they would have let their children rot or starve or be shot or be condemned to a future of no future instead of coming here, then they're not fit to shine my parents' shoes.

My parents are quick to identify as American. They go to the Fourth of July fireworks by the Brooklyn Bridge every year and root for the U.S. in the Olympics. In public, my mother says her favorite book is the Bible, but it is actually Hillary Clinton's *Living History*. She has entire passages memorized. (My mother idolized Hillary from the moment she laid eyes on her, which was shortly after a young Bill Clinton shook hands with my mother at a campaign stop in Brooklyn. When Hillary wore headbands, my mother wore headbands. When she forgave Bill, my mother did, too.) My parents train for 5Ks together. On weekends, they go to the Union Square farmers' market or to Chinatown for dumplings, like any other New Yorkers. My relationship with America is a little more complicated than theirs. I have not inherited the cognitive dissonance necessary to unconditionally love something that hates you, and I am childless—I have dogs, not kids—so I don't take consolation in the hope that my children will reap what I sow, that I will plant seeds that will bear fruit my children will eat. This all ends with me.

The twisted inversion that many children of immigrants know is that, at some point, your parents become your children, and your own personal American dream is making sure they age and die with dignity in a country that has never wanted them. I have excelled in this country; I am so very much the American Dream that I should be bottled and sold—but the parents who brought me forth, who are responsible for everything from my lovely Catholic school cursive to my commitment to philanthropy, are being persecuted like the rest of the 11 million undocumented immigrants who have laid down roots in the country they love and who now face a painful expulsion. When I watched my parents watching the Winter Olympics this year, the pair of them in front of the television, their hands over their hearts and their eyes sparkling with pride for the athletes on-screen, my eyes were only on them and my heart was in my throat. My allegiance, as ever, is to them; they are the country that I love. What makes me American—what makes the children of immigrants American in the most fundamental of ways—is something we learned from watching how unkindly America has treated our mothers and fathers. Our entire lives have been spent trying to deserve America. America needs to earn us, too.

### Print Citations

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# Reunited, an Immigrant Family Tries to Put Their Life Back Together

By Jonathan Blitzer  
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Last Friday morning, I had breakfast with a Honduran woman named Wendy Santos and her two daughters, Valeria and Aleisha, in the kitchen of their new home in suburban Maryland. Aleisha, who is three, was playing a game she recently invented for herself. “Copy, copy,” she said, looking at us, expectantly. She slid off her chair and walked up to each person, waiting for an answer. “Copy, copy,” Santos, Valeria, and I replied in turn. Aleisha chuckled and moved on, satisfied. In June, Santos and her two daughters had crossed the border near El Paso, Texas, where they were arrested and separated under the Trump Administration’s zero-tolerance policy. Santos spent the next forty-five days being moved from one detention center to another in Texas, while Valeria and Aleisha were held together in a facility for children in Arizona. “In the shelter,” Valeria, who is sixteen, told me, “we had roll call every thirty minutes, and the staff had walkie-talkies.” Aleisha had learned to imitate their sign-offs.

Santos and her daughters were released from government custody and reunited two weeks ago, thanks to a federal judge’s order and the persistence of the family’s immigration attorney. They then resumed the journey that they had begun this spring, when they left Honduras hoping to reach the Washington, D.C., area, where Miguel Calix, Santos’s longtime boyfriend and Aleisha’s father, lives. On July 17th, when Santos and the girls landed at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, Calix was there waiting for them with a bouquet of roses. A small crowd of reporters and well-wishers had accompanied him, in anticipation of the family’s reunion, and cameras flashed as the couple and the children all hugged.

For the next few days, the family ran errands in a state of half-stunned relief. Aleisha had left the children’s shelter with diarrhea and a dry cough, and she was sleeping fitfully. They drove her to a local medical clinic for a checkup, where she and Valeria also received vaccinations. Afterward, Calix took everyone to buy clothes. “We were starting from scratch,” Santos told me. “We needed everything.” The family’s lawyer, an attorney from El Paso named Linda Corchado, had contacted local volunteers and put out a call for donations. On their first Saturday at home, a mail truck arrived with boxes of gifts. “There were school supplies, utensils, kitchenware, games, and clothes,” Santos told me. She had taken photos of the boxes piled high in the driveway. Amazon gift cards were still arriving in the mail every

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day, with notes written by strangers, welcoming them to the U.S. “When we first got here, it was great,” Santos said. “I cooked for everyone, including the landlady and her family. And we were all together.”

Immigration laws are dense and inflexible, but the lives they’re meant to regulate are inescapably varied and complex. Santos, who is thirty-six years old, lived in Minnesota in the early two-thousands. That’s where she met Calix, who is a decade older than she is; he had come to the U.S. from Honduras in 1990 and had since attained U.S. citizenship. The couple planned to get married. But, before they did, Santos was arrested for shoplifting, and then deported to Honduras, in 2009. Since she had overstayed the visa she first used to come to the U.S., the government barred her from returning for ten years. Calix, who is a carpenter, sent money to support her and the children and flew to visit them every few months. After Aleisha was born, Calix and Santos began working with a lawyer to get Aleisha legal status in the U.S., as the daughter of a citizen. But, again, their plans were interrupted. Last fall, Santos took a job as a poll worker in her small town in northern Honduras and reported a case of voter fraud. Men associated with the country’s main political party chased her out of town, then tracked her down in the city of San Pedro Sula, where she had fled. She decided to seek asylum in the U.S. “Before I left, we came to an agreement,” Santos told me. “I told Miguel that if I got deported back to Honduras, or got turned back along the way, then he’d have to move to Honduras. He agreed, even though he’d be giving up his work in the U.S.” Santos has a middle daughter, Rachell, who was born in Minnesota eleven years ago, and is thus a U.S. citizen. There was no reason for her to make the perilous overland journey, and she stayed behind with her grandmother. The plan was for her to come later, by plane, once Santos safely crossed the border. Rachell pleaded with her mother to take her along. “I want to be illegal like you,” she’d told Santos, before she left.

Santos and Calix told me their story as we sat together, along with Valeria and Aleisha, on two faux-leather couches in their house’s cramped living room. Valeria quietly scrolled through her phone, while Aleisha played with a green stuffed turtle. “We never really talked about what happened,” Calix told me, referring to Santos and the girls’ time in detention. Calix is trim and quiet, with a short beard and graying hair. He teared up as he spoke, and Santos looked away to try to keep from crying herself. She is tall, with dark, alert eyes. Each family member had suffered, but in a different way; now that their time apart was over, they were reluctant to revisit the pain of what had happened.

“When I saw Miguel at the airport, I didn’t feel anything,” Santos confessed. “I’d waited so long for that moment. But when it happened, nothing came out. We just looked at each other. It was an ugly feeling.” She and Calix told me they’d been fighting a lot since they’d been reunited. “Anything sets it off,” Santos said. Calix added, “I’ll say to them that I couldn’t sleep while they were in detention, that I was so stressed. Wendy will say, ‘You were having trouble sleeping? But at least you were in bed at home!’ And I understand that.” I later learned, from Santos, that Calix had needed emergency abdominal surgery while they were in detention. He went back to work the next day, not wanting to miss a paycheck. “Still, there are times when

I hold him responsible for what we went through,” Santos told me. The government agreed to let her pursue her asylum claim, and released her pending

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the outcome of her case. She was fitted with an ankle monitor and received strict instructions to stay at home every Friday so that officers from Immigration and Customs Enforcement could confirm that she was living at the address the government had on file.

While the four of us talked, Aleisha bounded around the room, clamoring for attention, and the family laughed. Aleisha prodded Valeria, nestled in her lap, and kept grasping at her hands. She was completely fixated on her older sister. “It’s been like this ever since they got out,” Santos told me. Aleisha and Valeria slept in the same room while they were in detention, in Arizona. Now that they were home, anytime her sister left the room, Aleisha scurried after her. She would only eat when Valeria did. When she needed to go to the bathroom, she yelled “Tachis”—her version of Francis, Valeria’s first name, which she can’t yet pronounce—and held out her hand.

Valeria tended to her patiently, but looked exasperated. At one point, she had told Santos that she never wanted to have kids of her own. She has a teen-ager’s reserve, and when she speaks there are traces of deeper, more hidden thoughts. “Valeria gave me strength when we were separated,” Santos told me. “She never cried on the phone with me, even though I was crying. She said to me, ‘Mom, I’ll stay strong for you.’ When Aleisha was sick, she didn’t tell me, because she didn’t want me to get upset.”

Calix had originally planned for Santos and the girls to stay with his brother, outside Baltimore. But his brother got nervous before they arrived—even though he is in the country legally. (“Since immigration authorities were involved, he didn’t want any trouble,” Calix told me.) Calix had been renting a room in a small white house, with a modest living room that opens onto the kitchen on the first floor and a cluster of tiny bedrooms upstairs. His landlord, a Dominican nurse, lived there with her husband, and the couple had been looking to rent out one of the other extra bedrooms. After his brother backed out, Calix asked his landlord if he could rent one of the other rooms for the girls.

The house felt claustrophobic. On my first night in town, Aleisha had a fever and cried for hours. The landlord, her husband, and their nephew, who was visiting, were annoyed. “It’s gotten complicated here,” Santos told me the next morning. The landlord’s nephew rarely cleaned up after himself, but the landlord was blaming Santos. She also gave the girls a hard time if they went outside to play, according to Santos. Santos and the girls were spending most of their days in their rooms, with the doors closed. “We watch the news a lot,” Valeria told me. Santos said, “The landlady comes home from work around five, and her nephew’s been getting home at

about one. I get up at four in the morning, with Miguel, and make food for the day. Then I get out of the way. At night, the families eat separately.”

On Friday night, I made plans to accompany the family out to dinner at a Mexican restaurant. When I arrived at the house, Santos and her daughters were sitting on the front stoop, eating popsicles. “Miguel’s inside fighting with the landlady,” Santos told me. He emerged a few minutes later. “I’m paying for my room and for the kids’ room, but they keep taking out their frustration on Wendy. She has to clean up. She has to do this and that,” he told me. “Once, when Wendy and I were arguing, she told us we were setting a bad example for the children.”

We drove to the restaurant, where the mood lightened. Aleisha called out the names of objects on the wall (a horse, a guitar, a sombrero). I sat between Valeria and Calix, who ordered a beer and wanted to talk about American politics. He had theories about Michael Cohen. At work that day, there’d been a discussion of Trump’s family-separation policy. A white guy on his construction crew, whom Calix had always liked, asked, “Why are these people coming here? Don’t they know there’s nothing for them?” Calix couldn’t believe his co-worker was so incurious about what Santos and others were fleeing. “People don’t even want to bother to educate themselves. They don’t care,” he said.

A few times during dinner, Aleisha needed to go to the bathroom and nudged Valeria to take her, but she stayed closer to her mother, which tended to happen when they went out, Santos told me. “When we’re home, she’s back to Valeria,” she said. Valeria was taking advantage of the momentary reprieve to send text messages on WhatsApp. When I asked her if she missed her friends in Honduras, she nodded. “I never wanted to come here,” she said. She made up excuses to tell her friends at home, first to explain the circumstances of the family’s trip to the U.S. and then to account for why she’d been unreachable for the forty-five days she spent in detention. She told me, “I said I got into a fight with my mother, because I was so depressed about having to come here, and that she took my phone away so I couldn’t text or send messages.”

When we said goodbye in the parking lot later that night, Calix proposed that I swing by the house the next morning to take Santos and the girls out while he was at work. Because it was a Saturday, the landlord and her family would be home, and Santos dreaded the awkwardness. Early the next morning, however, I received a text message from Calix, calling me off. “Wendy and the girls are not at home. Last night, when we got back, the landlord was waiting for us. She told us we had to leave.” They relocated to a hotel, while Calix figured out what to do next. “It’s one thing after another these days,” he said. “We’ll be fine. I just have to think.”



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