

**Casa Tochan**  
**Frankie Mills**

*Casa Tochan*, 'Our House' in Nahuatl, is a shelter in Mexico City for Central American migrants and refugees. Most of its current residents have fled from gang violence in Honduras and El Salvador. The house is reserved for males, although some exceptions are made for those traveling with family. It can accommodate up to 12 people who are meant to move on after 3 months.

Outside of Tochan for the first time I rang a bell on an anonymous looking tin door before being buzzed through to a block of concrete stairs. From the top came sounds of clanging and loud voices. Not knowing what to expect I took the stairs, apprehensive as images of men sat slumped around a dimly lit room ran through my head.

At the top of the staircase I walked into a scene of ten or so people rummaging around a kitchen making lunch. A pan containing sizzling chicken spat oil; tortilla after tortilla was wrapped in whicker baskets, still steaming from being freshly taken off the grill, as two giant bottles of Coca Cola were ceremonially laid upon the table. People were shouting and sweating, as knives, forks, limes and whole chilies were placed onto the table. Judging by the laughter between people, with words being rapidly exchanged faster than my brain could think, it seemed that lunch was a reason to celebrate here.



***from left to right; Ender; a trained chef and old restaurant owner who left El Salvador when his brother in law started attacking him for his sexuality. Manuel, Honduras, who crossed to the U.S border but was then deported by the U.S. authorities. Javier, Honduras, who fought for a year trying to acquire legal papers in order to study.***

That scene, of a cramped kitchen full of bustling and shouting bodies, was my first impression of *Tochan*, and already it completely contradicted my weary eyed invention of migrants sitting slumped in the shadows together. I was somewhat taken aback to feel instead as though I had walked in on something of a family where everybody had a role, whether it was frying, laying the table, or calling others together to come and eat.

I noticed one boy, whose name I later learnt was Emiliano,

sitting in the corner behind an old computer, frantically alternating between two buttons whilst shouting “Pinche Zombies!!” – *fucking zombies*. He was not sad, nor depressed, he was waiting for his fucking lunch.



**Emiliano, Honduras, 18, who spent his time either playing zombie video games or writing lyrics about migration.**

Another man with thick grey hair, a wiry moustache, and a pair of glasses that rested on the bridge of his nose, sat chain smoking in the garden as he worked on crafting small wooden ornaments. Upon meeting he introduced himself then silently slipped back to his crafting, much more interested in what he was doing with his hands than in anything else.



**Victor, Honduras, who was given permission to stay permanently at Tochan in exchange for being its resident handyman.**

It didn't take long to realize that *Tochan* wasn't how you might imagine a refuge shelter to be. The office that contained medical supplies, which was strictly off limits to all residents, also contained a computer. Often I caught Joseph, a permanent volunteer at the house, watching programs such as *Waking the Dead*, with Jose Antonio, a 17-year-old refugee from Honduras, sitting keenly by his side making endless gestures at the screen.



**Jose-Antonio, 17, Honduras, a self-proclaimed romantic**

*Tochan's* aim is to provide food, shelter and emotional support to its residents, whilst aiding them in finding employment, permanent housing and acquiring legal papers. Recently there has been an increase in security on the U.S border, meaning an increase in the amount of people looking to establish themselves in Mexico. However, with scarce economic opportunities available people are continuously pushed to

continue on the route up to the U.S.



### **Watching Cartoons in the dormitory.**

The more time I spent at *Tochan* the more I learnt about what was happening that was making people migrate in such great magnitudes. Violence with gangs had gotten so bad that people were forced to flee for their lives, leaving behind family, businesses and a once prosperous future. Although each person had a unique story as to why they had initially left, they all started with the same premise; gangs had made continuous demands of individuals that had ultimately become impossible to fulfill. The only option that people felt ensured their survival was migration.

One resident, Jose, El Salvador explained to me;

*“I had a business in my country, and they [the gangs] wanted me to pay them every two weeks. I had to pay otherwise they’d kill me. At the beginning they asked for four hundred dollars a week. I didn’t make that money. And then they raised the price again.*”

*The business was going up and down, and when I didn't make the money to pay them they beat me up. I went to the hospital, they put me in the hospital, I stayed there for almost a month, and when I got out of the hospital I moved to another town, you know, tried to escape, but these people... these people are everywhere. They are all connected. They reach you very easily. And then, they found out where I was, they recognized me, and I had to start paying again or they'd kill me. The last time I saw them was at the end of September, they gave me 24 hours to pay five thousand dollars. In 24 hours where am I gonna get that money? So I left my county. I jumped to Guatamala, and then to Tapachula, Mexico". ... Jose El Salvador.*



**Jose-Antonio, 17, Honduras, “I did not want to work with the gangs, so they were going to kill me. They gave me three days to leave, so I left”. He was able to find work at a local Tortellia and lived at *Tochan* until another shelter offered him a permanent place and access to education.**

There was one boy at the shelter named Llionel, originally from

El Salvador, who like me was aged 21 at the time. He liked rap music; he often played on his phone, and wore a large diamond stud in his ear. At times we spoke and he reminded me of someone I might have known from home. One day I asked him about his history, about how he had ended up at *Tochan*, and he told me when he was aged 14 he had watched his dad being murdered in front of him by gangs. His father, who had been the only person looking out for him and his brothers, was gone. Now the same gangs were searching for him for witnessing the murder.



**Llionel, 21, El Salvador, who was forced to migrate after watching the murder of his father. “the *Mareros* (gangs) ask you for money and if you don’t give 100 pesos daily, for example, they kill you. They act like that with everyone in El Salvador. One may try to sell sweets in the streets but the *mareros* are going to ask for their share”**

With no other choice Llionel went up to the United States where he was working without papers on a ranch. He told me

that when crossing the U.S. border he'd cry because he couldn't bare the cold and how much his feet hurt. After 2 weeks of working at the ranch the owner reported him to migration officials to avoid having to pay him his wages. Llional was then deported to Mexico, where he has spent the past 3 years trying to acquire legal papers. His claims are continuously rejected, as the government insists he needs more evidence to prove his claims are legitimate, making it impossible to find any form of employment. If he returns to El Salvador he will be killed, yet making a meaningful life in Mexico continues to prove impossible.



**Llional with Tania, the daughter of another resident, who he met at *Tochan*.**

When I asked him if he'd rather be in El Salvador then Mexico he told me "Yes. I want to return there and live there but I just can't because of the *pandillas*". I told Llional he was strong for going through everything he had; he told me "well yeah, truthfully one has to be".

Although *Tochan* seemed like a haven at times, the reality was that it was one of the only places that provided any means of support for people who had otherwise been victimized in every other area of life. Rather than chasing warped fantasies of an alleged “Golden Dream”, most residents at Tochan were there because they had to be, as a necessity for survival. Often people knock on the door of *Tochan* having walked for days without any food or water. Many others have not survived the journey.



**Rossman, Guatemala, who lost his leg after being pushed off the infamous *La Bestia*, The Beast, the train that passes through Mexico to the U.S border. “Yes, I am lucky”.**

What surprised and engaged me more than anything else working at *Tochan*, was not the horrors that people had left behind, but the bravery with which they faced their current situations. Just like every other refugee and migrant, those who arrive at *Tochan* do not do so merely wishing to live in a permanent state of limbo; waiting for papers that might not arrive, moving between shelters, working part time jobs, being

deported, only to then migrate again once more. It is however a process that many had endured, whilst still aspiring to the dreams they had prior to migrating.



**“El Gusano”; *the caterpillar*. Named because he believed caterpillars were born from butterflies and could travel freely without borders.**

One resident, Ender, from El Salvador, had trained as a chef and successfully opened and ran a restaurant, before he was forced to migrate due to hate crimes made against him because of his sexuality. Upon appearing before a judge he was told he had to leave his home and change his ways. Coming to Mexico he was retained by migration in a detention center for 7 months before eventually being permitted to leave because of health complications. He said the worst part about being in the center was the lack of care that they put into the food.

Now in Mexico he told me his ambitions were;

*“First, achieve refuge. I’m still an applicant. It is a process that takes so long because of the many inconsistencies in the process. Achieve shelter and start again. Reopen a restaurant here in Mexico. Introduce Salvadoran cuisine. Salvadoran cuisine is among the best in Latin America, so I want to make it known here in Mexico”*



### **Communal Cooking**

Ender, like many others, had arrived at *Tochan* not just with dreams of survival but also with personal ambitions that exceeded the constraints of living as an undocumented migrant. However, regardless of his talents and ambitions, without legal papers to support him, Ender, like many others, is confined to living in shelters, making small amounts of money from part time jobs, unable to move forward nor turn back.



**Name Unknown, Honduras, currently in Mexico City trying to achieve asylum and work on his dream of being a singer.**

Despite the situations that they faced, the majority of people I met at *Tochan* were part of the aspiring, the still determined, the willing to stay true to their personal ambitions. However, in finding little progress in achieving asylum or any means of sustainable employment, many were close to giving up, and would spend their days in bed, choosing to be asleep rather than face the uncertainty of their everyday reality. It was in such cases where the work of *Tochan* became even more vital. As long as the problems with gangs persist in their home countries while Mexico and the U.S. retain inhospitable asylum policies, many of those I met will remain confined to a life of limbo, existing on the peripheries of wherever they are:

*“You think its easy for me being here? Instead of being in my home? If I was at home I wouldn’t have a job because if I had a job these people come with a gun and put the gun to your head*

*and tell you "I need this money, if you don't find me this money ..." they kill you. So I don't want to die now. I want to live longer. And that's why I'm here." Jose, El Salvador.*



**Christianity and Chelsea Football Club, reasons to go on for one Guatemalan Refugee.**