

We start out a little after 6 am, grabbing the nutty tasting hotel coffee and sleepily climbing into a fleet of rental vans. The highway is dark and stretches out straight in front of us, the shoulders bleeding into expansive dry grasslands. Occasionally spots of brown move, and cattle perk up as we speed past them. Behind us, orange and pink sunrise starts to expand across the horizon as the sun rises.

About an hour later, at Exit 84, we turn past a Valero gas station, and drive past a low-level prison, where according to the Texas Tribune, 562 inmates are serving time for aggravated robbery, 209 for aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, and 198 for aggravated sexual assault of a child. Immediately after that we pass a private ranch, and then turn left. A sign for the South Texas Family Residential Center hides on the left, inconspicuous and easy to miss. A line above the sign denotes the company that runs it – Core Civic, formerly known as CCA – with a current revenue of nearly \$2 billion. Due to the many deaths in different facilities, the company changed its name to be more profitable.

We park in the ICE designated parking, because we can. It's too hot after work to walk across the parking lot, and after all, we're all part of one big DHS family aren't we? Except we, from USCIS, are not allowed to go in the areas where people are actually detained. We have to go straight to our little trailer and sit there all day. Only ICE goes back to the areas where the applicants – or detainees to them – live. We walk into the facility, which is composed of khaki-colored trailers spread across the hot Texas dirt.

Volunteers, mostly from Catholic Charities but also a lot of first-year law students, are lining up to go through the airport-type security and have a pat down. We walk straight through, show our cell phones, and slide our badges through a reader and walk over to "corte," the court building, where immigration hearings happen via video conference. When there are hearings, they last about three to five minutes, I'm told. It's a quick way to decide the future and life of a person. But the numbers, the numbers. A few kittens meow at us from a hole below the corte trailer – their mother is missing, but this center is the so-called "reunification hub" for mothers and children separated by ICE. Maybe they missed her, I sarcastically think.... Too soon, too soon, but this is what I'm thinking when I walk into work.

To hit a legally sufficient interview, we just have to cover the bullet points of the Immigration and Nationality Act: Does the harm rise to a severe level of persecution/torture? Was the harm due to a protected ground? Were the police willing/acquiescent in the harm? Any hint of a mandatory bar? Ok, done. Next.

We are supposed to finish in under an hour and go through rape, death threats, kidnappings, and more rape. There is a LOT of rape.

Next.

Today I had an applicant who was raped - she pointed to her four-year-old girl who was fidgeting in the corner. "That's why she's here... he just kept raping me, and then I had her."

"How did he meet you?" I asked her, not exactly a necessary question, but I wanted to know how this man even met the woman in front of me. "I had an ice cream shop and he came by a few times. Then he followed me home and he raped me at home." He just decided because he had seen her that he could do that. Just because. She didn't even know his full name. She did the "right" thing, too, and went to the police who said they would "kiss and make up" and that "women are too dramatic." She went to the police in her precinct, and they followed her home in a patrol car twice, and got out and groped her and told her to shut up or she would regret it, and who knows what they would do to her tiny daughter. She went to three other police stations, hoping they could help. "You don't live in our direct area – we can't help you," they told her. So she saved money and her family gave her money and she moved and started a new ice cream shop in a different city. The rapist sent three thugs who found her, robbed her, and told her he was the boss, she had to submit, and that she would never escape. He broke her business and she had nothing left. It took her a month to get to the U.S. "I just want to be here for a while," she said, "Just to be safe. He keeps hurting me."

Then I asked her about her right eye, which looked clouded. "Is your eye ok, ma'am?" "It's from him, he had herpes. It's from the rapes," she tells me, matter of fact. "I need a new cornea because I got herpes in my eye. I just want to be in the US for 3 - 5 years for the girl to get a little older away from him, and get a cornea transplant. I can go back later. Please keep me safe for a while," she said.

And she'll be out in a few days. I wrote two sentences – two – about her harm and signed the papers. I printed a bunch of other required pages of extraneous paper BS. She is a "positive" decision for Credible Fear. She will hopefully be safe now, at least for a while. But it also means that she is supposed to register address changes for wherever she moves, which many, many people don't do – they just don't know how to. And if she did, there is a three-year backlog. To get a work permit and have basic protections, will take a long time. For asylum, she needs to see a judge. So now begins the long process of work, undocumented, and cheap labor for all of us soil-born US citizens. And now begins the process, in which her daughter starts to speak English, and grows into her own woman. I wonder how her mother will see her daughter in the US. If being away from a rapist can change perception more than a cornea transplant, or if things like that are forever imprinted on the brain.