Mariana Alejandra wakes at 6 a.m. She is attempting to make an omelet while entertaining her niece, who is mimicking the dance moves she's watching on a second-hand TV. The living room is dark and cluttered, and toys are scattered over the colorful foam mat that covers the floor. Alejandra returns to the kitchen to discover that the omelet has burned; she sighs and quickly shifts it to a plate. Her mother, 69, Ana Lopez, packs rice and beans for Alejandra's lunch. She and Alejandra's father stay home to care for the baby and do the cooking.

Alejandra is petite, with curly long black hair. She is 28 years old. She has dark circles under her eyes and shares a two-bedroom apartment with six family members, including her sister's 9-month-old baby girl.

As you walk into her building, there is an overpowering smell of marijuana. Their apartment rests underneath the stairs of a dilapidated building in Malden, Massachusetts. Their lives are often disturbed with the heavy footsteps of residents coming up and down the building's staircase. Alejandra's living conditions are less than ideal, but it's a small price she's willing to pay to escape the widening chaos in her native country, Venezuela.

Alejandra and her family left their home in Venezuela's capital of Caracas two years ago. Her family was fleeing harsh living conditions, declining food supplies, and the endemic street violence that plagues this once-prosperous South American country.

According to the U.S. State Department, Venezuela is one of the countries that tourists should not visit because murder, armed robbery, carjacking, and kidnapping are endemic throughout the country. Caracas, had the highest homicide rate in the world in 2015, according to Mexican think tank Citizens Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice.

Venezuela also has the highest rate of hyperinflation in the world. Venezuela's inflation rate was at 475 percent in 2016 and, according to the International Monetary Fund, may climb as high as 1,660 percent this year. People suffer from severe food shortages. Hospitals cannot provide water, let alone the saline, gloves, sutures, pins, and plates necessary for basic medical care; one medical student recently told a reporter for the New Yorker. In a poll taken at the end of 2015, an astounding 30 percent of respondents had concrete plans to leave the country permanently; over half expressed the desire to do so.

Living in the U.S., Alejandra can see the huge differences from her countries of origin.

"Here, you can get the food you want from the local supermarket as well as medical care from a local clinic, and you feel safe when you are walking on the street by yourself," she says as she finishes the burned omelet and gulping down a glass of orange juice.

"Those are the things that are very important to have a good quality life [and] that cannot happen in Venezuela.," she says as she swoops down to grab her lunch and purse from the living room.

Alejandra's family is not alone. There are roughly 150,000 other Venezuelans to leave their native country in 2016. Venezuela, now, became the Western hemisphere's version of Syria, leads the world in US asylum applications. In 2014, Venezuela ranked far down the list of asylum seekers, with roughly 18 percent of applicants as those from China, which ranked first. This February Venezuela surpassed China with 4,000 applicants from that month alone as the country with the largest number of US asylum seekers.

Applying for asylum is not an easy process, nor is it fast. And those seeking it must navigate a complex system of regulations and forms. For people like Alejandra who are in the U.S. and not targeted for deportation, they must apply within a year of their last arrival into the country. The case then is assigned a hearing date, sometimes up to six years later because the system has a backlog of 620,000 cases, according to the American Immigration Council. The asylum seeker must then prove that they are facing persecution or torture if they return to their native country. But if asylum-seekers miss that one-year deadline, they are thrust into an alternative process that affords less leeway to immigrants. While waiting, some people, children included, are detained.

In the end, 60 percent of all asylum cases are rejected.

In February, President Donald Trump issued guidelines that would assign more power to immigration officers in the field to deny asylum claims of immigrants caught living here illegally. When this happens, deportation is inevitable.

At 8 a.m. Alejandra leaves for work. She kisses her niece goodbye, exchanges a quick joke with her sister and brother-in-law, and walks briskly through the clouds of marijuana smoke on her way to the car. She commutes 40 minutes to Newton where she works for a construction company. Alejandra told me the whole family is terrified at the prospect of returning to Venezuela. And given the slim chances of asylum for the family, they need to improvise ways to stay in the country.

“We will never [go] back to Venezuela,” Alejandra said. Unfortunately, she may not have a choice.

In 1950s, Venezuela had the largest oil reserves of conventional oil (light and heavy crude) in the western hemisphere and the largest reserves of non-conventional oil (extra-heavy crude) in the world. In 1960, Venezuela became one of the founder members of OPEC. The outbreak of the Middle East war in 1973. To smack Israel and countries who are friendly Israel, to OPEC Persian Gulf states members decided to raise the oil prices by 70 percent.

As the results of increasing oil production profits, Venezuela became the richest country in South America and attracted many immigrants from Latin America and Japan. Between 1972 and 1974, the Venezuelan government revenues increased roughly 400 percent. The price of oil peaked in April 1979 at $103.76 per barrel.

However, during the 1980s the oil market fell into the crisis of glut, by falling demand following the 1970s-energy crisis. In 1979, Venezuela faced a severe recession due to collapsing oil prices. The bolívar, Venezuela’s currency, fell into a significant devaluation at Feb 18, 1983. It also knows as “Black Friday.”

In 1998, because oil prices hit a historic low at $10 per barrel, which fired up the economic depression encompassing the country. At the same time, along with increasing poverty, riots were primarily taking place around a period of economic collapse in Caracas, where hundreds of civilians were killed.

Then, in 1999 many Venezuelans saw a ray of hope shine down upon the political landscape, in the form of Hugo Chávez, a bombastic but intensely charismatic new leader. The former general won 56 percent of the vote, a winning coalition comprised of Venezuela’s lower classes who had felt left out of the country’s oil-driven economic booms. Chávez promised the people that he would draft a new constitution and rid the

country of the old elites. He styled himself as a modern-day Simón Bolívar, the 19th-century revolutionary that brought self-rule to much of South America.

When Chávez came to power, many Venezuelans were hopeful that he was capable of turning things around because he had military experience.

However, this "Bolivarian Revolution," failed to deliver on Chavez's promises: This new regime was geared toward helping the poor and distributing equitable revenues, and reducing economic inequality. However, Chávez 's policies had the opposite effect: it resulted in hyperinflation, economic depression, and poverty.

Corruption, mismanagement, and abuse of power in Chávez made the country falls even further into disrepair. Chávez emphasized that "Being rich is bad, it is inhuman." However, his daughter, Alejandra Gabriela Chavez, 35, is the richest woman in Venezuela. According to Daily Mail, she has $4.2 billion in assets held in American banks. Chavez disclosed that he has $11.2 billion in his name sitting in HSBC accounts in Switzerland.

Disorder, street crime, and gun violence continued to plague Venezuela. In 2003, four years after he had become president, kidnappings and robberies have risen sharply. Under Chávez's regime, the homicide rate had nearly doubled.

Yet, Chávez showed no interest in law enforcement, claiming that inequality, poverty, and capitalism were the causes of crime, according to the New Yorker. He focused all of his attention on executive power, even re-writing the Constitution to bolster his position. While doing so, he ignored the needs of Venezuela's economy. During his administration, Chávez used Venezuela's oil as its primary foreign policy in an attempt to develop a close alliance with Cuba and other South American countries.

He supported his fame abroad by lavishly spending on foreign aid and trade. His ambitions allowed him to stay in power for 14 years. Though he died in 2013, the negative effects of his policies are still rampant, with Venezuelans experiencing shortages of food that have led to rationing and a lack of basic goods. The situation is so bad that 15 percent of Venezuelans were eating food waste in 2016, according to a study conducted by three Venezuelan universities. Moreover, 73 percent of the population lost weight since last year.

His vice-president, Nicolás Maduro, a one-time bus driver, succeeded Chávez. Since Maduro took office in April 2013, Venezuela has not seen much improvement and currently has the world's highest inflation rate—800 percent—as of 2016. And the inflation rate is expected to rise to a whopping 1660 percent in 2017, according to the website Trading Economics.

In 2016, food shortages and awful living conditions led to 200 prison riots throughout the year. And according to Fox News Latino, the conditions at one prison were so desperate that prisoners stabbed, hanged, dismembered, and then ate a fellow inmate.

Maduro's rule over Venezuela is the reason Alejandra left. She is not alone. An estimated 150,000 Venezuelans have created a mass emigration in 2015 alone, with Venezuelans fleeing to Spain, Colombia, Panama, the U.S., the Dominican Republic, Argentina, Chile, and Mexico, according to New York Times.

Alejandra shakes her head sadly as she merges into the I-90 traffic. Every day, she worries that her small, second-hand, black Honda that she acquired for $2,000 will break down on the highway, leaving her without a lifeline to her livelihood. It's a hard and perilous life, she says, but the alternative—returning to the chaos and violence and starvation that await her family if forced to return to their native land—is far worse.

She knows firsthand just how bad it can be. One time when she was 24 years old, she was walking down the street in a city that borders Colombia when she was held at knifepoint by a man who demanded $200 in exchange for letting her live. This happened in broad daylight, with plenty of witnesses.

The route she was walking was part of her ordinary course of life. Alejandra and her family used to cross a bridge into Colombia to buy things as necessary as a bottle of shampoo or toilet paper. She is quick to point out that only middle-class Venezuelans can afford such luxuries.

In another incident typical of Venezuela, one of her friend's car was stolen and held for a $500 ransom. Since a new car would cost more than the robbers demanded, her friend chose to pay the ransom. "That is normal in Venezuela," Alejandra says.

So then there are the food rations. After protests over food shortages broke out in the country, President Maduro put the military in charge of rationing out the country's food supply, according to the Associated Press. This has forced people to wait in day-long lines at supermarkets only to find bare shelves, creating a black food market created and supported by the military, according to the AP. Maduro, Alejandra says, "a motherfucker."

She rummages through her car that's littered with makeup, half-eaten food, and unlaundered clothes looking for a lighter. She smashes the gas pedal while lighting up a Virginia Slim cigarette. Alejandra did not smoke before she arrived here. Unwrapping a stick of gum is not enough to take away her stress. Lighting up a cigarette and inhaling the taste of nicotine has become her only consolation.

Alejandra fled to Boston two years ago with a student visa because she believes her country has been ruined by the Chávez-Maduro era. She said that a student visa was not a way to a better education. It was a means of escape.

Usually, middle-class immigrants like her fly directly to the U.S. on a tourist or student visa, but for poorer migrants, stowing away on boats or hopping onto freight train cars are the only options for entering the country. Once they arrive in the U.S., applying for asylum as soon as possible is vital.

Alejandra hasn't started to apply yet, but she has a plan. Her current visa allows her to stay legally for at least three more years provided she is in school, and she thinks she'll be okay as long as she submits her asylum application right before her visa expires.

It's understandable that Alejandra—or any other refugee—might adopt this approach: Maximize the time you have in the country, then apply for asylum as that window begins to close. However, she has set herself up for a much harder path to asylum, and thus, her American dream.

What Alejandra doesn't realize is that she has missed the one-year deadline for proactively applying for asylum and any chance of gaining this status must be done through a much more complicated process that requires an "adversarial" hearing in front of an immigration judge. If she cannot afford an attorney, she must represent herself against government lawyers during proceedings while trying to convince the judge that she faces "credible fear" of persecution or torture if she returns to Venezuela.

After the 40-minute drive, she arrives at her workplace, a small construction company in Newton tucked behind a McDonald's in a small warehouse. The front door is only five feet high, and Alejandra has to bend over to enter. The odd details of the warehouse's exterior belie the beautiful, modern office that awaits her. Inside, Macintosh computers adorn marble desks and a flat-panel television in her office broadcasts President Trump's inauguration. Alejandra is talking to clients on the phone in Spanish. She wipes the sweat from her brow and lifts her glass to take a quick sip of water.

Collating documents, writing and mailing checks, and buying office supplies are facets of Alejandra's work. Her boss pays her $11 per hour under the table. This job is her lifeline. Without it, Alejandra could not pay rent, let alone tuition. Her income also pays for her car, insurance, and gas.

Alejandra thinks she could find a much better job if she had a legal work permit because she could cite her bachelor's in accounting that she earned from a good university in Venezuela. However, that education only made her around $40 per month in her home country.

Though Maduro just increased the nation's minimum wage by 40 percent, in 2016, it was the equivalent of $67 after converting from Venezuelan bolivars.

Data from the U.S. government's Citizenship and Immigration Services show that 18,155 Venezuelans applied for asylum last year. The number is six times more than in 2014 and represents a 150 percent increase from 2015.

"The pace at which requests are increasing is alarming," said Julio Henriquez, an immigration lawyer and director of the Boston- based nonprofit Refugee Freedom program. Because the vast majority are middle-class Venezuelans who don't qualify for refugee status, applying for asylum is the option for them.

Although Venezuelans are qualified to apply for asylum, the chance of being granted is slim.
The situation in Venezuela is not as bad as in Syria when measured with the U.S.'s cold calculation of human misery. The chance of being granted asylum depends on the applicant's place of origin, and Venezuela is not on the priority list, according to Henriquez.

The United States, famously, is a country of immigrants. According to USCIS, the government encouraged relatively free and open immigration policy since the 18th century. However, a watershed decision by the Supreme Court in 1875 changed things. In the 1880s, Congress began to pass immigration legislation to respond to the increasing number of immigrants. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and Alien Contract Labor laws of 1885 and 1887 restricted certain laborers from immigration to the U.S. and levied heavy taxes on people who defied the acts.

At the end of Cold War, the United States increasingly detained asylum seekers and unauthorized migrants. The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 made it difficult to win asylum cases in the U.S.

The case for asylum seekers became even tougher after 9/11, according to Henriquez. In many countries, strict laws don't welcome asylum seekers. The U.S. joined this exclusive list after once welcoming asylum seekers.

After 9/11, the number of allowed asylum applications granted dropped from 70,000 to 27,000, according to the Department of Population, Refugees, and Migration. This enhanced security and made the U.S. safer and

stronger, according to the agency's assistant Secretary. Overall, the number of granted asylum cases decreased 40 percent from 2001 to 2014.

Alejandra gets off work with the construction company at 5 p.m. She does not have enough time to finish her dinner and must drive fast to make it to school, the Computer System Institute located in Charlestown.

The school is in a leased space on the second floor of an old commercial building that also houses lawyers on the floor below and a salon on the floor above. The school is so small that there is no campus, no library, and no student center. The tuition for Alejandra is just $1,200 per semester and judging from some reviews about the school on Google like "worst experience ever," it should not cost even that much.

Alejandra doesn't know what will happen with immigration under the new presidential administration. She doesn't have much time to learn politics after hurrying from chores at home to work all day to school all night. She doesn't have the energy for it.

With the promise of harshly enforced immigration laws, the Trump administration made it more difficult for immigrants to win their cases to remain in the U.S. According to documents released by the Department of Homeland Security earlier this year, the Trump administration has quietly but effectively made it harder for immigrants to be granted asylum. From the "seven countries travel ban" at the beginning of 2017 to the executive order, known as "Protecting The Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into The United States," the outlook for would-be asylum seekers is bleak.

"For [Alejandra], applying for asylum is out of the question. Things will become worse if [immigration officials] find out she is working under the table. It is raising a red flag above her," Henriquez said.

Alejandra's voice trembles when she speaks of her American dream.

"I would like to have my master's degree from a business school in marketing and have a good job in the United States," she said. "I cannot back to my country not because I don't want to. I mean, I love my country. But I don't have other options," she adds, with a hint of hopelessness in her voice.

After finishing four hours of intense English classes, Alejandra's brain seems to stop operating.
The dark bags under her glassy eyes seems bigger after the eye makeup smears. She stretches herself with yawn compulsively as walking out the building. Her shoulders slumped, and her head hung down as she lights up a cigarette.

At 10 p.m., she quietly opens her apartment's door. Her mom is asleep on the brown, second-hand sofa. The majority of the furniture in the family's apartment was purchased from a flea market in Somerville. After exchanging a few casual words with her sister and mother, who has woken up, she enters her bedroom and silently bends over to kiss the forehead of her niece.

Her sister gave birth after she came to Boston to give her child a better life. Like Alejandra, her sister and brother-in-law also work all the time, including weekends.

“They could apply for a green card once the 9-month old baby turns 21years old,” Henriquez says with a regret and a forced smile. The baby is now the family’s only U.S. citizen.

“The worry is very big. If for some reason, we cannot stay here and face deportation. We [might] go to other places. We are not [returning] back to my country. Not at all. It's not gonna happen. You know, United States is not the only country [we can live]. It is just one of the best,” She said.

As she continues to speak about her home country, Venezuela, her eyes turn red with tears.

At 12 a.m., Alejandra has her dinner, cleans ups, finishes her schoolwork, and heads to her room to finally sleep. When the clock-chime sounds at quarter past one, she finally hops into bed, reminding herself – convincing herself—that her long days and nights will pay off in the end.

*Asked not to use the real name to protect the source.