

And a Song Shall Carry Them Home

The Journey of the Brothers Fermin – Part 1

By Jennifer Torres

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Porch lights glowed on Boggs Tract in the cold blue hours before sunrise when the brothers pressed their shoulders against the front end of the purple Chevy pickup - parked nose in on their narrow driveway, battery dead - and heaved.

The truck rolled back a few feet and then rocked forward again toward the men: Santos, wearing a red windbreaker and flip-flops; Efrain, serious and dark in a leather coat that hung past his hips; Constantino, whose whistles punctuated his sentences, sometimes as a period, sometimes a question mark, often an underline; and shy Nicasio, who was 22 and still blushed. His older brothers called him chubby, but it was only that he had round features.

They squared their shoulders against the truck and pushed again.

A train's horn sounded. Neighbors stirred. Across the street, a man retrieved his garbage can from the curb and dragged it to the side of his house.

The truck - more than 2 tons heavy even before the luggage was loaded into its bed - seesawed back when they shoved, forth when they relaxed.

A friend had tried to install a stereo the night before, but it didn't work, and the battery was drained in the process. The brothers had an Oldsmobile parked in the street that could give it a jump-start, but they needed to get the truck down there first.

Vans pulled up to the house next door and to the one on the corner, waiting for men and women who emerged quietly, quickly in ball caps or hooded sweat shirts. They carried lunches wrapped in aluminum foil to be eaten with dusty fingers in one of San Joaquin County's vast agricultural fields.

On any other Thursday morning, Santos, Constantino, Efrain and Nicasio Fermin would have been getting ready for the same jobs.

Two years ago, they left home - a remote village in the southern Mexican state of Guerrero - and came to Stockton together.

They were lured by the same unremarkable, yet no less compelling, prospects that had led millions of other poor Mexicans across the border before them: An American income would build houses and buy food, would keep their children in school.

Work in the United States meant a cell phone in Santos' pocket, a Chevy in the driveway and Coca-Cola in a refrigerator at home in the village of Acojtapachtlan, more than 1,000 miles away.

It meant, besides, for Constantino, the chance to lead a band. And that little idea, which had been among so many to push the brothers out of Mexico, was about to tug three of them home again.

In less than a week, Acojtapachtlan would celebrate San Lucas, its patron, with a two-day festival. Residents would dance - they did every year - but this time it would be to Constantino's music.

Workdays in San Joaquin County fields were broken up by weekends at Stockton flea markets, where Constantino bought a keyboard, microphones, guitars, accordions, amplifiers and a conga drum.

All of it was piled into the back of the truck, along with water coolers, bags full of clothing, a bicycle, a television set, cowboy boots, a DVD player - every little thing that was out of reach in Mexico and that America had seemed bursting with. And they were taking it back.

One more time, they crouched behind the Chevy and sucked in their breath.

They pushed the truck all the way into the street.

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"El rico con el pobre, el pobre con el rico."

"The rich need the poor, and the poor need the rich," Santos, 30, said as he served dinner to his brothers a little more than two weeks before their return trip to Mexico.

He dropped a stack of corn tortillas - still too hot to touch - next to a bowl of salsa.

"It's written in the Bible," he said.

If we all were rich, he said, who would work?

His younger brothers nodded around the table, leaning back as Santos set bowls in front of them. Their hands were tough and their fingernails gray. They scooped up beans and beef with folded tortillas.

"And if everyone were poor, well, then, how would anyone eat?"

Santos was the only brother without a wife and children in Mexico, and he was the only one who had decided to stay in Stockton rather than go home with the others.

He figured he needed three more years at least, maybe four, to save enough money to build an employment center in Acojtapachtlan. He wanted to help other young men find jobs so they wouldn't have to leave home, too.

"I don't want the children to suffer the way I suffered."

Constantino, 28, pulled cans of Bud Light from a carton on the floor and passed them around the table. "They are eating," he said, "because we are here."

The television in the next room threw a dim halo into the kitchen. Santos shooed a small, whining dog outside.

Ten hours later, he and Constantino were the first ones awake at the start of another workday.

Santos cleared empty beer cans from the kitchen table and switched on the bare light bulb hanging above the center of the room. He struck a match to light the stove pilot, shook it out and set a pot of water to boil.

Constantino sat at the edge of his bed and played a few wistful notes on the accordion as the other men - in total, eight people lived at the house the Fermin brothers rented - began to wake up.

After several minutes, Santos gave him a red plastic cup full of boiling water. He stirred in a teaspoon of instant coffee grounds, another of sugar and asked Santos, "Is the milk fresh?"

Then he stopped and looked sideways at the cup. The water left it melted, misshapen. He raised his eyebrows and whistled.

In 2006, San Joaquin County growers harvested more than 1.6 million tons of tomatoes on 51,700 acres of land. The crop was worth in excess of \$146 million, making tomatoes the county's third most lucrative agricultural product behind milk (\$261 million) and grapes (\$205 million).

In a tomato field alongside Highway 4, the Fermin brothers were among the men, and some women, who dug their shoes into the soil and sat on upturned buckets, waiting for the dew to dry.

Though tomatoes have been bred over decades to have thick, hearty skins, picking them while the field is still wet increases the risk of mold. As fall progressed, the crop took longer to dry. The brothers could tell by the frost on their car windows in the morning whether it would be a late start.

California agriculture has long relied on an immigrant work force.

In 1917, the U.S. Department of Labor issued an order allowing farmers - who worried their crops would otherwise go unharvested - to recruit and hire Mexican workers outside the constraints of recently tightened immigration rules.

A Mexican ballad from 1930 called "Los Enganchandos" - the ones who have been hooked - tells a story of migration to the United States. It ends like this:

*Estos versos son compuestos
Por un pobre Mexicano
Pa' ponerlos al corriente
Del sistema Americano.*

("These verses are written by a poor Mexican to keep people abreast of the American system.")

Faced with another potential labor shortage as it entered World War II, the federal government approved the Bracero Treaty, which let U.S. growers hire Mexicans for temporary farm work. Over the next 22 years, until the Bracero program was suspended in 1964, millions of Mexicans headed north legally to work on American farms and ranches.

Around the time the program ended, University of California researchers predicted that mechanization of agricultural work would quell future needs for cheap farm labor. But, as recently as last year, the California Farm Bureau Federation, an advocate for growers, estimated that \$85 million in agricultural losses could be attributed to farm labor shortages.

The tomatoes that the Fermin brothers harvested six days a week on farmland west of Stockton grew near the ground off of slack green vines.

The men were paid a per-bucket piece rate; each quality load - that meant two buckets full of unbruised fruit - shuttled from the ground to a waiting gondola earned a token that could be redeemed later for about \$1. An inferior load, as judged by a foreman, got nothing.

If they were fast, and the gondolas not too far, Efrain estimated, they could earn \$10 to \$12 an hour, far more than in Mexico's growing regions.

Meanwhile, the California tomato industry has celebrated a recent rise in tomato exports to Mexico: 2.5 million 25-pound boxes were shipped from this state over the border in 2005, up from less than 1 million the year before.

Constantino balanced his keyboard on a red vinyl kitchen chair and pulled a spiral-bound, 170-page student notebook from a bag in his closet. In a short stack of notebooks just like it, written in small, deliberate letters, were the words to all the songs he knew and had composed.

The only one of his siblings to have finished the equivalent of middle school, Constantino said he always loved music but had little money to pursue it.

Over the past three years, he taught himself to play - a little guitar, a little accordion, a little keyboard - and to sing. Every day, for at least an hour and a half after work, he and Nicasio practiced.

Constantino flipped through notebook pages.

He found it: "El hermosísimo," he said. The most beautiful.

The song was called "Una Botella de Mezcal."

"We are far from our families," he said. "We want to see them. But we can't, so instead we reach for the bottle to remember."

Nicasio slipped his arms into the accordion straps and lowered his chin to his chest. The instrument whined when he pressed its keys and let the bellows open. Nicasio's wife was in Mexico, too. A few months earlier, he wired her some money and told her to buy herself a pair of earrings.

Constantino sat behind the keyboard. He tapped his feet as he played. His voice was plaintive.

The two of them had performed at weddings and holiday parties in Stockton. They had enough instruments and enough experience to start a band back home now, Constantino thought. Once they got there, he would talk to the other musicians in Acojtapachtlan, and they would figure out a name for their group.

He wanted to teach his son, who had been just a toddler when he left, how to play. He wanted his wife to see him. He wanted to impress his daughter, Areli, a bright, wiry 9-

year-old, who was sad when he went away. Every time he talked to her on the telephone, she would ask, "When are you coming home?"

He told her, "Tomorrow." It became their running joke.

"Una Botella de Mezcal" is a song for loneliness, Constantino said. "It is a song for remembering a woman."

*Todas las noches, cuando agarro la botella,
Yo te miro dentro de ella
Y me pongo a platicar.
Al rato siento que me abrazas y me aprietas
Cual si fuera cosa cierta
Te amo y te amo y no es verdad.*

("Every night, when I grab the bottle, I see you inside of it and I start talking. For a while, I feel you hug and press me as if it were a real thing. I love you and I love you, and it isn't true.")

*Cuando al fin vuelvo de mis locos pensamientos
Empiezan los sufrimientos
Porque te busco y no estas.
De mis ojos empieza a brotar el llanto
Porque yo te quiero tanto
Y no puedo evitar.*

("When, in the end, I return from my crazy thoughts, the suffering starts because I look for you and you are not there. My eyes begin to weep because I love you so much and I can't avoid it.")

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On a Friday after work, still wearing his heavy green handyman's apron, Mario Gomez loaded a truck with boxes of cereal, soup, onions, poppy-seed muffins and day-old doughnuts to take to migrant families living in trailers and barracks on San Joaquin County farmland. He makes similar trips every week.

"It isn't very much," he said. "But it's something."

Mario, 44, is responsible for maintenance at St. Mary's Interfaith Community Services. From its Stockton campus, the organization offers meals and other assistance to the homeless and poor.

More than 20 years ago, he came to California without documents but later gained legal status under provisions of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act.

When Mario met the Fermin brothers, they were living in group quarters owned by a local grower. He was impressed by their drive and their commitment to family. He showed them the flea markets that had the best prices on used car parts. He videotaped the performances they gave and the birthdays they celebrated. He took them to see snow. He stored the musical instruments Constantino worried could get stolen from their house.

And he had decided to go with the brothers to Acojtapachtlan to make sure they made it back home with their truck and their music in time for the festival of San Lucas. He would even drive; none of the brothers are licensed in this country.

Two other men — Sacramento-area farm workers who were from villages near the Fermin brothers' hometown — were going, too.

At 5 a.m. on the day they were to leave, Mario pulled himself up into the bed of the purple truck. Carrying a small flashlight, he climbed over boxes, bags, suitcases, speakers, a spare tire. He struggled to fasten a tarp over a water cooler.

Efrain shook his head. If it didn't fit, they could just leave it behind, he said. Mario clapped. "If your people need it," he said, "let's do it." The water cooler was coming along.

Santos, who was staying behind, watched from a few feet away.

The night before, he stood in a bedroom doorway as his brothers got ready to leave. They had been laughing, punching each other's shoulders. Constantino played every musical instrument he touched as they packed.

"I'll have to find some more roommates," Santos said. They didn't hear him. He helped his brothers push the truck to the edge of the driveway.

Mario opened the hood and attached the jumper cables. The others stood around him, staring at the engine. When they exhaled, thin clouds escaped their lips.

Constantino, in the cab, turned the key. The truck grumbled, strained.

Finally, it roared.

Mario grinned.

"Orale!" he growled. "Orale!"