# And a Song Shall Carry Them Home
## The Journey of the Brothers Fermin – Part 2

**By Jennifer Torres**
Dec. 9, 2007

Santos touched the fingers of his younger brothers - Constantino, Efrain and Nicasio - as they left the house, an hour later than planned, but still before dawn.

He dug his hands back in his pockets, then, and shivered.

It would be warm at home in Acojtapachtlan, a village of cinder-block houses scattered into a wrinkle of the Mexican Sierra. The rainy season had just ended, though the air would still be wet.

By this hour of morning, the chickens would have scattered from their nighttime perches in the branches of a hibiscus tree. The women would be awake as well.

Having already lit a fire over the big stone stove, they would be pressing tortillas and patting the rumpled heads of blinking toddlers.

In a few days, Constantino, Efrain and Nicasio would be there, too.

Their truck was packed and running, waiting for them in the street.

Only Santos was staying behind in Stockton.

He watched as Nicasio and Efrain climbed into the rear cab with Salvador Jimenez and Alejandro Medina, friends who were going home with them.

Santos laughed at the four of them squeezed inside, shoulders pressed against shoulders. They had three days and more than 1,000 miles of road ahead.

"May God help you," he said and giggled. One of his silver fillings flashed in the glow of a streetlight.

Mario Gomez sat behind the wheel. Constantino took the passenger seat, and Santos leaned in.

He spoke in Nahuatl, the Aztec dialect that was the brothers' first language. Constantino nodded, and Santos shut the door.

He stood alone in the street as the truck pulled away.

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Except for Mario, they all were wearing narrow-toed cowboy boots as they stood around the truck, parked at a rest stop near Avenal a little more than two hours south of Stockton on Interstate 5.

Their sharp-collared, button-down shirts were pressed smooth and tucked behind leather belts. The brim of Efrain's hat cast a shadow like a mask over his eyes.

It was as if they had shaken off the brown dust of picking and pruning, and underneath it all along had been their true desperado selves, pulled straight from the cover of a banda album or from the verses of a Mexican ballad.

The Chevy's hood was open, and Mario was unscrewing the oil cap.

The brothers found the truck in Idaho, where they had gone for quick money in the frenzied sugar beet harvest. It was parked at the side of the road with a for-sale sign in its window, and it cost them almost $4,000.

Roads don't stretch to Acojtapachtlan yet. Electricity has been there only a few years. In the Fermin brothers' village, that big purple machine was going to be a trophy.

Once they got the truck from Idaho to Stockton, they only took it out on Sundays.
But fewer than 200 miles into their trip to Mexico, something dark and gray began spraying from behind it, so Mario pulled over.

He examined the dipstick and showed it to Constantino, pointed out where the line ought to be.

Too much oil.

He could fix that. The really tricky work of getting the truck home already was handled.
A 30-page document published by Mexico's customs agency outlines the regulations governing the importation of used cars and trucks.

It references nearly three dozen portions of seven laws, 11 sections of code, 11 regulatory articles, six rules and three federal decrees.

The brothers paid $860 to an agency with a Stockton office to take care of the paperwork for them.

They were due to pick up their permits and new license plates at an office in El Paso, Texas, on Friday morning.

It was Thursday now, and Constantino wanted to be in Acojtapachtlan by Sunday in order to rehearse the music he and his band would perform at the annual festival of San Lucas a few days later. That gave them roughly three days and three nights to get home. It was the same length of time that, two years earlier, they spent walking through the Sonoran Desert wilderness that sprawls over both sides of the international border.

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Constantino was the one who said they should go to the United States together.

The brothers had left home before - to the state of Sinaloa, where they picked squash and tomatoes.

But farm work that earned $400 a week in the United States paid maybe $50 a week in Mexico, Efrain said.

Alfonso, oldest among the Fermin brothers, had made the trip across the border twice. Now he had a bathroom with a flush toilet at home in Acojtapachtlan. His wife shampooed her hair in a shower with warm running water.

"Vamos al norte," Constantino told the others. Let's head for the north.

He didn't have to talk them into it.

They left for the United States on a mid-February morning, hiking for nearly two hours down a muddy path - past skinny dogs and chickens, old women bent under enormous bales of corn leaves, boys leading raw-boned donkeys - to a rutted, rocky dirt road. They waved down a pickup truck and paid its driver to take them to the bus station at Chilpancingo, Guerrero's capital, another two hours away.

There, they booked tickets to Sonoyta, a town of about 10,000 residents. On a map, it's where Mexico ends.

The roughly 30-hour trip was uncomfortable but exhilarating, Efrain said.

Promise cloaked their anxiety. "We were all together. You don't feel so bad that way."

Waiting for the brothers on the American side of the border was the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument. It is remote and vast - 330,000 acres of Sonoran Desert - a formidable gateway to the United States.

Summer temperatures peak in the 100s, while winter lows can dip into the 30s. Still, thousands of Mexican migrants try to cross there every year. Many come poorly prepared.

Until the late 1990s, the Border Patrol's San Diego sector was the busiest in the country. In 1993, about 532,000 of the roughly 1.26 million people caught illegally entering the United States were apprehended there.

That changed with the 1994 launch of Operation Gatekeeper.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service initiative was the first in a series of efforts aimed at stanching illegal migration along nearly 2,000 miles of southwestern border. Hundreds of new Border Patrol agents, as well as motion detectors, cameras and other tools, were dispatched to cities neighboring Mexico, starting with Imperial Beach in San Diego County.

Over the next decade, the strategy helped slow the stream of migrants that had been flowing across the border's urban centers.

But as once heavily trafficked crossing points have been sealed off, migrants, including the Fermin brothers, have carved more remote - and more dangerous - routes, often through the Arizona desert.

Last year, 400 people died trying to enter the United States from Mexico, more than half of them in Arizona. While car wrecks, drowning and fatigue also were blamed, the primary cause of death was exposure.

As the risk of crossing increases, the men who lead groups of migrants over the border have raised their fees .

Two years ago, the Fermin brothers spent $2,000 each.

They carried only backpacks.

The first day of desert walking was fine, Constantino said.

The next two were horrible. They didn't have enough water. There wasn't much to eat. At night, every soft rustle turned Efrain's imagination to images of poisonous snakes and scorpions. In the forbidding dark, cactus spines clawed at their ankles and reached out toward their faces.

Still, the brothers and the roughly 40 other men they traveled with - no women or children were part of their group - made it.

Once safely across the border, they were packed into vans that took them to Phoenix. Labor contractors were waiting there to hire them on to San Joaquin County crews.

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Two years later and past midnight on the first day of their journey back to Acojtapachtlan, Mario, the only driver, needed a break.

Over nearly 20 hours on the road, the truck had cut through the broad sweep of California agriculture, had galloped into the state's foothills and subdivisions, and through its lonely desert.

Billboards that flashed in the windshield advertised God and ZZ Top.

There was a rest stop outside Deming, N.M., that Mario knew from other long road trips. He trusted it would be quiet and safe, and so at about 1 a.m. Friday, he pulled off of Interstate 10.

They were within an hour's drive of the Mexican border.

A sedan was parked to the right of the truck. The couple inside slept with their legs stretched out their open car doors.

To the left of the truck, lights flashed.

Mario jumped down to investigate while the others waited glassy-eyed in the cab. He was away for only a minute before he turned around and walked quickly toward them again with a blank expression.

At the far end of the rest stop, two Border Patrol agents had stopped a woman and a teenage boy.

One questioned the woman while the other searched the trunk of her car.

Agents looking for illegal drugs and immigrants routinely conduct traffic checks along highways that race north from the border.

On a typical day in 2006, U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers caught 2,984 people who had crossed illegally.

Mario climbed into the truck and backed out of the parking space.

He pulled slowly out of the rest area, past the Border Patrol stop and merged again onto the freeway.

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They made it to El Paso by 9:30 a.m. Friday, still on schedule, more or less.

The sun already shone severely above a settlement that, over more than 300 years, has been claimed by Spain, Mexico and finally the United States.

At the agency where the brothers were to collect the permits they needed to drive the Chevy over the border, they met a man with ostrich-skin boots and a neat mustache. The manager.

He looked over the truck, still packed with all of their belongings - their clothes, gifts for their wives and families, instruments Constantino had bought to outfit his band, the suits they would wear on the night of the concert.

He looked over the men. "All illegals?" he asked Mario.

He went back inside his office.

Mario, Salvador, Alejandro and the Fermin brothers waited for him in a parking lot full of vans and trucks. Some were dusty and laced with cobwebs. Others still carried little things left behind: CDs tucked behind a sun visor, a pair of glasses on a passenger seat. None had license plates

Nicasio and Constantino crouched in the meager shade of a truck like theirs, and after 15 minutes, the manager came back.

He said he was sorry. The laws had changed, and now the truck was too heavy to take into Mexico.

"I'll do all I can to help you," he said. For $80 a month, he would store the truck for them - as long as they left behind the title and the keys.

Mario asked about the $860 the brothers paid to arrange the importation. For months, the agency had been telling him that everything was in order, he said.

The man said they would have to settle the matter back in Stockton.

He told the brothers to think about what they wanted to do and returned to his office.
"I don't trust him," Mario said finally.

He called Santos, who asked if they could just drive over the border anyway.

"Santos, Santos Santos," Mario scolded into the cell phone, "if I cross with them, and they get pulled over, the truck will get taken away, and they will get put in jail."

Worse maybe, they had now ventured too near Mexico to turn back.

If Border Patrol agents stopped them driving toward the highway, the truck would be seized and the brothers detained, Mario warned.

The Chevy wasn't leaving El Paso.

Mario shook his head. "You have a plan, and then you wake up in the morning and everything has changed." He asked the brothers how much money they were carrying. None of the men cursed or shouted. None of them so much as rolled his eyes.

Efrain untied the tarps that covered the truck bed and began unpacking.

"Mi mochila y mi guitarra?" Salvador Jimenez asked. My backpack and my guitar? Efrain lifted a bag.

"Yeah, that one."

Salvador's bicycle stayed in the truck bed.

The men pulled shirts and pants into black plastic garbage bags. Constantino handed the keyboard down to Nicasio, who wrapped it in a red wool blanket tied up with a microphone cord.

They took one of the accordions and left behind the conga drum. They left behind the water coolers, the television, two guitars, the amplifiers, and everything else they couldn't carry.

Mario drove the men to one of the caged footbridges that link Mexico to the United States, then went to find someplace to store the truck and the rest of the luggage.

With a combined population of more than 2 million people, El Paso, Texas, and Juarez, Mexico, comprise the border's largest metropolitan area.

Every day, more than 100,000 people cross between the sister cities.

The brothers hoisted their bags and boxes onto their shoulders.

Nicasio steadied the keyboard under his arm like a weapon, like a bible.

On the other side, in Mexico, mothers with resignation on their faces were sitting on the sidewalk cradling babies and lifting paper bowls full of a few clinking pennies.

Taxis were honking as men walked in the street among them, holding newspapers, DVDs, oranges and squeegees up to their car windows.

Police officers were blowing whistles. An ambulance siren was screaming. Girls in plaid school uniforms were standing in line for aguas frescas.

The sign hanging above the international bridge bid them "Buen viaje." Have a good trip.

Nicasio followed his brothers back over the border. Amid its crowds and chaos, he couldn't have looked back if he wanted to.