And a Song Shall Carry Them Home
The Journey of the Brothers Fermin – Part 4

By Jennifer Torres
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A slight girl with long, black hair took her brother's hand and held it tightly. They stood together on a rock overlooking the steep, wet path that leads to their house.

She watched and waited, and shifted her bare feet. She wore her black satin headband like a crown.

Her brother sniffled.

The girl kept watching the bend in the path, kept holding the boy's hand. Finally, she smiled and straightened.

A group of men came trudging uphill behind a brown horse with bags piled over its wooden saddle.

One of them looked at her and squinted. He shook his head and said to one of the others, "No, they aren't ours."

But then he looked again at them and stopped. "No. Oh. Yes!"

Areli Fermin's father was home.

Constantino put down his backpack and crouched in front of the children. Areli looped her skinny, 9-year-old arms around his neck and squeezed.

For two years he had been away, working in a place called Stockton, and she had missed him.

When they talked on the telephone, she would ask him when he was coming back. He always told her, "tomorrow," but it was never true - until now, on that mild Sunday morning, in that pale yellow light. He was back.

Constantino turned to Edgar, his almost 3-year-old son, and asked, "Como estás?" How are you?

The boy said nothing. He put a finger in his mouth and looked up at his big sister.

"Your papi is here," she said, smiling and nodding.

Edgar just gazed back at the man kneeling in front of him.

Constantino sighed, stood and lifted his stiff, uncertain little boy over his shoulder. Areli led the way home, looking back once to make sure her dad was still there, following.

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The two-story Fermin home was built of concrete along the path that stretches in and out of Acojtapachtlan.

Its walls are the same muddy gray as the fog that drapes over the hills above the village and lingers trapped in the valley below.

Chickens pecked at the ground in front of the wide, covered porch. Three dogs scrambled at the doorway. The brothers shoved them aside with their boots as they walked, tired but smiling, over the threshold. They had been traveling for three days.

A refrigerator stood alone in the dim room just inside the house. Bare light bulbs hung from a complicated web of extension cords that crept around the ceiling and sagged over doorways.

Constantino, Efrain and Nicasio said hello to their wives with nods and handshakes. The greetings between them were brief - there was no gushing, as though coming home from work meant only that the men had been gone for the day.

The women turned back to their kitchen, lighting wood fires over its rock and brick stove. They wore long skirts over delicate nylon slips.

Four plastic buckets under the kitchen window held the household's supply of boil-purified water. Efrain had hoped to replace them with water coolers from Stockton, but those were left behind with the truck in Texas.

Areli lifted the lid from one of the buckets and ladled herself a cupful before getting back to dancing after her father.

Constantino was in the middle of the room with a grocery bag, pressing cookies, chips, candies and yogurt cups into the eager, reaching hands of his family's children. They spoke in Nahuatl, an Aztec language that sounds like leaves rustling, and then like water hitting rocks.

Areli slung her arm around the wooden post that helps support the second story and spun herself around and around it.

Nicasio's cheeks were flushed. He sat holding the chubby hands of a toddler who had rice in her pigtails.

"This one is mine," he said laughing and bouncing 2-year-old Berenice. "They were babies when we left, and now they're all walking."

Efrain met his youngest children for the first time. His wife, Quirina, was four-months pregnant with the twins, Lisendi and Efrain Jr., when the brothers left for the United States.

Lisendi, who had big black eyes, screamed when she looked at her father, then crawled away, sobbing. She cried when any of the men came near.

After the first frenzy of homecoming, Constantino carried Edgar to a corner of the kitchen and set him down.

He knelt in front of the child, who stared at him with wide, watery eyes. He put his toughened hands on Edgar's arms.

"I am Constantino. I am your father. I went away to work, but now I am back."

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The air inside was thick with incense and the aching chants of a 14-year-old boy on his knees in front of the altar.

Acojtapachtlan's Roman Catholic chapel is a short walk from the Fermin house, up a muddy trail that leads past the village municipal building, past pigs tied to trees in front of their owners' homes, past the square of weeds and concrete blocks that Efrain said would become his house someday when he had enough money to finish it.

A wooden cross was posted in front of the white chapel, and at 7:30 p.m., the clanging of its single church bell called the village to prayer.

Women, their heads covered in long, lacy veils, took seats in the sanctuary, while men stood in the back and along the walls.

Children coughed and fidgeted. Areli sat at her mother's feet on the concrete floor. A gauzy purple shawl hung over her head and shoulders. She tapped her feet but didn't sing.

Her cousin Raul led the rosary prayers in a frantic whir of a voice. The congregation responded in a murmur that grew like a wave threatening to swallow him before eventually subsiding after all.

"Santa Maria, madre de dios ..."

The silver and pink altar was covered with orange flowers gathered from the hills above Acojtapacthlan. Candle flames shivered and cast their weak light across Raul's face.

On pieces of paper clutched in his fist were the words to all the prayers he was to recite. When he sang, his voice broke over the highest notes then dripped down again.

"Bendito, bendito, bendito sea Dios," he began. Blessed, blessed, blessed be God. "Los aaaangeles cantan y alaban a Dios."

The congregation repeated the words: The angels sing and praise God.

When the service was over, Constantino talked with the other men gathered in the chapel's doorway. They shook his hand. Some clapped his shoulder.

Edgar ran to him. Twelve hours after meeting his father in the path, he finally called out, "Papi!"

They walked home together in the warm, sticky dark.

Back at the house, Efrain had plugged in a television and DVD player that had traveled with them from Stockton.

Children sat on the floor around it as the women passed out dripping ears of steamed corn.

They watched "Predator" as they peeled back the corn husks and bit into fat, yellow kernels.

After a while, Mario Gomez, the brothers' friend from Stockton, took out a few pictures of the men and their lives in San Joaquin County. Areli pulled one from his hands. "Papi," she said, "is that truck yours?"

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The roosters began crowing around 4 a.m. Monday. Minutes earlier, fireworks lit to celebrate the San Lucas festival, still two days away but anticipated for weeks, cracked against the hills.

In the early morning, dogs whined and yipped at each other. Behind the house and near the creek that runs down from the mountain and through the village, two pigs settled in the mud.

A goat, tied by its neck to a wooden post, bleated.

The noise jostled chickens from their roosts in the trees and children from the blankets spread over the floor.

By 6 a.m., while it was still cool and misty, Constantino, Nicasio and other men from the village were walking down the path again, on their way back to Chilpancingo.

They needed to buy speakers, microphones, cables and clothing for their concert. They said they would be home by 1 p.m.

Although he was officially in charge of the festival and its preparations, Felipe Fermin stayed behind. He was the oldest, next to Alfonso, and had made the journey north alongside his younger brothers two years earlier.

He lived with them in Stockton and worked with them in the county's fields. But while he was driving in Idaho, he was pulled over and eventually deported.

Still, he had earned enough money to fulfill his responsibilities as the festival's mayordomo: It was up to him to pay for the food, the decorations, the entertainment. Since his return, he also was put in charge of the village school, overseeing repairs and persuading parents to send their children regularly.

Felipe had planned to play drums in Constantino's band - until he fell from a horse and broke his wrist.

There is no doctor in Acojtapachtlan or anywhere very near. He wrapped his swollen, discolored arm in a bandanna.

About an hour after their brothers left for the city, Felipe and Efrain untied the goat that was resting in the shade between their houses. They carried it to a concrete slab at the edge of the creek and tied its legs together.

Silvina was washing dishes in the water next to them. Benicia was washing husband Nicasio's shirts where she had washed their daughter, Berenice, the day before. She wore a pair of small gold earrings bought with money he had sent her.

Berenice, stood behind the men, watching with an open mouth. The older children were getting ready for school.

The goat cried.

It would be used to make birria, a spicy meat stew, a special meal to celebrate the brothers' homecoming.

"Chivo! Chivo!" Berenice began singing. "Lo matan! Lo matan." The goat! They're killing it!

She didn't turn her eyes away.

Juan Fermin, the brothers' father, came out from the kitchen. His sons have little affection for him.

He teetered over to the concrete slab and tried clumsily to wrest the knife from Felipe. His eyelids drooped. He swayed and slurred, "Sangre de Jesus y sangre sagrada." Blood of Jesus, sacred blood.

Efrain rolled his eyes and stepped between his father and his brother.

Felipe made the cut. The goat bleated wildly.

Benicia went on with the laundry.

By the time it was over, she was hanging the wet clothes on a yellow line, Juan Fermin was passed out in the dirt, and Berenice was trying to tie a red-haired, blue-eyed doll to her back with a long piece of cloth - like the rebozos the other mothers in the village use to carry their babies.

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October afternoons in Acojtapachtlan are hot and damp until sunset.

The dark rooms inside the Fermin house are airless, but there was a breeze on the porch where little girls with buckets of corn began lining up at 2 p.m.

The village has no industry and no real employers. But with some money saved, a family can open a very small business.

In a house five minutes uphill from the Fermins', a man and his wife operated a satellite phone - the only way to make a call out of Acojtapachtlan.

From another house, on the path toward the chapel, a family sold sodas, beer, juice, small toys and a few canned goods. The brother's uncle Francisco gave haircuts with an old but sharp knife.

The Fermin wives operated a molina, an electric mill that grinds corn and mixes it with water to make dough. Every afternoon, girls stepped up to the porch, one at a time, handing Silvina their buckets along with five pesos.

When the last of them walked away with specks of dough in her hair, Silvina unplugged the molina and went back inside.

It started to rain. The men had not returned from Chilpancingo.

Quirina and Benicia were in the kitchen cooking the goat. Silvina sat down with the children who were watching another DVD, this one a home video that Mario recorded.

It showed Constantino and Nicasio, awkward and serious, performing at a backyard wedding in Stockton.

"That's my husband, the singer," Silvina said quietly to herself. She was 14 when they married.

"That's the bride? How fat she is. And old, too. People must get married old there. And she can't dance like I can."

Edgar bounced in rhythm to his father's music.

“He says he’s going back there in February,” Silvina said. “What can you say?” she shrugged. “Nada.” Nothing

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Areli finished her bowl of birria, wiped the orange broth from her fingers and went out to the porch to look down the path.

It was raining still. The water hit the corrugated roof like pellets.

It was dark now, hours after her father had said he would be home. There wasn’t any way to call him, no way for him to call the village.

The rain kept falling, and there were those two rivers to cross. Finally, she spotted them. The men came lumbering uphill, hunched under massive speakers, carrying a box of disco lights.