

De Regreso

By Salvador Hernández

He doesn't quit...

He just keeps driving. It's been 26 hours and he hasn't stopped to rest. The hives have started to break out all over his arm. It looks swollen and unreal. He says "Estoy bien," I'm fine, but his body says otherwise. 1,238 miles of desert, mountain, field, and open land. 6 cups of coffee and 2 cokes. He's come too far to give up.

Hands on the steering wheel. Eyes blood shot. He doesn't deter his focus from the road. He can't, he has a responsibility to make sure everyone makes it home. He lets go of the steering wheel with his right hand and fights the urge to scratch. The blotches seem to be blossoming like weeds all over his body. He ignores our pleas for him to drive to the nearest hospital. He's focused on getting us home, so he takes a Benadryl and downs it with a coke, for the caffeine, so he won't get sleepy. We pass a green sign that says Omaha 407 miles.

I sit silently in the passenger sit. My sister sits in the middle row with her legs spread out across the adjacent seat, staring out the window at nothing in particular, dreaming with her eyes wide open. My mother tries to sleep on the converted bed in the back, but she's too nervous. So, she does what she always does when she's scared or nervous. She does what her Mother taught her to do, she prays. Silently "Padre nuestro que estás en el cielo...Santa María, Madre de Dios..." with her eyes closed as tears stream through.

I'm scared and without knowing, my mother and I are in silent unison "Padre nuestro que estás en el cielo..." and I can't help, but to tear up. I fight back the tears in my eyes by biting my lower lip, but I bite too hard and I can taste my blood. It tastes salty. I look away to wipe the tears, because I can't let him see me cry. I don't think he notices. Men don't cry, it's not our custom. Even though I want to cry and I want to hug him and tell him "I love you, dad." I sit there and say nothing. I fight back tears and I start to get mad, because for the first time I acknowledge the fact that life has caught up to him. His body is worn out. The wrinkles around his eyes, his thinning hair, his aching back and arthritis hands are the result of 55 years worth of generational trauma and pain. 35 years of his life married to the slaughter house. A relationship that has taken a toll on his body and infected his soul. He's short tempered and yells regularly. His blood pressure pills have little effect on his temper.

The more I think about it, the angrier I get, and the more I want to cry. I remember a picture of me sitting on his lap. It was my 2nd birthday and he's holding me and helping me blow out my birthday candle. The picture is perfect. We're sitting at a table blowing the candle out on a homemade cake imperfectly glazed with strawberry frosting. The candle is a small round lavender scented candle, the kind you buy at a home interior party. The wall paper is white with orange, yellow, and green blots impersonating ugly flowers. The back door is beaten with tangerine chipped paint and a black door knob that feels like it is about to fall off with the next turn. At night the door is reinforced with a master padlock, which hangs unhinged. The screen door doesn't close all the way and has a hole the size of a child's fist on the side. The door is open in the picture, welcoming the air into the cramped basement. He's smiling as he's blowing and he's happy. He's proud to be holding his baby boy in his arms and nothing else in the world matters more than to be with his son at that moment. He's full of life in the picture, his smile

transcends the simple realities into a rich paradise were he has all that he needs. The man in the picture doesn't give up.

His eyes are focused on the road with both hands on the wheel. Without taking his eyes away from the target, he smiles and says "Estoy bien" and at that moment, I know he is. His smile says it all. He's full of life and he won't quit.

We pass a sign that says Omaha 350 miles.

Over the next six and half hours, we sit mostly in silence. A Vicente Fernández CD whispers in the background. He's my father's favorite mariachi singer. He sings songs of lost love, horse races, rooster fights, and of slow death for a woman's affection in a cantina. "Y volver, volver, voooooolver...Aaaaaajajajajayyyy!" Vicente is known for his gritos de dolor, his cries of pain. It's not a physical pain that he cries out for, but a spiritual pain. A pain en el mero corazón, a hole in the heart. Abandonment. Without love. No affection. Only liquor and sorrow as companions and it's too easy to drown in sorrow, especially in a sea of alcohol.

I'm lucky my Father doesn't drink. Every now and then he will have 1 or 2 beers, but that's it. He doesn't go to the bar and he doesn't feel the need to flush his food down with a beer. When he listens to Vicente Fernández, he doesn't try to heal his pain with poison, like most people do.

I'm not quite sure how he deals with his pain. Most times he's quiet. I've never seen him cry. Not even during my Abuelita's funeral. I remember him at the church and grave yard, while others cried, he kept his composure, with a steel look. I often wonder what he thinks or what he feels, but he's like a vault and the combination to free his emotions has been lost.

My tío Lencho once told me a story about my Father...

"Cuando tu papá estaba chiquillo, un día llegó llorando después de la escuela, porque un chamaquillo se había burlado de él. Tu Papá Seferino lo jaló del brazo y se lo llevó arastrando hacia la tienda de Don Franco donde estaban todos los niños jugando. Y en frente de todos le dio sus cinturazos, gritándole, "Los hombres no lloran, y si quieres llorar, te doy la razón!" Desde ese día, tu papá nunca más lloró." *

Growing up, there was no time to cry, his worry was to eat. His family had to eat. That's what mattered, having enough money to buy frijoles and masa to make tortillas. There was no room for him to get drunk or spend money foolishly, other people's lives depended on him. Sometimes my Papá Seferino would go months without sending money from el norte, so as the oldest, he had a responsibility to make sure his 11 younger siblings and mother never went hungry.

When he wasn't having a watchful eye on the cows en el cerro, he was out in the corn fields sweating under the hot sun, picking costales of corn. In the evenings, he would set up shop on the corner road underneath the street lamp. In a wheel barrel, he'd have a big olla, the size of a mini fridge full of elotes. He would sell the elotes with crema, chile, and queso. Some people preferred their elotes plain, others con limón, sal, y chile. Half of my father's survival in Mexico depended on corn. For most of his life, he has worked and taken care of others. Quit is a word he has never known, because for him, quitting equated to dying.

A door slams. The van has stopped and I open my dreary eyes. I must have slept through the last 2 hours of the trip. We're stopped in front of my Padrino's house. I get out to stretch my legs. "Ven, ayúdame!" my father yells from atop the van. I help him pull down my Padrino's suitcases, we hand them over and then we say goodbye without saying goodbye. No hugs, kisses, or handshakes, just an "órale pues." We get in the van and begin to drive home. We've been in the van for 36 hours of non-stop driving and we have finally made it. The Benadryl has had little

effect on the blotches on his arm. It's still swollen. He tries to hide it, but I can see past his act and so can my mother. "Emiliano, we need to go to the hospital." My sister who has been fairly quiet throughout the entire trip, wakes up and agrees with my Mother "Yea dad, it looks bad!" My concerns begin to rise again. "Dad if you don't go to the hospital, voy a llamar 9-1-1." "Ya me tienen enfadado! No vamos a ir a la hospital ni le van llamar al 9-1-1!" He's hard headed and has too much pride, or maybe it's fear to go to the hospital.

The 15 minute drive to our home seems to last longer than the 36 hour drive from Mexico. Why does he act this way? Why won't he go to the hospital? Why is he so hard headed? Why is he so selfish? We arrive home and we don't speak. For the next hour we slowly unload the van. Bag by bag, suitcase by suitcase. Clothes, shoes, candy, food, and souvenirs. By the end, the van is completely bare, but full of crumbs, remnants of Mexico. It smells like the rancho, a mixture of burnt wood, queso, chile, and leather from the botas he bought in León. It will be days before the smell fades away, once we have readjusted back to reality.

He continues to fight the urge to scratch. His facial expression looks unbearable, like he has hundreds of ants crawling all over his body eating away, inch by inch. Finally, he breaks and can't take it anymore. He agrees to go to the local Urgent Care facility. My mother grabs her insulin and a bag of chips in rapid motion before he changes his mind. Her gut tells her that it's going to be a long night, so she makes sure to bring her Bible.

We arrive to the Urgent Care facility, but to our surprise, it's closed. We have to wait 45 minutes before we're able to see a doctor. The lobby is open and my mother begins to fill out the required paperwork. A man sits across from us, he appears to have a cold. He's alone. There are a few magazines on a table in front of us. *Home Design*, *Time*, and *National Geographic*. None of us are in the mood to read. My father is exhausted and can barely keep his eyes open, he keeps nodding off. Mother is praying, as she reads her purse size Bible. My sister stares at the television, a man is teaching how to paint a mountain landscape. It reminds me of the cerro that overlooks the rancho. I wish we were there. "Emiliano Cruz," the nurse calls his name. He stands up, but before he can take a step, he begins to fall. Without thinking, I jump up and catch him. He's heavy. I'm the only thing holding him up. My mother screams "Emiliano! Emiliano! Help! Wake up! Help!" The nurse runs over and takes one glimpse at my father and yells "Call 9-1-1!". This isn't happening. Wake up, Dad. We need you. The world is moving in slow motion. I can't remember the last time I held my father. I'm helpless, but I'm holding on tight. He feels lifeless. I won't let you go Dad. Please wake up. I'm sorry. I love you, daddy. Another nurse burst out from the back with a wheel chair and I sit my father down.

Why is this happening? This isn't supposed to happen! My dad is strong. My mom is the one that is always sick, not dad. Please don't leave us, dad.

My mother and sister are both crying. Someone is yelling in the back ground. I can't understand them. All I hear is static. I'm frozen. I can't move. All I can think about are the words that I never said.

Thank you for being my father. Thank you for never leaving us, for making sure that we had food on the table. For the nights you carried me to sleep and tucked me in, for buying me toys, but never spoiling me. You taught me to appreciate and value everything I have, not by your words, but by your actions. Thank you for going to my parent teacher conferences and expecting nothing, but my best. Thank you for spending your nights at home, for eating dinner with us, instead of drinking at the corner bar like so many other kids fathers did. Thank you for making me try and try again when I fell off my bike and I wanted to quit. All those times you came home worn out from work, but you found the energy to take me to the park and hit me pop

flies until we could no longer see the ball. You were there when I hit my first homerun, earned my black belt, and crossed the stage on graduation day. You were there to give me a hug, even though I know it's been years since we have embraced, I still remember. Thank you for not doing drugs and not giving up on me when I did, even though I know you wanted to. Thank you for not cheating on my mother. Thank you for being strong. Because of it, you made me stronger. I LOVE YOU, DAD.

"We got room for one person in the ambulance."

"Vete, mijo, I'll call your tío to take me to the hospital"

"Vete! Your father needs you."

I'm sitting in the ambulance and I don't know how I got here. I have always needed my father, but now, he needs me. I can hear the siren screaming, but it begins to fade away. I've never been in an ambulance and after this, I never want to be in one again. My dad is strapped onto the gurney and they've placed an oxygen mask on his face. His eyes are barely open.

"I just want to advise you that I would like to start an IV, so that in case something happens along the way, we can correct your condition... "

What condition? He doesn't have a condition!

"In bound 55 year old male..."

"Rick, I really think this will be the Huskers year at the national championship..."

"They are going to flop again, lose to some weak team..."

How can they be talking about football! My father's life is in their hands and all they are doing is talking about football!

Everything begins to blur together. I can't think. The sounds are all meshing. I close my eyes and I can hear myself breathe, in and out, in and out, in and out.

I have to be strong, just like my father taught me. My mother needs me. My sister needs me. My father needs me. Everything will be ok. Things happen for a reason. I need to think positive. Dad is still alive. He's not dead. He's strong. He's gonna be alright. He's in good hands, the medics and doctors will take care of him, but what if they mess up? I'll...no, think positive. Think about what you have control over, just yourself. That's it. Your own actions. You have to be strong for everyone...

We have been at the hospital for hours. The doctors can't figure out what's wrong with him. They say they can't believe how dehydrated he was and that he's very lucky his body didn't give out halfway through the trip, in fact they are astounded that his body didn't give out period. They say that he is going to be ok, but I refuse to believe it. I'll believe it when we are all walking out together. I won't get my hopes up.

They draw his blood and perform several tests, but nothing comes back. An allergist comes and nothing comes from his visit. They invite a specialist to the party, he stays awhile, but quickly leaves without saying goodbye. Nothing comes from the visits or test. The blotches have disappeared, but red rashes appear at least 3 times sporadically throughout the day. On the third night, my father is in pain. He has chest pains and later states that he felt his heart was going to explode. Although we are all sleeping in the room, none of us hear his silent grunts of pain. The next morning he yells "Ya nomás estaba esperando que me muriera!" He goes on about how he is ready to die and how it hurts so much, but we can't bear his words. We leave his room and head to the lobby. I hug my mother and my sister. I have never seen my father so depleted and defeated, ready to give up. I don't recognize the man lying in the hospital bed. That's not my father.

My mother begins to pray a powerful and sacred prayer. A prayer that causes miracles, that is not written anywhere, and can only be found in the purest place of all, the heart. My mother is cry praying. “Diosito, estamos sufriendo, por favor ten piedad de nosotros, somos debil, de carne y hueso nada más...” I hug my mother and sister and we cry pray together. We have faith that la Virgen de San Juan will hear our prayers and will remember our offering. We have faith that my father will return, that his spirit will find its way back and that everything will be ok.

After a week of inconclusive tests and bed rest, they are finally releasing my father. If he had it his way, he would have been home days ago. He’s mostly upset because he has had to miss a week of work. “Estos hijos de la...”

The doctors never figure out what was wrong with him or what caused the allergic reaction. All they can say “He’s lucky,” but I know otherwise. He’s not lucky. He’s strong and he doesn’t give up. He can’t give up. Other people depend on him. He has a reason to be alive. His family. We need him just as much as he needs us. We can’t lose hope, because once we have lost hope, there is no other reason to be alive.

We’re standing in front of the hospital entrance waiting for my Padrino to drive up and take us home. My mother and sister take a restroom break before leaving. It’s just me and my father. The sky is clear and the birds are singing. My father stands tall and I remember the photo from my 2nd birthday and I begin to cry. I don’t hide the tears. We embrace each other and I tell him “I love you, dad.”

*One day your father came home running from school crying because a classmate had made fun him. Your Papá Seferino grabbed him by the arm and dragged him to Don Franco’s store where all the kids were playing. In front of everyone he whooped him with his belt yelling “Men don’t cry and if you want to cry, I’ll give you a reason to cry!” From that day forward, your father never cried.”