

FOCUS IMMIGRATION

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On a quest for the only life he knew

Whether by stealth or decree, deported man tries to return

By **RICHARD MAROSI**
Tribune Newspapers

NOGALES, Mexico — The freight train slowed through downtown and screeched to a stop in front of Luis Luna. He scrambled under a boxcar and climbed onto narrow beams that crisscrossed the undercarriage.

He lay on his back, suspended 12 inches off the tracks. His nose almost touched the bottom of the boxcar.

Seconds later, the train lurched forward and rolled across the border into the U.S. It accelerated, and the undercarriage began to sway. Luna tightened his grip and braced his legs against a beam to keep his balance. He had tucked his sweatshirt into his pants and his shoelaces inside his boots; the tiniest shred of clothing could get snagged and yank him under the wheels.

It had been nine months since Luna was deported from the U.S., where he had lived since his mother smuggled him from Mexico when he was a toddler. In America he played point guard on an intramural basketball team, grilled burgers at a McDonald's and looked forward to the senior prom. In Mexico he had no family. He was a stranger sleeping on the streets, scruffy and destitute.

He felt hopeless — until he figured out how to stow away on this Union Pacific train headed to Tucson, 70 miles away. The train had covered 10 miles through the high desert when it stopped at a U.S. Customs and Border Protection checkpoint. An inspector and his dog walked by on the gravel path. Luna, 20, stifled his breath and prayed. Then he felt a sharp tug and a dog's hot breath.

A German shepherd sank its teeth through Luna's two shirts, locked onto his ribs and dragged him out from under the train. He clutched his side.

A few hours later, he was taken back to the border by U.S. agents. He walked into Mexico and eventually made his way to the garbage-strewn lot where he slept with other penniless migrants looking to sneak into America. Unlike the others, Luna didn't consider the U.S. a mythic land of opportunity. It was simply home.

There would be another train. He would try again.

"The wheels start moving. It starts picking up speed. It gets bumpy. You have nothing to hold on. But the hunger that you have to get to the United States just to be with your family, that's all that's in your head," said Luna. "I'm going to make it."

Caught in a web

Luna was on his way to work at a Pizza Hut in January 2010 when a police officer in Pasco, Wash., pulled him over because of a broken headlight on his Honda Accord. He was arrested for driving without a license and taken to the county jail, where the next day an Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent arrived on his rounds.

The agent was part of a rapidly expanding program to scour the country's jails for illegal immigrants. Those with serious criminal histories were priority targets, but thousands of people charged with relatively minor infractions, like Luna, were also being swept up in the federal agency's largest-ever deportation effort.

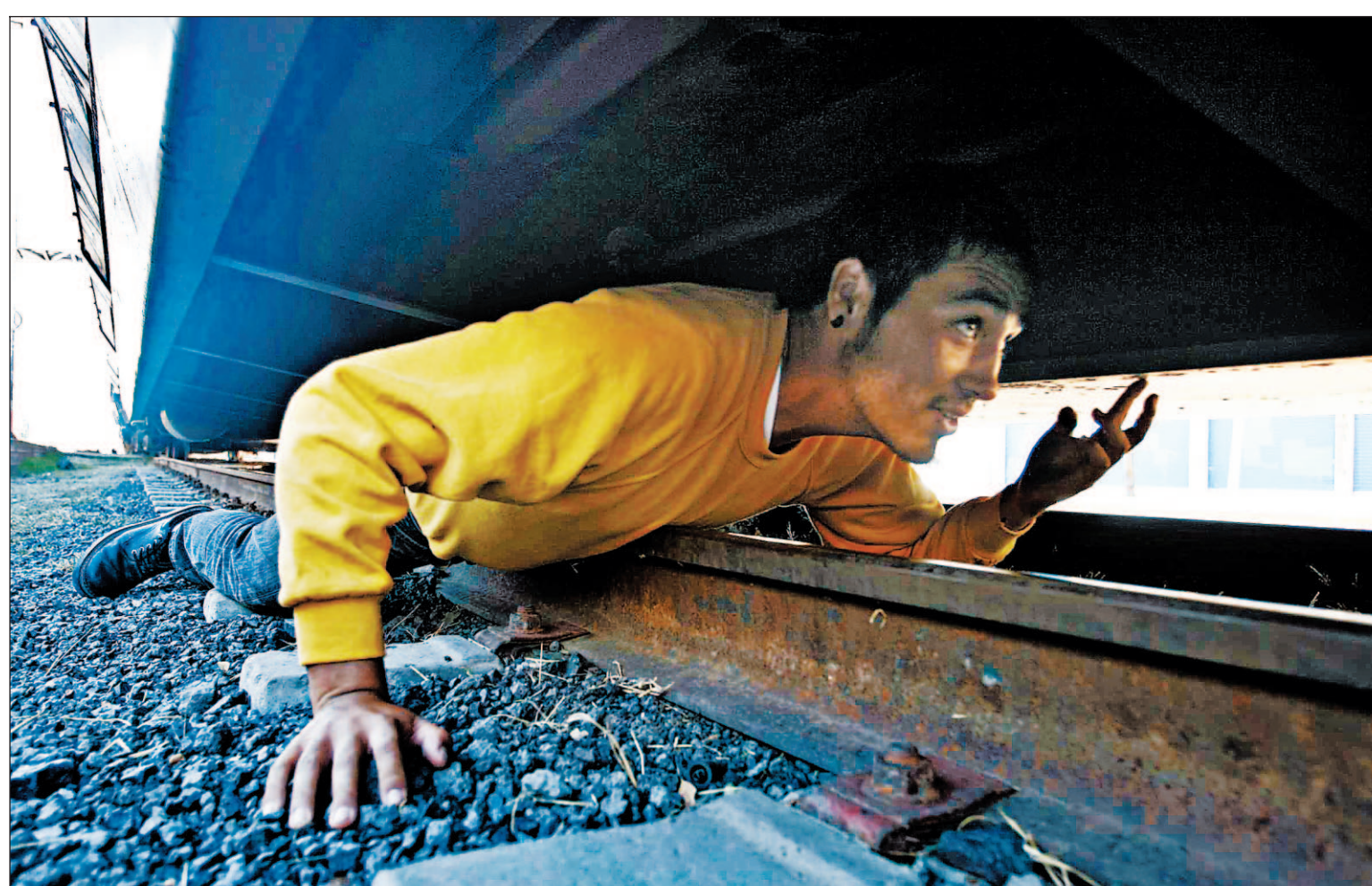
The agent discovered that Luna was in the country illegally and started deportation proceedings against him. A few days later, he was sent to a detention center in Tacoma, handcuffed and still wearing his Pizza Hut uniform. His badge read: "Hablo Espanol."

The smelly bunks, rude guards, prison uniforms and other indignities of confinement bewildered Luna. The threat of being deported had always seemed to him the stuff of breathlessly reported Spanish-language television news. Violent people were the ones he thought were targeted. Not someone like him, who had never committed a crime and had no say in coming to this country in the first place.

He believed he had earned his place in America. Now the country wanted to kick him out.

Later that year at an immigration court hearing in Seattle, Luna presented school records in a bid to stop the deportation. He wanted to establish that he lived in the country for at least 10 years, had good moral character, and that his absence would cause undue hardship for his family — factors that could allow the judge to cancel the deportation.

Friends, relatives and court



DON BARTLETT/TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS PHOTOS

Luis Luna, 20, was smuggled into the U.S. as a toddler. An all-American childhood ended two years ago with a traffic violation that led to his deportation. Now in Mexico, he takes steps such as crawling into the undercarriage of U.S.-bound rail cars to get back to the country he calls home.



After taking a cold-water bucket bath, Luis Luna brushes his teeth at a makeshift shelter in Nogales, Mexico. Before his deportation, the former Washington state resident had no memory of ever having lived in Mexico.

records backed up the account Luna presented to the judge.

Luna's mother, Demi, a native of Monterrey, brought Luna into the country illegally when he was 3. He started working in downtown Los Angeles, peddling Helen Grace chocolates and flowers at intersections and garment district sweatshops. He was 5 years old.

"He became a great salesman, and he helped me pay the rent," Demi said.

When money was tight, Luna, his older brother and his mother would sleep on the streets or under the trees at South Gate Park, their belongings piled into shopping carts. Luna remembers rummaging through trash cans looking for food scraps.

When he was 15, the family moved to Washington state, where rents were cheaper and jobs more plentiful. His tall, lightly freckled good looks landed him a job at an Abercrombie & Fitch store. He moved into a studio apartment and decorated it with a poster of Michael Jordan. Using a fake Social Security card, he got two restaurant jobs to pay the bills; work pressures forced him to drop out of Pasco High School a few months short of graduation.

"I know Luis to be an upstanding young man with great potential," said John Wallwork, then assistant principal at Pasco High, in a letter submitted to the immigration judge. "He was a model student."

Jeffrey Murrill, a retired U.S. Marine whom Luna helped with yardwork, wrote to the court: "This is a driven young man being faulted for no fault of his own."

In December 2010, the judge denied Luna's application to halt the deportation and gave him two months to leave the country.

Before he left, Luna married his high school sweetheart, a U.S. citizen who planned to seek legal residency for him.

On Feb. 13, 2011, Luna took a bus to El Paso, Texas, and started walking toward the Bridge of the Americas spanning the Rio Grande. To confirm his return to Mexico, he was required by the court to report by Feb. 14 to the U.S. Consulate in Ciudad Juarez, his birthplace.

Glimpsing Juarez beyond the border fence, Luna hesitated. He had only \$300. He had no memories of Mexico and no one to stay with. Juarez, plagued by drug cartel violence, was the most dangerous city in the hemisphere. He could hop on a bus for home and melt back into American society like millions of other illegal immigrants, he thought. But Luna decided that he'd get his life back on track if he did the right thing. He crossed into Juarez: "This is just my little sacrifice that I have to do."

Among the first things Luna learned in Juarez was to press himself tightly behind a street post when a slow-moving car drove by, lest he be mistaken for a rival gang member. He saw people shot down in four separate attacks. He was constantly harassed by thugs.

By July, Luna was getting impatient waiting for the U.S. to approve his return as a legal resident. Guilt-ridden about leaving his family without financial support, Luna went to the border crossing and tried to walk into the U.S. He didn't have a U.S. passport, so he presented the Washington

Every weekday afternoon, the man said, a Union Pacific train carrying Ford Focus cars crossed through Nogales on its way to Tucson. There were dozens of boxcars, but only a few with undercarriages that could hold a person, he said. One day, Luna watched the man stow away on one. A few hours later the man called Luna, saying he had held on all the way across the mesquite-dotted Green Valley to Tucson.

The smuggler reminded Luna to focus on the subtle features marking the special boxcars.

Luna memorized them and kept them to himself.

Looking for kinship

Luna walked to the railroad tracks nearly every day to wait for the 3 p.m. train, hoping to spot the specially designed boxcars. But the few he saw stopped in areas patrolled by police.

The rest of the time he hung out with homeless immigrants at a dusty bus yard dotted with shabby trailers that housed deportees. There, Luna could get an oatmeal breakfast and coffee, and bathe with a bucket of water.

Young men from Mexico and Honduras sat on ripped-out bus seats and plotted how to get into the U.S. Luna, who speaks accent-free English, made some of them wary. One accused him of spying for the U.S. by collecting intelligence

on crossing routes. Luna sought out deportees like himself, longtime U.S. residents craving burgers and fries and a little cultural kinship. At dusk, he lingered at the shelter hoping to grab a bunk even though he had reached the shelter's three-day limit. A supervisor ordered him off the property.

He walked to a weed-choked cemetery to hang out with other migrants, some of whom spent the night atop the graves. "I can't sleep here — I'm scared a dead person will grab my feet. I've seen too many zombie movies," he said.

On most nights, Luna would spread his blankets in a vacant lot. He didn't sleep much. He was surrounded by strangers, and he had nightmares of U.S. immigration agents chasing him. He won-

About this story

For this article, Richard Marosi spent several days in early October with Luis Luna, doing interviews and reporting on his life as a deportee in Nogales, Mexico. He was there when Luna made several attempts to stow away on a freight train. The dog attack on Oct. 7 was confirmed by U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials.

dered if he'd live to wake up.

It was six days after he was attacked by the dog, and Luna was at the railroad tracks. He worried about his socks. He feared the smell would alert the canines at the U.S. checkpoint. He was wearing a clean donated shirt and had washed thoroughly, even scrubbing the iodine from his wound.

The tissue paper for his runny nose had to go. His pockets contained only his Mexican passport and his wallet with snapshots of him with his wife and a folded copy of Psalm 91: "...no harm will overtake you..."

A quick decision

The half-mile-long train was slowing, and one of the boxcars with the steel-beam undercarriage stopped in front of him. "This is it," said Luna, tucking in his sweatshirt and his shoelaces.

He braced himself for a jolt of pain from his bite wound — he expected it to be rubbed raw when he scrambled under the train. "If I do get caught, I hope I don't get bit on the same side," he said.

A truck filled with Nogales police officers appeared on the road parallel to the tracks. Cops often stopped Luna and checked his pockets for pesos to steal. He ducked behind a wall separating the road from the tracks. The truck faded into traffic.

Luna pursed his lips. Time was running out. If the train moved while he was crawling under, a wheel could slice off a leg. He crouched, ready to go.

"Hey, what are you doing there?" It was a man wearing an orange vest, accompanied by another man: railroad workers. "This is the third time this week I've seen you here," he said.

Luna said he was just waiting to cross the street, and the workers left.

Luna turned toward the train. The boxcar was still there, but the moment didn't feel right. He yanked the shirt from his pants and walked away. "I take it as a message. Maybe God doesn't want me to leave today," he said.

He headed back downtown, walking next to the moving train.

The day before, he had climbed the stairs of a pedestrian bridge that offers a view of the border fence and the town of Nogales, Ariz. He could see the boxcars rolling into the U.S. without him. An American flag fluttered above the courthouse. There was a Burger King sign and the golden arches of a McDonald's. Luna felt like he could reach out and touch his past life, almost.

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Photos show the difficult life of immigrants after they've been deported to Mexico.