

Seven Fingers Jeffrey Lo 1
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Seven Fingers

The Story of Larry Itliong by

Jeffrey Lo

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Seven Fingers

Darkness.

At a low volume, an acapella rendition of Dahil Sa Iyo. It plays on repeat. It's a short song but it's so good you can hardly tell it's started over.

The darkness is broken by the light of a stricken match. The match lights a cigar. The music slowly grows in volume. A puff of smoke from the cigar.

Lights slowly rise to reveal Larry Itliong. At this point in his life, he has fought many fights and won many battles. His eyes are closed as he smokes, taking in the music.

He sings along. Not very well but with panache.

LARRY

Dahil Sa Iyo...

Nais Kong Mabuhay...

Dahil Sa Iyo...

Hanggang Mamatay...

...

Dahil Sa Iyo. Because of you.

Hell of a song. Surely you've heard it.

My guys sing it all the time. Out on the field.

If not from the guys, in the dance halls...

You, definitely heard it there.

Weekends in the dance halls...

Loving in the dance halls...

Government trying to tell us Filipinos we can't get married to nobody in this country.

What the fuck do they know?

What are they gonna do to stop me?

I got married four times.

Heh. You surprised someone like me could get married four times?

What? Is it my Seven Fingers? Yeah. That's why they call me that. Seven Fingers.

Most people think I lost those three fingers working in Alaska, canning fish.

I can fish in Alaska all the time, sure, but the true story? Jumping off a moving freight train.

Hand got stuck.

Fingers gone.
Am I not pretty to you?
I got the ability to make you think I'm pretty.
You girls might think I'm ugly, but you talk to me for a couple of hours... I'm pretty.
How about that?

We fully see LARRY's face at this point. A challenging smirk on his face.

LARRY

I'm gonna be very frank with you, I have all kinds of guts you know? I'm not scared of nobody. And I'm a son of a bitch in terms of fighting for the rights of Filipinos in this country.

The music grows.

LARRY

The guys sing this song. As they protest. It's romantic. It makes them feel good. For me? It reminds me why I fight. It keeps me focused. I look at those grape growers and I tell them why we have a problem. Sa buhay ko'y labis ang hirap at pasakit. Dahil Sa Iyo...

The music grows more.

LARRY

DAHIL SA IYO!
Because of you mother fucker.

*The music is suddenly gone.
Lights shift.
LARRY transforms into a younger version of himself.
The sounds of Delano farms.*

LARRY pantomimes the motions of

LARRY

Movement. That's the feeling of being a migrant Filipino farm worker.
Constant movement.
At one time you are in Alaska -- packing fish, canning fish, moving fish.
Move. Move Move.
Then to Coachella – hacking vegetables, packing vegetables, moving vegetables.
Moving. Moving. Moving.
Then moving to Delano.
Our bosses expect us to move their products and they expect us to move ourselves like products. Not humans. We're not on their level, we are Filipinos.

And if there is one thing our bosses – the growers – know about Filipinos, they know that we will work. Through the heat, through the pain, through the fatigue – we keep working. They take advantage of that.

To make their pockets fat.

The other day, one of the manongs had a heat stroke!

104 degrees and only a hat to block the sun, of course he got a heat stroke!

And what did they do?

They gave him a bowl of water and asked him if he could continue?

Shit...

(Beat)

With no one to protect us, we have to protect ourselves.

We have to fight for ourselves.

...

Fighting back is hard work.

Fighting back against a system set up to keep you oppressed is not easy.

Making it even more difficult was the fact that our unions were also divided.

Us Filipinos, we had the AWOC – The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee.

The Mexicans were the NFWA – The National Farmworkers Association.

The growers, they are very smart in their abuse of our labor.

If the Mexicans strike wanting 15 cents more.

The growers come to us Filipinos offering us 5 cents more.

If the Filipinos strike.

They go to the Mexicans.

It's hard to overcome when they are putting us against each other.

After many years as a migrant worker I became one of the leaders of the AWOC as did Philip Vera Cruz and Pete Velasco. They will forever be my brothers. For the first three or four months I worked for the union, it felt like all we did was talk, talk, talk! Goddamnit, I'd come home 11, 12, 1 o'clock. But lemme tell you, my mouth was sore!

*LARRY plays out a AWOC meeting.
The sounds of a room full of men.*

LARRY

Everybody, everybody, come on, give Ed your attention.

LARRY

(As a farmworker Ed:)

We work so hard with no break!

Cheers of agreement.

LARRY

(As a farmworker Ed:)

We cut our fingers picking their grapes!

We break our backs carrying their boxes!

Our sweat turns into their dollars!

Cheers of agreement.

LARRY

(As a farmworker Ed:)

Do they give us a break?

The crowd responds with "No!"

LARRY

(As a farmworker Ed:)

Do they help us when it is over 110 degrees?

The crowd responds with "No!"

LARRY

(As a farmworker Ed:)

Do they respect us!?

*The biggest NO! of all.
A slight light shift.*

LARRY

(As a second farmworker:)

Sometimes I cannot believe how they talk to us.

Calling us, *boy* this, *boy* that.

BOY COME HERE!

BOY GET TO WORK!

I'm a fucking MAN!

The cheers grow more passionate.

LARRY

(As himself to the farmworkers)

Ok! Ok! Everyone, listen up. We hear you and we agree with you.

It sounds like it's time we do something about it.

(To the audience:)

So I put it to the group. We took a strike vote.

And after the strike vote I asked –

(Back to the meeting:)

Who wants to volunteer to picket?

(To the audience:)

Only one man raised his hand.

(Back to the meeting:)

Only Ed?

What about the rest of you? What's wrong? I thought we took a strike vote?
Didn't we take a strike vote?

(As farmworker 3:)

I can't picket the boss!

(As Larry:)

Why not?

(As farmworker 4:)

I've been working with with these people for almost 20 years!

(Another farmworker:)

I've been here for 28!

(As Larry:)

You've been here for 28 years? Ok. Tell me. Working here for 28 years. What do you own? What property do you own?

(As Larry:)

A car. What else? Do you have a roof over your head? Do you have a bed to call your own? You have your car and your debt to your "BOSS"

(As farmworker 4:)

I don't want to be the one they see. I don't want them mad at me.

(As Larry:)

You don't want them to be mad? Talaga? That's what it is?

Sounds from the crowd.

LARRY

Well then forget about the strike.

All of you, get the fuck out of here and get back to work tomorrow morning.

If you don't want them to get angry, you better become satisfied with their bullshit.

This meeting is done.

(Back to the audience:)

It's as though what they actually want to do is bitch and moan, not get anything done.

Lights shift.

LARRY

A few days pass, conditions get worse.

The temperature grows hotter.

The growers push harder.

Our frustration becomes unbearable.

Another meeting is called.

Back at the community center.

Back to sounds of the AWOC meeting.

LARRY

Alright men.

Here we are again. What do you have to say?

LARRY

(As farmworker 3:)

Today, I tripped on the vines and injured my knee! When I told them I needed to rest and get it checked by the doctor, they told me that I would not get paid and they would replace me!

LARRY

(As farmworker 2:)

Our breaks have gotten so short! I barely have time to drink water! I can't even take a piss! Who the fuck do they think they are!?

LARRY

(As farmworker ED:)

Come on guys! WE HAVE TO GO ON STRIKE AND WE HAVE TO DO IT RIGHT!

LARRY

(As himself:)

That's right. Ed is right.
If we go on strike, we need to really go on strike.
We need to ALL go on strike.
We need to ALL picket.
Because if only a few of us go – why should they care?
If there are only two, three of us out there picketing and everyone else is scared why would they change? They won't.
So tell me – are you guys fed up?

The group cheers!

LARRY

Good.
Because I'm fed up too.
And I don't like to be alone.
So what do you say?
Do we picket?
Do we strike?
Do we do it right?

The room explodes with cheers!

LARRY

(Back to the audience:)

We decide unanimously.
We will strike tomorrow.

Be back at the community center at 3 AM.
We will come through like it is a normal work day.
Once it hits noon, we put our work down.
We are done.
We strike.
... and on that day... right at noon. It happened.
Over fifteen hundred tired, lonely and abused Filipino men put their tools down and
planted their feet.
September 8, 1965 - The Delano grape strike began.

(Beat)

That grape strike.
O, ano? Are you surprised?
It's true.
The plans to start the Delano grape strike were drafted in Tagalog.

*We hear sounds of the strike. The
picket lines.*

*LARRY chants with the rest of the
manongs.*

LARRY

Watching my guys put down their work – one by one – and meet together at our base...
It felt good.
The only thing I like more than watching us organize together to fight...
Is winning.
Winning the fight.

As soon as they notice what we're doing, the growers come out and ask us what we are
doing. What we want.

I tell those "bosses" not to worry... we just want what's fair.
They look at me and leave.
Day one. We start strong.

The next morning, we get up to start where we left off. No one works. Everyone pickets.
We will not stop until we get paid our fair share and our working conditions are humane.
But suddenly – as we had seen time and time again...

Our picket lines were crossed.
The growers went to the local Mexican farmworkers of the NFWA and the Mexicans were
crossing our picket lines. We watched them pick up our tools and take our work.

Our guys looked around at each other and then to Vera Cruz.
Vera Cruz looked to me.

(As Philip Vera Cruz:)

Seven Fingers. What should we do?

*LARRY looks at Phillip Vera Cruz and
grabs a megaphone.*

LARRY

(Calling out to the Mexican farmworkers:)

HEY!

LISTEN HERE!

LISTEN TO ME!

WE ARE YOUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS OVER HERE!

WE SHOULD BE TOGETHER!

COME HERE INSTEAD!

(To the audience:)

They looked at us for maybe one second.

Then put their heads back down and went back to work.

I couldn't blame them.

...

Those motherfuckers pitting us against each other again.

Vera Cruz and Velasco tried to get them to stop but there was nothing we could do.

(As Pete Velasco:)

Larry. The others are losing hope. The Mexicans won't listen...

We are losing the strike because of them.

We're trying to talk to them in English but they don't speak English.

None of us talk Spanish...

So what do we do, Larry? We cannot keep going on like this!

(As Larry:)

...

Ok.

...

I'm gonna go talk to Cesar.

(To the audience:)

Chavez.

What? You didn't know that the great Cesar Chavez would not have joined the Delano grape strike if it wasn't for Seven Fingers?

Well it's true. Shiiiiit.

And that son of a bitch didn't want to help!

*LARRY ITLIONG's meeting with CESAR
CHAVEZ.*

LARRY

(As Chavez:)

Look Larry, I understand the hardships the Filipinos are going through.

(As Larry:)

No, you are not listening to me!

(As Chavez:)

I am... but we're just not ready.

(As Larry:)

And we cannot wait anymore.

(As Chavez:)

Look Larry...

(As Larry:)

We need your support.

(As Chavez:)

We cannot give it to you.

(As Larry:)

Why the hell not, Chavez?

(As Chavez:)

We're not ready.

(As Larry:)

Do you see my guys out there? They are old and they are suffering. For what? I know it's different for you Mexicans but the Philippines is a long way from home. We have nowhere to go.

(As Chavez:)

We are not ready to do this Larry. Give me two or three more years. Then we can talk.

(As Larry:)

Goddamnit Chavez!

Maybe you can wait two or three more years but we cannot.

The Filipinos. We are getting old. We came here in the twenties.

And every penny, every quarter, every dollar we can fight for – we need that to retire.

We need that to live our lives.

No.

We need to strike now.

And you are going to strike with us.

Cause let me tell you Cesar.

And believe me when I say this.

If you do not join us. We will be against you, forever.

Every step of the goddamn way.

Whenever you strike.

Wherever you strike.

We will be there to break it.

Whatever picket lines you have.

We will cross them.

And you will get nowhere.

...

We do this now or I will leave this room and we will all suffer. Forever.

(As Chavez:)

Come on, Larry...

(As Larry:)

You know I mean it Cesar.

Don't test me.

(To the audience with a cocky, satisfied smile:)

I won.

Cesar Chavez called a meeting with us and the NFWA at the Guadalupe Church. Really it was just a meeting with the NFWA that we were allowed to sit in and watch. They were yelling, arguing and debating in Spanish. Whether or not they should support us. All we could do was sit and wait. Vera Cruz and I stepped outside for a smoke as they continued their debate when suddenly we heard a cheer.

We turned to the church and heard –

*The sound of a Mexican crowd
cheering SI SE PEUDE! VAMOS IR
EN HUELGA!*

LARRY

Vamos Ir En Huelga!

Let's go on strike!

...

Now we had what we needed to win.

A partnership.

Organization.

Mexicans. Filipinos.

No longer brothers fighting against one another but brothers fighting together.

Beautiful.

The next morning we came to the community hall like every other day but this time...

(Sees the Mexican farmworkers entering:)

Cesar came in.

And Dolores Huerta.

And the rest of their community.

For the first time, they were in our Filipino Community Hall and we shared breakfast.

We shared a meal as we shared our fight.

Finally.

We were together.

(As Filipino Worker:)

Oy! Come over here grab a plate! Sit with me. Are those tamales?

(As Mexican Worker:)

Si! Fresh! From my wife!

(As Filipino Worker:)

Bring them over here!

(As another Filipino Worker:)

Try some of this! We call this longaniza!

(As another Mexican Worker:)

Like chorizo!

(As another Filipino Worker:)

Yeah! Haha! Like chorizo!

LARRY turns back to the audience and smiles.

LARRY

Mexican food.
Filipino food.
All delicious.
All giving us energy.
The energy we needed to win this fight.

We hear Mexican fight music played by the Mexican laborers mixed in with the Filipino songs played by the Filipinos. Together, it is more empowering than apart.

LARRY

When the growers saw that the Mexicans and Filipinos had decided to work together, they knew they were in trouble. They knew that united, we had power. And they knew we meant business.

So with that, they got scared. They got scared and became aggressive with their tactics. Once they got scared those assholes turned to intimidation and violence. They turned off the lights and gas in our labor camps so we had trouble showering or cooking a meal.

My son saw a fellow labor striker get beat up by thugs hired by the growers when he was just five years old. Later that night, he asked me why there was a difference between white and brown.

As the resistance to the strike grew more and more violent, we came up with a plan. Two workers and a student activist followed a mass grape shipment that came from one of our picketed growers to its ending destination in Oakland. We instructed them that once they made it to the end, to convince the transporters to not load the shipment. And they succeeded! It worked. Because of this, a thousand ten-ton cases of grapes were left rotting in the docks.

From there, we got support from the Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union. They refused to load non-union grapes.

From here – Chavez came up with an idea. An idea to make public boycotts of the two largest corporations involved in Delano Grapes – Schenley Industries and Digiogio Corporation. If the growers were going to hurt our pockets, we were going to do the same to them.

News of our strike and our boycott moved fast and we quickly gained support across the country –

*LARRY picks up stacks of newspapers
and reads the headlines.*

LARRY

Atlanta- Delano grapes and Scheneley products are added to a boycott project run by African Americans throughout the South.

El Paso – The Bishop of El Paso announces his support of the boycott.

New York – 50,000 government employees pledge their support of the boycott.

Sacramento – The California Democratic Council announces its support of the strike and boycott and donates \$5,700 to the union.

Chicago – Members of the largest co-op in the state of Illinois remove all boycotted products from their shelves.

Indio – Over 600 farm workers and supporters gather to hear leaders of the movement speak.

A huge rally is held in Selma.

And us fighting for our rights, inspired others like us to do the same.

In Del Ray – 80 Orange pickers go on strike.

In Oxnard – 20 workers go on strike in the strawberry fields.

Washington D.C. - Father Vincent Saldini, an orange picker for 11 years, leads an outdoor Mass at the Washington monument in support of *our* fight.

In March of 1966, while I led the fight in Delano, Cesar embarked on a three-hundred mile pilgrimage to Sacramento to demand answers from the government. When he and his hundreds of followers arrived the following month, he was met by thousands of supporters rallying at the State Capitol's door.

And finally, as our power grew stronger, we finally made the union of our battles, official. In August, 1966 the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee and the National Farmworkers Association combined and we officially charted the United Farm Workers of America.

(Beat)

Many thought that with the Cesar and me working together that the fight would be short. That the strike would start and the growers would quickly give in but... we fought for over five years.

‘tang ina...

Five years...

LARRY closes his eyes and ages back to where he was at the beginning of the play.

LARRY

We got tired.
We got hungry.
We got beaten.
We got abused.
But...
We stayed brave.
Five long years...
...
We won.
Goddamnit we won!

We hear Dahil Sa Iyo. Larry hears it and opens his eyes.

LARRY stands up and dances with himself. Holding a beautiful, imaginary partner.

LARRY

Because of you...

(Singing:)

Dahil Sa Iyo...

He sings and dances as the music plays. Lights fade.