

LITERATURE:
DEATH OF AN ASSASSIN



Walking Stars

Stories of Magic and Power



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wrong, too. One little kid even offered to break another window for me.

I said, "No more broken windows, and listen closely. He got the twenty not because he broke the window, but because he had the guts to speak up, and he didn't know if he was going to get punished or what. This boy is going to go far! He made the decision to come forward no matter what. And that takes guts."

You see, it's like my Dad always told me. Our decisions are who we are. Decisions and having the guts to stick to our decisions against all odds. And in this story, my Dad, who was younger and weaker becomes the hero, and his older, stronger brother becomes the nobody. And that's how it works in real life, too. Bullies eventually become nobodies, and the persons who were tormented become "somebodies," if—and this is a big if—they only have the guts to endure and not get bitter.

So, in my opinion, this is, indeed, the greatest gift we can give to ourselves and God: to keep the faith and stretch ourselves to the stars as we reach inside ourselves with all our God-given power and magic.

Death of an Assassin

"The colonel is coming! The colonel is coming!" shouted a young, barefooted boy, running up the cobblestone street of the little settlement.

It was almost dark, and quickly Juan ran into his home, yelling, "Hurry, Mamá! Here comes *el coronel!*"

Emilia started screaming with terror. The last time the colonel and his men had caught them, they'd raped and beaten Emilia in front of Doña Margarita's very own eyes so that they, the Villaseñors, could see what became of anyone who refused to bow down to authority. But the great woman, Doña Margarita, had not shied away from her responsibilities. No, she'd knelt down and began to pray, refusing to close her eyes to the horrors that these abusive, federal troops put her daughter through. And she had watched them with her eyes wide open and prayed with her rosary in hand, asking God to forgive them and to not blame their mothers whose loins they came from.

Hearing Doña Margarita's words, one soldier had lost his ability to rape Emilia, and he'd become

so enraged with the old woman's praying that he'd pulled up his pants and rushed across the room to beat Doña Margarita. But another soldier had knocked him down. Then, in a fit of rage, the federal troops had begun to fight amongst themselves until the colonel had come in and separated them, calling them a bunch of weak fools because they didn't know how to properly treat a woman. The colonel had then yanked Doña Margarita's rosary from her hand and slapped her, calling her "a stupid Indian." And then he tore the rosary to pieces, scattering the well-worn beads to the wind.

Now Luisa and Doña Margarita quickly tried to get Emilia to stop screaming and ushered her out the back door of their home so they could hide in the bushes underneath the wall of the *ramada*. It was almost dark; there was just a little pink and pale yellow in the western sky painted across the heavens in soft, long horizontal brush strokes. The colonel and his men could be heard entering the village, their horses' hooves echoing on the rock-smooth cobblestones. Emilia began to cry again, whimpering like a lost little child. She wanted her doll. Ever since her last beating, nothing could pacify her except her dirty, little, ragged doll. It was a doll that she'd gotten as a child, ordered all the way from Spain, and at one time had been a wondrous Flamenco dancing woman with fine clothes and real blond hair.

"I'll run back inside and get it for her," said Salvador, his heart pounding in deadly fear.

"Oh, no, you don't!" said his mother. "They so

much as see one little movement and they'll start shooting! You know how much they still fear us and hate us! No, you stay put!"

"But, Mamá," said Luisa, who was big with child, "if he doesn't go and get her dirty little doll, they'll find us all and maybe even kill us this time. Please, let him go quickly before they get any closer and hear her."

Emilia was crying and whimpering, and the colonel and his troops were halfway up the street now. They were walking slowly, confidently, each horse stepping deliberately—well-shod horses and well-armed men coming down the cobblestones, watching every house, every shadow, as they came. They'd killed almost every male human down to the age of twelve in all the area, and so they figured that they had no one left to fear, fully realizing that the old men and little boys who were left had seen so much bloodshed in the last few years that their hearts were gone out of them.

"Mamá, Luisa is right," said Juan. He was ten years old and he'd been running and hiding and dodging bullets for the last three years of his life. "I've got to do it, and now!"

Quickly, he jumped up and sped out of the bushes, up over the wall, and across the *ramada*. The colonel and his men were only three houses up the street. He had to find his sister's doll and get back into hiding instantly or all would be lost. My God, he was so scared that his little heart was pounding a million miles an hour.

Going inside the house, he glanced all around

the kitchen, but didn't see the doll. He rushed to the back, looking through the bed where Emilia and Luisa slept together. Ever since José-Luis' death, Luisa slept with Emilia. That way they could give each other comfort in the quiet of the night.

He found nothing. He rushed into the room where he and his mother slept on another straw mat on the floor. The last time the soldiers had come, they'd taken all their bedding and furniture and set it on fire in the street in front of their home. Oh, these soldiers were determined to show them what became of people who raised sons who dared feast their eyes on the Heavens and think of themselves as having value.

Searching desperately, Juan didn't find the doll there, either. Then he heard his sister's cries and the horses dancing, echoing, their well-shod hooves getting closer and closer. He just knew that they were going to be found. He rushed into the kitchen to get a pan or a knife to throw at the horseman, so that they'd give him chase and not find his mother and sisters. That's when he saw Emilia's doll. Why, it was sitting there on the ledge of the broken kitchen window with the last of the going sunlight reflecting off the doll's fine, smooth face.

Juan snatched up the doll and dashed out to the *ramada*, coming within a few feet of the well-shod horses' hooves. He dropped, crawling alongside the twisted vines of the *ramada*, his chest pounding against the good Earth. And he was just going to drop the doll over the rock wall to his mother and sisters

when a soldier heard him and reined in his mount.

"What's that?" shouted the soldier, drawing his pistol and shooting once, twice, three times into the vines of the dark twisting *ramada*.

Hearing the shots, Doña Margarita and her daughters glanced up and saw Juan's hand hanging over the top of the wall above them. His hand opened, letting go of the doll, and then went limp. The old ragged dancing Flamenco woman came tumbling down through the leaves and branches of the bushes into Emilia's starving hands. Immediately, Emilia calmed down as if she'd been given a gift from Heaven. It took every ounce of power for Doña Margarita to not scream out in HORROR! Juan was dead. His hand had gone limp. They could now hear the colonel's huge, bellying voice.

"Stop wasting your bullets, you fool!" snapped *el coronel*. "This village has nothing worth shooting anymore with our guns!"

The colonel's men laughed and continued down the cobblestone street, shooting now and then and laughing as they went. They'd won; the colonel figured that they'd killed each and every man, woman and child who'd seen him run down the road that night with his fat ass wiggling in awful fear. And anyone who might still be living, the colonel was sure that they wished that they were dead.

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Late that night, little Pelón, Mateo's youngest

brother, who'd given Juan his smooth, good-luck rock on the night of the witch, came to see Juan. The word was out that the federal troops had put three good bullet holes through Juan's body but that his mother, Doña Margarita, the great *curandera*, healer, had slipped the bullet holes from his body to his loose clothing and saved his life. Little Pelón found Juan and his family in the thick trees just down the hill from the town. They were going to sleep outside for a few nights in case the soldiers returned.

After inspecting the three bullet holes in Juan's clothing, just inches away from his neck and left side, Pelón informed Juan that the last of his brothers had been assassinated two days before. "They came late in the day as we were eating, but we didn't run," said Pelón, tears coming to his eyes, "because I'm ten and Alfonso was only twelve, and they'd already killed Mateo and all my older brothers. So, well, my mother said, 'Don't run! Just keep eating and they'll leave us alone.' But they didn't. They shot Alfonso as he sat there eating his *taco de frijoles*."

No one knew what to say. There'd been so much killing in the last couple of years that, my God, there seemed to be no end to it. As soon as a boy began to just show any little sign of manhood, he was executed on the spot. And the word was out that these killings would continue until every man, woman or child with any bad Indian blood was eradicated so that Mexico could then take its proper place among the modern nations of the world.

"Look," Pelón whispered to Juan once the women were asleep, "I've figured out a way to kill the colonel, but I need your help."

Juan glanced around, not wanting his mother and sisters to hear. He got up, and he and Pelón went out to the meadows beyond the trees. The moon was out and the sky was filled with thousands and thousands of stars. Facing each other, they sat down like two little dark stones, and Pelón explained the whole thing to Juan.

"You see, Juan, this is our only chance to do it," said Pelón, "now that *el coronel* figures that he's killed all of us and he's starting to use the same trails each time to come up here."

Juan nodded. He could see that it was a good plan and the right time to do it, now that the colonel was so confident that he was leisurely coming up each time on the easy main trails. But, still, there was the problem of a weapon. Every pistol and rifle had long ago been confiscated by the Federales. There wasn't a weapon to be had in all the mountains.

"No, that's not true," said Pelón. "I saw where my brothers buried a couple of good rifles before they were killed." He stood up. "Are you in?"

Juan sat there on the ground, looking up at his childhood friend whom he had known since they'd begun to walk. "Yes," said Juan, standing up and taking hold of his friend's hand. "I'm in *a lo macho!*"

"*A lo macho!*" repeated Pelón, and he took Juan into his arms, hugging him. Two little boys, each ten years old, and each so scared and torn and

worn that they didn't know what else to do.

"Look," added Pelón, wiping his eyes, "with you at my side, Juan, what can possibly go wrong? You're the one who faced La Bruja single-handedly and took three of the colonel's best bullets and didn't even lose a drop of blood! Nothing can go wrong, I tell you. It's done! Day after tomorrow, before the sun is chest high, *el coronel* will be dead, and this land will be free once again!"

And they held each other in a long *abrazo*, both knowing fully well that they really had not one chance in hell of pulling this off. But there was nothing else that they could do, for tomorrow they'd get a little hair on their upper lip or just a little bit taller, and then it would be their turn to be executed. Now, only while they were still children, did they have any chance whatsoever of succeeding.



Two days later, Juan met Pelón down in the deep gulleys north of town. It was late afternoon; they only had a couple more hours of good daylight.

"Did you tell anyone?" asked Pelón. Pelón, meaning "bald-headed," had such a big, thick mane of wild hair that everyone had teased him about his hair ever since he could remember, saying that all the forests of the world would be gone before Pelón went bald.

"No," said Juan. "I told no one."

"Not even your mother?" asked Pelón.

Juan resented this question. "Especially not my mother!" he snapped. "My God, she'd be out of her head with worry if I'd told her what we were about!"

"All right, calm down," said Pelón. "Calm down. I was just checking. We can't be too careful with what we're about to do."

"Did you get the rifle?" asked Juan.

"Sure. I got it over there in those rocks, wrapped in a serape and covered with leaves."

Juan glanced over to the pile of large boulders and could see nothing. He was glad that Pelón had hidden the weapon well. After all, they didn't want to be seen lugging a rifle around the countryside. He glanced back at Pelón. There was something different about this childhood friend of his; his eyes were not the eyes of a young boy anymore.

"Come," said Pelón, "we'll go over my plan once more. You have Don Pio's blood in your veins, just like your brother José, so you should have a head for strategy. Oh, my brothers would marvel at José's strategy of battle. Our brothers, they were great, weren't they?" he added.

"Yes," said Juan. And he almost added, "If only they had lived." But he didn't say this. He held.

They went over to the boulders and hunched down out of sight, warmed a couple of *taquitos*, and ate as they spoke. The sun was finally going down, and they could soon travel without being seen.

Pelón's plan was simple. He'd been watching the federal troops for days now, and he'd come to realize that the colonel and his men were coming

up from the lowlands on the same trail. And, every time, they'd rest their horses three-fourths of the way up the mountain in a little basin where there was water and grass. The colonel had also gotten in the habit of walking a little way away from his men to take a crap over a large, fallen log, from where he could keep watch on the trail above and below him.

"So, you see," Pelón had explained to Juan, "all we got to do is get there the night before and bury me in the dirt and cover me with leaves and broken branches. Then, in the morning, when he has his pants down and he's shitting, I'll just rise up and shoot him dead from a distance of about ten feet, so I'll be sure not to miss."

The plan could work, Juan was sure of it, if only he covered Pelón up correctly with the leaves and branches and the colonel came the same way and took his same crap and Pelón didn't lose his nerve.

"Look," said Juan, "I've been thinking your plan over very carefully, and I really do think that it can work. But, well, it's going to take a lot of nerve for you to stay there quietly all night and then to not panic or make a single move when the colonel and his men ride up, making so much noise and trampling all around you with their horses."

"I got the nerve," said Pelón. "Believe me, I got the nerve. After they killed Mateo and all my brothers, I've been thinking of nothing else but this!

"You know," he said, a strange calmness coming to his eyes, "*el coronel* is right. There isn't ever

going to be peace in Mexico until they kill every one of us, damn their wretched souls!"

Juan was taken aback. He hadn't expected this hate, this power, this conviction, to come from one of his own playmates who was so young. But he could now see that he'd been kidding himself. For he, too, was raging mad inside, wanting to kill, to destroy this damned colonel and all his men. Oh, the abuses, the absolute horrors that these men had committed in the name of law and order were monstrous!

"All right," said Juan, "I agree with you that there isn't going to be peace in Mexico until somebody is killed, but it's not going to be us. It's them who must die. They don't work the fields, they don't protect their homes and families, so it's them who must go. We have to live as my brother José said. We, the meek, who give heart and soul and the sweat off our backs to our sacred piece of Earth."

"You're right," said Pelón. "And that's why we must do this. Let's go."

"Just wait," said Juan. "I want to see the rifle. Also, after I bury you, how will you know when to raise up and start shooting, especially if I bury you so well that you can't see and you can't be seen, either?"

Pelón was stumped. But not for long. "I guess I'll know to come up shooting when I hear his first shits and farts."

Both boys started laughing.

"Then, let's hope he eats well tonight and drinks

a lot so he'll be shitting and farting big and loud tomorrow," added Juan, laughing all the more.

And so there they went, two little boys, lugging an old *retrocarga*, homemade shotgun, that hadn't been fired in years, to do in the most famous badmen of all the region. The sun was down now and the western sky was painted in long streaks of pink and rose and yellow and gold. The clouds were banked up against the distant mountain called El Serro Gordo, The Fat Mountain, and all the rolling little hills and valleys between that distant mountain and their own great mountain called El Serro Grande, The Big Mountain, were green and lush, looking so beautiful and peaceful.

The two little boys began to whistle as they went. They were absolutely stout-hearted in their belief that they would succeed, and so they were happy.

Overhead, the last of the great flocks of fork-tailed blackbirds came swooping by on their way to roost in the tall grasses by the shallow mountain lakes. It had been another good day on God's sacred Earth, and she, the Night, was now approaching in all her splendor and magic. The first few stars were beginning to make themselves known, shining brightly in the heavens. Oh, it was good to be alive, holding your head high and feasting your eyes upon the wondrous evening sky with your heart full of hope and glory.

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No one knew where Juan was, and Doña Margarita was becoming very anxious. She wondered if her little son's disappearance had anything to do with Pelón having come by the night before. She decided to call Luisa back from looking for Juan. She just had this little quiet feeling deep inside herself that the two boys were up to something, and so maybe it was best not to draw anymore attention to the fact that Juan was missing.

Doña Margarita took in hand what was left of her father's once-fine handmade rosary and went outside to pray. The sun was gone and the night was coming, and soon it would be dark. Doña Margarita began to pray, releasing her soul to God and knowing deep inside of herself that all would turn out for the Sacred Good, if only she kept faith and allowed God to do His work, and let herself bend with the turns and twists of life, and not take too seriously those fears that kept coming up inside her weak, human mind. For she well knew that the turns and twists of life could never be understood with the head, but had to be felt by the heart and allowed to blossom with the wisdom of one's God-given soul.

Oh, if it weren't for her complete faith in God, she was sure that she never could've survived that terrible day that the colonel and his men had abused Emilia. But, with her feet well-planted in the rich soil of the Mother Earth, she had endured and she'd been able to go on, just as she was going to go on now. This was the power of living; this was the power of bringing in God's light with every

breath one took. To fill one's being with so much light that no little, dark, sneaky thought of fear or doubt could reside in one's entire being.

Doña Margarita now continued praying, eyes focused on the Father Sky and feet planted in the Mother Earth, not really knowing where her little boy was, but fully realizing that her soul was gone from her body, having been released to God's infinite powers, and her soul would somehow find the means with which to help her son. She prayed and the Universe listened and the stars brightened.



Going down through the trees, the two boys dropped into the little basin. It was dark now, and they needed to move slowly, carefully, and not leave any signs of having passed through there. Grass was in the open places and leaves and broken branches were under the trees. Then, they heard a sound. They froze, not moving a muscle, and glanced around, but only with their eyes—barely moving their heads or bodies.

Two eyes were watching them from over there by two trees. They couldn't quite make out what the two eyes were until they saw the flicker of the ears. Then they knew that it was a deer. In fact, they could now make out that it was a doe and her fawn, which had stepped out from behind her.

"*Mira, mira,*" said Pelón, blowing out with relief. Both boys had been holding their breath in deadly fear. "I thought maybe it was a tiger, or

maybe even a soldier. You know, if the colonel was smart," continued Pelón, "he would leave a group of soldiers behind to keep track of their trails. That's what I'll do when I join Villa," he added with *gusto*.

"You're going to join Pancho Villa?" asked Juan, also feeling relieved that it had turned out to be only a deer.

"Sure, of course. It's either join the rebels or continue to stay up here all alone in these God-forsaken mountains until they hunt us all down. It's not going to stop with us killing the colonel, you know. They'll be sending others."

"Well, then, why are we doing this?" asked Juan. He'd assumed that once they'd gotten rid of *el coronel* it would all be over.

"Because the BAS..." Pelón began shouting in anger.

Just then, the doe leaped, looking behind her, and was off in large, graceful bounds. Her fawn went right after her in small, tight prancing leaps. Both boys crouched down, holding deadly still. They couldn't see what had startled the doe, but they were terrified once again. Pelón signaled Juan to follow him, and they moved quietly along the ground, their little hearts beating wildly.

Crawling into the brush, they lay down, chests against the good Earth. Juan drew close to Pelón's right ear and whispered, "Look, maybe we shouldn't bury you right now. I think maybe we should wait until daybreak, when we can see better. That doe was really frightened."

"Maybe it was just because I raised my voice,"

said Pelón.

"Maybe," said Juan, "but maybe not. I think we should wait."

"I don't know," whispered Pelón. "They've been coming by here pretty early."

"Yes, but what if the situation doesn't look right in the morning? Once you're buried, Pelón, that's it. We can't just uncover you. I think we better wait until daylight so we can see. Then I can bury you carefully and fix up the area so it looks like nobody has been here."

Pelón glanced around, thinking over the situation, then said, "Okay, I'll trust your judgment, Juan, but I just hope he doesn't come by too early and catch us sleeping."

"He won't," said Juan. "Remember, he's going to eat and drink a lot tonight, so he'll fart big and loud for us tomorrow!"

Both boys laughed quietly, trying hard to keep their voices down. They still didn't know what had startled the doe, and they wanted to be very careful.

"You know," said Juan, glancing up at the star-studded heavens, "I think we should maybe pray."

"You still pray," asked Pelón, "after all that's happened to our families?"

At first Juan was taken aback by Pelón's question, but then he recovered and said, "Yes, of course. In fact, at home we probably pray more now than ever before." And so Juan knelt there in the brush where they were hiding and began to pray, with Pelón only watching. Overhead the stars

continued blinking, winking, giving wonderment and beauty.

"Come on," said Juan to Pelón, "join me. In the morning, we'll have plenty of time to do everything."

"All right," said Pelón. "I hope you're right."

And so now, both boys were praying together. The doe came back down into the grassy meadow and began to graze once again. Whatever had frightened her was gone now. Upon seeing the doe and her fawn return, the boys felt better and finished up their prayers, feeling good and confident once again.

"And so, *buenas noches*, dear God," said Juan, finishing his prayer, "and let us sleep in peace and keep us well throughout the night."

"And help us tomorrow," added Pelón, "that we not fail, for we are pure of heart and only wish to protect our homes and families."

Making the sign of the cross over themselves, the two boys came out from the brush and stood up in the clearing by the doe and her little fawn. It was a magnificent night, filled with thousands of bright stars and not a single cloud. The doe and her fawn looked at the two small boys, but didn't bolt. The two animals seemed very much at peace once again.

"I wonder," said Juan, "if animals pray, too. Look how relaxed and happy they are now."

"Animals don't pray," said Pelón, laughing. "What are you, *loco*?"

"No," said Juan, "my mother has always told us that praying calms the heart, and look how peace-

ful those deer are now.”

Pelón glanced at the deer and then back at Juan. “Did your mother really move those bullet holes from your body to your clothes? You know, everyone is starting to say that your mother is the real *bruja* of our region, but that she’s a good witch because she goes to church every day.”

“My mother is no *bruja*!” snapped Juan.

“Look, I didn’t mean to offend you,” said Pelón. “It’s just that, well, did she move those bullets from your body to your clothes?”

Juan didn’t want to answer. He’d been out cold when they’d taken him inside. “I don’t know,” he said. “I was told that the one bullet hit so close to my head that I was knocked out. But, yes, that’s what they were saying when I came to. They said that they’d seen the other two bullets in my body, and I was dead until my mother lit the candles and put her hands on me and started praying.”

“Then your mother really is a witch,” said Pelón, making the sign of the cross over himself, eyes large with wonder.

“No, she isn’t!” said Juan. “Women just come from the moon—you know that. And, well, when they show their power, and the men see that they can’t move them, people start calling them witches. But they’re not. They’re just women, damn it! My mother is no witch! Not any more than yours!”

“Don’t call my mother a witch!” yelled Pelón.

“Well, then, don’t call mine one, either. Hell, your mother has done wonders, too. No one can figure out how she keeps your corn growing, even

after the soldiers trample and burn it.”

Pelón calmed down. “All right,” he said, “you’re right. My mother does wonders, too, so I won’t call your mother, well, a *bruja* anymore. But tell me, Juan, how come you know so much about all this?” asked the boy, his eyes still huge with fear. “You aren’t a *brujo*, are you?”

“Of course not,” said Juan, getting really tired of the whole subject. “It’s just that each night when my mother puts us to bed, she tells us stories.”

“What kind of stories?”

“Well, stories about the magic of life. Stories that give us hope and strength, wings of understanding, so no matter how awful the world gets all around us, we’ll always still feel the power of God’s breath...giving us light, just like those stars and moon give light to the darkness.”

“I see,” said Pelón. “I see. Just like those stars and moon, eh?”

“Yes,” said Juan. “Just like those stars and moon.”

The fawn had come closer to the two boys. It was obvious that Pelón still wasn’t too sure about Juan and had a thousand more questions, but Juan wanted no more of this. He was exhausted. Ever since that soldier had shot at him, everyone had been asking him what his mother had done to him and if it was true that she’d brought him back from the dead.

“I’m tired,” said Juan. “I think we better find a place to bed down for the night so we can go to sleep.

“Look, the little fawn wants to smell us,” added

Juan, smiling and putting his hand out to the little deer. The fawn stretched out his neck, sniffing Juan's fingertips. "You know, I bet animals really do pray in their own way," said Juan. "That's how they're able to live surrounded by lions and all these other dangers but still live in such peace and happiness."

"Maybe you're right," said Pelón, feeling that no deer would come this close to a real witch because wild animals—it was well-known—could see what lurked inside a human's heart. "Come on, I'm tired, too. Let's go over to that huge tree by the fallen log where the colonel does his *caca* and find a place to sleep."

"Okay," said Juan, getting to his feet slowly. He didn't want to startle the little deer.

Both boys now went over to the huge tree by the fallen log where the colonel had been relieving himself each time he came up the mountain. They got down between the thick, bare roots of the tree that some pigs had uprooted, creating a little hollow. They wanted to get out of the wind and cold so that they could get a good night's rest.

The fawn, who'd been watching them, saw them disappear into the hollow and came over to see what had happened to them. The doe followed her fawn and saw the two boys going to sleep. She took up ground, standing over the boys and her fawn like a sentry.

Juan remembered opening his eyes once and seeing the mother deer standing over them, and he just knew that his mother had come to protect

them in the form of a mother deer. But he didn't say anything about this to Pelón. He didn't want to confuse things any more than they already were. High overhead, the stars were blinking, winking by the thousands, and the moon gave her magic light, too. It had been another good day and now it was becoming a good night. There were no witches or other evils on the other side. No, there was just the fear and jealousy that people took with them in their souls.

"*Buenas noches,*" said Juan to the miracle of the heavens. "And thank you, Mamá," he said to the mother deer. He breathed more easily and went back to sleep, feeling safe, and dreamed of green meadows and happy deer praying to the Almighty.



The two boys were fast asleep when they first heard the snorts of the colonel's horses coming up the steep grade. Quickly, they opened their eyes, not knowing what to do. Oh, my God, they'd been caught with their pants down. And now they couldn't just jump up and take off running or they'd be spotted and shot down for sure. They glanced at each other, then raised up their heads as much as they dared and looked between the displaced tree roots. They saw that the soldiers were already in the basin. Some were already off their horses and putting them to graze. Others were taking their mounts down to the water to drink. Then, they heard the colonel's big, powerful voice and realized

that he was directly behind them. But they didn't dare turn around to look.

"Take my horse!" shouted *el coronel*, belching loudly. He sounded like a man with a bad stomach. "Over there, over there. Get the hell away from me!"

They could hear the soldier doing as he was told, grabbing the reins of the colonel's horse and quickly leading him off, coming so close to them that they could see the horse's hooves passing by as they looked from under the big roots of the huge tree. Then, here came the colonel himself, passing by them even closer, his tall, leather boots glistening in the early morning light. He was grabbing tree branches as he passed, causing leaves to fall, and belching with every step. Oh, he was in terrible shape. They could smell the sour odor coming off of him.

Juan and Pelón glanced at each other and, if they hadn't been so terrified, they would've burst out laughing. This was exactly what they'd wanted. They couldn't have asked for it any better. Then, there was the colonel, only fifteen feet away from them, unbuckling his gun belt and dropping his pants. He turned away from them and barely got his big white ass over the fallen log before he began to shit with enormous-sounding explosions.

Quickly, Pelón reached under himself, bringing up the rifle, which was still wrapped in the serape. He tried to unwrap the weapon as quickly and quietly as he could, but he was having trouble working within the small confines of the little hollow.

Juan kept glancing at the colonel, praying to

God, "Oh, please, dear God," he said to himself, "let him be so full of farts and caca that he doesn't stop shitting and can't hear us!"

Finally, Pelón had the weapon uncovered, but it was pointing in the wrong direction. Quickly, he tried turning it around, hitting Juan in the face with the barrel.

Seeing the huge barrel of the homemade retrocarga, Juan blurted out, "That's it? That's our weapon?"

"Quiet!" whispered Pelón under his breath as he shoved the huge weapon between the roots, pointing it at the colonel's back side.

"But it won't shoot!" said Juan. "I thought we had a real rifle!"

But Pelón wasn't paying attention to Juan anymore, and he now cocked back the two big hammers and spoke out loud. "*Coronel*," he said in a clear, good voice, "I'm Mateo's little brother!"

And, as the colonel turned to see who had the audacity to come up behind him and bother him while he relieved himself, Pelón pulled both triggers. But nothing happened; the hammers just didn't move.

Instantly, the colonel saw the situation: two little boys with an old retrocarga from the days of Benito Juárez, hunched down under a bunch of big tree roots, trying to kill him. Quick as a cat, he pulled up his pants and reached for his gun belt. But, at that very instant, Juan hit the two hammers with a stone, and the old weapon EXPLODED, pipe-barrel splitting in two and a fountain of

rock and used little pieces of iron shooting towards the colonel. The two boys were thrown back with the explosion of the weapon, smashing Pelón against the dirt across the hollow. The colonel was thrown over backwards across the log. Instantly, his men were shouting and taking cover, returning fire.

Crawling out of the hollow, Juan was up and trying to clear his head so they could take off running. But what he saw Pelón do next was something he'd never forget. Pelón didn't run. No, he cleared his head and ran over to the colonel, who was squirming about in terrible pain, took the colonel's gun from his gun belt and emptied the pistol into his naked, bloated belly. The soldiers' bullets sang all around Pelón's head, but he never gave them any importance. Only when he saw that the great bad man was dead did Pelón throw down the gun and come running towards Juan. Then they were off like deer, running down through the brush and trees as the soldiers continued shooting at them.

"I killed him!" yelled Pelón, as they ran. "I killed him and he looked me in the eyes and knew who I was before he died! Oh, it was wonderful!"

Some of the soldiers got on their horses and tried to give chase, but the two boys knew these mountains like the back of their hands and cut through the breaks, leaping from boulder to boulder, leaving the armed men far behind. Finally, they were down in the deep canyons where the wild orchids grew, and they were going to start back up

the mountainside when they came upon the doe and her little fawn once again. The deer had been bedded down.

"Wait," said Juan. "Maybe this is a good place for us to hole up for the day. We don't want to get up on top and run into the soldiers or someone who might turn us in to them."

"Who'd turn us in?" asked Pelón. He was so excited that he was ready to pop. "I killed him! I killed him! Oh, my God, it was wonderful! Seeing him squirm around, I put a bullet into his fat belly for every one of my brothers! We did it, Juan! We really did it!"

"Yes, we did. But now we got to keep calm so we don't get killed, too. Come, let's get up on that ridge and bed down like the deer do and keep very quiet 'til nighttime."

And they'd no more than hidden themselves when here came five mounted soldiers down into the bottom of the canyon with an old Indian leading them on foot. The two boys held their breath, watching them pass by down below in the trees. Once, the Indian stopped and glanced up in their direction, but then he just went on down the canyon bottom, leading the soldiers away.

"Did you see how *el indio* looked up towards us?" asked Pelón.

"Yes," said Juan. "He knows we're up here. We better go before they circle above us and come in from behind."

The two boys took off up the ridge as fast as they could go, startling the doe and her fawn,

who'd bedded down above them.

"You better run, too!" said Juan to the deer as they went racing by them.

But the deer didn't run with them. Instead, they ran downhill. Juan and Pelón were coming off the top of the ridge when they heard the shooting down below.

Juan stopped. "They shot the deer," he said.

"How do you know?" asked Pelón.

"I just know," said Juan, tears coming to his eyes.

And he took off racing for home as fast as he could go. He had to see if his beloved dear old mother was all right.

Two days later, Pelón disappeared. It was rumored that he'd joined Francisco Villa's army and had been given the rank of Captain, making him the youngest officer Villa had ever welcomed into his armed forces.



Author's Note

In real life, Rambo and John Wayne and Schwarzenegger and all these other big fake movie heroes have it all backwards. It doesn't take big muscles and all these modern guns to be a Superman or Superwoman. That's all superficial bull! It's not how big the dog is, but how big the fight in the dog is.

And each one of us, no matter how small or young, can defend ourselves once we set our mind to it. Conviction of heart is our power. Truly, conviction of heart, making that "decision" that this is it and we are going to do it, no matter what. Why, this colonel had killed well over five hundred people, and he'd bullied thousands of others, entire communities, and yet these two little boys did him in. No one, but no one, can push people too far. Even the most meek and good-of-heart will finally stand up and be accounted for.

Also, my father and his friend didn't do this for glory or medals or to prove anything to anyone. No, they did it for the love of their families, the love that they had for their mothers and sisters and little brothers and their sacred piece of Mother Earth.

Thank you. *Gracias*. We're all somebody, people of value. All we have to do make that "decision" to stand up and do it!