

# Toy Soldiers

By Chuy Ramirez

Joaquin was a kid, maybe eight, certainly no older than ten. He was barefooted, wore denim cut-offs and no shirt. From his father's chair, a blonde boy of about the same age, a pensive look on his face, slowly surveyed the room. As if mentally measuring the dimensions of the room, the boy stared up at the ceiling, and then down to the corners at the floor. His short, vaseline-sleek hair was neatly combed with a part on the left side. Clad in slacks and an oversized, white, long-sleeved shirt, the boy's palour was a sickly pale, except for the shadows under his eyes. A pair of red suspenders pulled up the boy's pants and was crunching a soiled, white shirt up to his chest.

With his left hand, Joaquin tugged his shorts away from his butt as if the sweat had glued his underpants to his skin. He gulped down another drink of water which he had poured from a clay-red pottery water jug—a cantaro—the family's water cooler. The cantaro had a long tubular stem which opened at the end and served as a handle. Water was held in the fat belly of the jug, where it remained cool. Like water filtered for decades through layers of limestone, it had taken on the flavor of the earth. Hastily applied brush strokes adorned the jug. Joaquin paused to breathe deeply in between gulps, as excited children often do, and savored the earthy after-taste, as if taking in the sweet water of a cool spring.

For a weekday, the blonde boy was obviously over-dressed. Sitting there silently, he displayed an inauthentic enthralment with an oversized green plastic toy soldier which he playfully held by its outstretched arms and somersaulted between his hands. A sad, somber look had fixed on his face.

Just then, Benancio came into the kitchen through the side door, and acknowledged Joaquin with a nod of the head. Benancio was a very serious man. At over six feet tall, he could hardly be missed, especially in the small kitchen. Always resolutely serious, Benancio donned a neatly trimmed thin moustache. In his left hand, Joaquin's father toted an electric rotary saw. In his right hand, he carried a weathered, black tin lunch box which he dropped on the kitchen table. It let out a hollow whimper. Benancio then began to turn the sleeves of his khaki shirt which appeared frayed from use and Benancio's mother's washing to remove the rings of sweat and grime that collected on them.

Apparently, Benancio did not notice the young guest sitting silently in Benancio's worn chair. Indeed, the blonde boy, himself seemed oblivious to Benancio's entrance as well, and continued his self-entertainment.

Benancio undid the first couple of buttons of his khaki shirt and pulled out his shirt tail. He issued a tired “whew”. Then he went to the cantaro, raised it above his head, tilting the stem --just so—like a Catalan Shepard, to let the water flow into his mouth. His lips never touched the jug’s opening. As he lowered the cantaro away from his mouth, he finally noticed the boy.

“Y este,” (“And this one” as in “where did this come from”), Benancio frowned, as he inclined his head, gesturing in surprised apprehension toward the small, frail boy sitting in his chair.

Visitors were rare. Benancio was a very private man. And he absolutely forbade from his home certain neighborhood kids whom he had labeled as bad influences. But this was an entirely rare site indeed: a gringito (small or young anglo boy).

Questions razed through Benancio’s mind: What is this gringito doing here? Is this boy lost? Is he a runaway?

“This is Bobby,” Joaquin answered Spanish. “He’s with the circus,” he added, somewhat proudly and matter-of-factly. “I am his best friend.” Benancio frowned again and stared at his son.

At the sound of his name, Bobby, still shy, but now somewhat emboldened, craned his neck up and gave Benancio a confident, acknowledging glance, as if to say, “hey, I’ve been cleared, okay”. Papa turned down to the boy and sized him up just for a second.

“What circus?” Again, Benancio gestured with his head and hands.

Joaquin pointed through the kitchen screen door toward the open sand lot next door. “There, at El Salon, Papa. The circus is broke. They have no money for gas.”

Benancio took his chair to undo his boots as the boy joined Joaquin at the screen door. The laces on his work boots loosened, he calmed down a bit. The two boys walked out of the kitchen with Benancio following them. The screen door let out a complaining whine as Joaquin pushed it open.

Toward the rear of the abandoned lot at intersection of Kansas and Third, down by the alley, El Salon displayed the remnants of a concrete stage about three feet from the ground. Rumors had it that in its heyday, during the 1930s, El Salon had served as a dance hall. The concrete platform had served as a raised stage, and directly in front of it had been the dance floor. Parts of the concrete foundation had survived the years, but that’s all that remained when El Salon was burned to the ground in the 1950s.

A faded “McDonald Circus” sign was barely noticeable on one of the two semi-trailers which has been maneuvered along Kansas Street to serve as the east wall of this temporary circus village. Small military style tents were being set up as living quarters for the carnies. Among them, a tall, tanned, blond man barked out orders to the crew as they busied themselves.

“Mira no mas” (“look no more”), Benancio was noticeably relieved at the site. Two elephants, chained with leg irons attached to a steel stake imbedded in the ground, were chomping on a pile of carrots. One of the semi-trailers had pulled into the alley, up along the outhouse at the back. From where the trio stood observing, the view of the outhouse (to which one of the carnies had already helped himself to) was partially blocked by a large ebano tree [desert prickly evergreen which grows to about 20 feet]. But clearly visible on the side of the outhouse were a crescent moon and a five-point star jig-sawed into the sides of the privy.

“Han de ser Hungaros (“they’re probably Hungarians,”), Benancio wondered aloud to his son (but he really thought he was referring to “gypsies”), speaking authoritatively, as old and wise men often did, as the three looked over the working circus crew. Benancio smoothed the neatly trimmed moustache with the backside of his index finger. To him all door-to-door salesmen and transients were one thing or another, but usually, hungaros or gypsies. Joaquin’s mother had often told Benancio that he should not be so prejudiced. But Benancio could not help himself. He detested them, he said, as much as he detested politicians.

For the past three years, the South Texas drought had plagued el Valle. People in South Texas called this area where along the Rio Grande el Valle. (the Valley). But the drought had finally dissipated. While Mexico and the U.S. had not normally agreed on much, they had recently settled on a rare cooperative agreement that resulted in a new dam on the Rio Grande. They called the agreement between the two countries a treaty. President Ike came down personally and signed the treaty. And last September, some people had claimed that the Virgin of Guadalupe mercifully delivered a hurricane which filled the reservoir with water. The desert’s thirst has been temporarily quenched.

The hurricane also brought the McDonald Circus as well as the Formica-tagged federal disaster agents to the Valley. Benancio had steady work for months now, as the federal agents doled out small disaster loans so families could fix their rain-damaged homes.

Joe McDonald Jr. and his circus had not been as lucky. His bill collectors chased him out of Arkansas. Again! If he could just keep moving, he told himself, he could avoid his collector’s claim. If a claim was filed against him in one county, he had already moved the McDonald Circus to the next county, and avoided the constable’s subpoena.

During the carnival’s slump, the enterprising McDonald had also hired out his crew of carnies as plumbers, electricians, roofers and carpenters. He did not mind that half the time his crew lacked the basic skills to perform the work. McDonald figured that by the time defects in the work began showing up, he

and his carnies would be long gone. Benancio explained all of that to Joaquin, just as he explained about the Hungaros.

Mind you, this had not been the first time the McDonald Circus has arrived in a community on the heels of a hurricane. All that Joe McDonald Jr. needed from San Felipe was to buy enough time, perhaps a week, hopefully two, and then head on to San Antonio for the Spring season. By that time, he was certain he'd have enough money to convince his creditors to let him keep his caravan of trucks rolling for another six months.

The small, itinerant McDonald circus moved from town to town in this fashion. Joe Sr., the founder of the circus, and father of Joe Jr. McDonald, had fallen on hard times as well, and had begun the Winter treks south to the small communities along the Mexican border. Joe Jr. followed in his father's footsteps. For the first few days in any community, the hoopla would be a welcomed site. Joe Jr. had his routine down to a tee, having picked up the advance man's skills from Joe Sr. He would select some struggling church or civic organization. He would offer to "joint-venture" with them to put on circus shows. All that was expected from his temporary "partners", as he called them, was to advance some funds or some other "in-kind" contribution. Joe Jr. used to say, "in-kind is anything of value other than cash". In return, Joe Jr. would promise the organization that joined a partner a percentage of the circus's profits.

Of course, "profit" was a fleeting thing. Joe Jr. had to subtract interest, salaries, depreciation and other "expenses" from the gate generated by the circus acts. Once he did that, there was rarely any money left to distribute to his "partners" who had provided the "in-kind" services.

On this occasion, the carnival had come to San Felipe, and to El Salon in particular, courtesy of the Sociedad Mutualista (the "mutual society"). A small fraternity of old men, the "Sociedad" was made up of the leading businessmen from the north side of the tracks. Their leaders were Don Magin, the grocer, Don Andres, the baker, and the Don Silvestre, the shoe repairman. Of course, Joe McDonald had convinced the Sociedad to throw in the use of El Salon for the circus as part of its in-kind share. Fraternity members had contributed other "in-kind" services: the printer offered the advertising flyers; a farmer offered carrots to feed the elephants and the monkeys. Joe Jr. told everyone that "in-kind" was as good as cash.

"Vamos muchachos," ("Lets go boys") McDonald barked at two young dark boys who are struggling with the flap of a large tent. Benancio frowned at the site. Several of the smaller trucks were traveling animal cages, and Benancio could make out some spider monkeys and a giant low-land gorilla through the cage's bars.

"Quidate de un gringo que habla espanol" ("Beware of the gringo who speaks Spanish"), Benancio

whispered over Joaquin's head, and flipped off his boots, making his way back into the kitchen.

Joaquin frowned in response, and turned to Bobby McDonald, who remained attentive, showed Bobby an embarrassed smile, shrugged his shoulders and rolled his eyes. Bobby McDonald read his expression, returned a sympathetic smile and shrugged back. They both giggled as if sharing a joke only the two of them knew.

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It was the second day after Joaquin and Bobby had met. Joaquin turned to Bobby. "How many more toy soldiers you got, Bobby?" he asked.

"Millions, probably," quipped Bobby McDonald, somewhat detached. He paused, turned to Joaquin, a serious tone in his voice, and pointed out to Joaquin, as if seeking some reassurance, "You know that a best friend has to keep secrets?"

"Nope," Joaquin responded, and shrugged his head, an uneasiness in his voice. Any good Catholic knew that you could not keep secrets, not from God, your priest or your parents. Joaquin squirmed in his chair, as he thought about it, and wondered, What strange secrets can this kid have?

"A best friend also has to be loyal," Bobby McDonald counseled, apparently assuming that Joaquin would eventually come around. He added, "and ya cain't snitch on a best friend."

Joaquin remained visibly uneasy and offered to keep the terms of this new partnership simple and childlike. "Where's our hideout going to be?" he asked. "I have some friends, about seven of them," he offered, "and we have a hideout over by the ebano tree. We can play there after school."

Bobby McDonald, however, would not be deterred. This boy needed assurances. He pressed on, "I don't attin school. But ever where we go, we tell people I attin private school." Bobby searched Joaquin's eyes for compassion.

Joaquin's defenses melted. He gave quick and due consideration to the severity of Bobby's infraction and assigned it a low rating on the sin chart. He then shrugged his shoulders innocently, and offered his hand to Bobby. Bobby shook on it. Joaquin took a silent, but solemn oath never to tell anyone that Bobby McDonald was a truant. Bobby McDonald shook on it as well, and gave it two pumps for good measure.

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When Joaquin first set foot in the large tent Bobby called home, he was surprised at how comfortable life in an army tent could be. Two cots, several large steamboat trunks and a small screen

black and white television set with the portable, rabbit ears antenna were crowded into the small space. Once the flap at the entry way was tied down to keep out the heat, and the reciprocating fan turned on, life in a tent seemed quite enjoyable.

“Where do you sleep, Bobby?”

“On the cot that don’t smell of cigar.”

Joaquin bent down and sniffed the cot closest to him. “This must be your father’s,” Joaquin complained and wrinkled his nose as he said it.

The boys chuckled and pointed at each other’s sight.

Bobby McDonald did have millions of toy soldiers, it seemed. They were everywhere in the tent. Bobby explained in painfully boring detail the different types of soldiers and military paraphernalia that constituted his estate: both Union and Dixie infantrymen, the ever popular super GI, which Bobby had somersaulted the day before, even Indians, a Davie Crockett, a gray cavalry, the green infantry and some soldiers with black headdresses and bright red coats. These Bobby kept everywhere in the tent, poised and ready for battle.

On one of the steamboat trunks, Bobby had placed the deuce and a half, Sherman tanks, amphibian landing boats, planes and gun batteries. Next to the cot, the Union and Dixie infantrymen faced each other in mortal combat.

Joaquin learned from Bobby that the Indians were special extras, since he had no cowboys. He told himself aloud, “I need some cowboys.” In any case, he told Joaquin that the Indians could fight on the side of the South just as soon as on the side of the North. And, since there were no Nazi or Jap toy soldiers available either, Bobby explained, the Indians had been known to serve in his battles even as a Nazi or Jap force. Of course, the Indians were usually never a match anyway and were always quickly dispatched by the green GI heroes. All these things Bobby explained to Joaquin as they postured in front of the reciprocating fan.

If I had a toy soldier, Joaquin imagined, crouching for a better view of the grass battlefield where the super GI Joe now lead an assault by the green G.I. soldiers, he would be king of the hill at the ebano tree.

“Bobby, you must be rich,” Joaquin remarked, impressed with the endless figures of plastic soldiers posing with carbines, bayonets already, or setting grenade launchers or aiming their sharpshooter rifles.

“Daddy says we were rich once,” Bobby answered, not the least aloof, and added, “Last Summer we went to Gettysburg. Do you know how many casualties there were at Gettysburg?”

Uneasiness showed on Joaquin’s face. “Where’s that?”

“Fifty thousand, at least.” Bobby proudly answered his own question and returned to his presentation. “I use the Indians to fight Davy Crockett on account we don’t have Mexican toy soldiers either,” he said. “Why, if I had some Mexican soldiers...why Davy Crockett could whup ‘em all single-handedly.”

“They don’t make Mexican soldiers?” Joaquin asked, surprised.

Bobby shrugged his shoulders, indicating he really didn’t know, and then gave one of the toy soldiers particularly special attention as if he had found some defect.

“I don’t know,” he added and looked to the side and crooked his mouth. “Anyways, the Indians I use sometimes to help out the North ‘cause the South is always whupping the North anyhow. And so that way, they kinda whup all the bad guys at the same time.”

Joaquin felt compelled to contribute something to the conversation which was being completely hogged by his new pal. “My father says we have Indian blood,” he offered, “but I don’t know which tribe.”

That got Bobby’s mild attention and he walked over to Joaquin, right up to his face, and looked curiously at Joaquin’s features, as if undertaking a forensic inspection.

“I dunno ‘bout that,” Bobby concluded, “sometimes if you have like only one-sixteenth part in you, you caint tell at all.”

“Yes, that’s what I think it is,” Joaquin quickly volunteered, “about one-sixteenth.”

“Maybe you’re an Apache?” Bobby’s eyes grew.

Joaquin nodded. “I don’t think so,” he quickly discounted the idea.

They both giggled aloud although neither knowing exactly why.

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The third day found Bobby back at his cot, lying down, turning a toy soldier on its outstretched arms. Bobby’s mood turned to serious again. “Have you ever had a best friend before,” he asked.

Joaquin’s uneasiness returned. “I don’t know,” he said. He felt the tone of his voice was a bit harsh, but he had intended to convey that Bobby’s queries were too personal. He stretched nervously on the other cot hoping the inquiries would cease. There was a long pause in the conversation. Finally, Joaquin turned on his side, faced Bobby and offered, “There’s lots of kids in this neighborhood. We’re all friends. We’re all best friends.”

An anxious Bobby snapped back, and pleaded, “I know that, but don’t you have a best friend, just for you.”

“We’ll, I guess so. My brother, sometimes, he’s my best friend.” Joaquin smiled, and, as if on second thought added, frowning for better effect, “But then, sometimes he’s my worst friend.”

They giggled.

“I know whatcha mean; I mean, I don’t have a brother, but I know whatcha mean. But don’t you ever talk to someone ‘bout things that only you know and you want no one else to know?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Personal stuff.” Bobby turned to Joaquin, attentively.

Joaquin held an Indian figure up to his face to block out the glare from the light bulb in the center of the tent. He started off cautiously, slowly kneading his response. “Well, on Valentine’s day, I bought this large valentine with a lotta glitter.” He paused thoughtfully and then added. “Paid a quarter for it. Our whole class had envelopes on the classroom wall with our names on ‘em. And I was going to give this Valentine to this girl, but I could never get in the classroom when no one was there. And I wanted it to be a secret. I never told anyone about it.”

“Well that’s personal,” Bobby sounded excited and sat up on the cot. “What was the girl’s name?”

“I can’t tell you; it’s a secret.”

“But we’re best friends aren’t we?”

“Yes, but there are some things you should never share even with your best friend.”

“Why?”

“Because...” Joaquin paused, getting noticeably flustered, “Do you tell everyone all your secrets?”

“No. I guess not.”

Joaquin went back to lying down on the cot and shielded his eyes from the light bulb. He began again, uncharacteristically slowly, thinking out the words as he spoke them. “Sometimes,” he said, “I tell my Mama stuff....about what some of the bad things older boys do. She just tells me to avoid those boys. There’s this boy who lives over by the canal. He’s about three years older than me. Anyway, he always comes around and tries to boss us around. Just because he’s bigger and stronger. No one likes him. He always pushes us and punches us and kicks us around. He made me cry the other day and I wanted to kill him. I really wanted to kill him.”

“Whatya do?”

“Mama said, ‘avoid him.’ When he comes around, just say you have to go home. And avoid him. He will eventually go away and find someone else to bother.”

“Did you tell her about wanting to kill him?”

"No, I kept that to myself."

"Did you tell your dad about that?"

"Heck no!"

"But you told me," Bobby quipped proudly, feeling a certain affinity.

Joaquin shrugged and forced a smile.

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Every afternoon, after school, Joaquin would throw off his school clothes and take off, barefooted and in his shorts, across the back yard to Bobby McDonald's tent. There, the two would play with Bobby McDonald's toy soldiers.

Mama had warned Joaquin, "Son, you know how much your father hates it for you children to make pests of yourselves in other people's homes. You can visit your friend Bobby, but just for fifteen minutes, then you must come home."

"Okay, mama, but what if Bobby comes to visit? Can he?"

"Well, son, you know your father. If you must come into the house, just stay in the kitchen. Don't venture elsewhere."

Mama had told Joaquin and his younger brother, Chacho, that the thick ebano tree in the back yard had grown at the exact location of an old pit privy. An evergreen, the ebano's bark was rough and creviced, and its limbs were covered with needles. No one Joaquin knew had ever climbed an ebano. By early afternoon, the tree extended a cool shadow under which the boys could play. Everyone of the neighborhood boys knew that under the ebano tree was the best spot in the neighborhood.

Occasionally, Joaquin's father brought home bits and pieces of wood left over from one of the construction jobs. Around the ebano, Joaquin, Chacho and their friends, would make-believe that their small pieces of "two-by-fours" were toy cars and trucks and buses or semi-trailers or battleships and barges.

"What are all those pieces for?" Bobby McDonald gently inspected with his foot one of the small pieces of wood lying around the ebano.

"Those are our trucks; we play with them," Joaquin answered.

"Those aren't trucks; they're pieces of wood," Bobby snapped back.

"Well, they're pieces of wood but they're also trucks if we make-believe."

Joaquin took two small pieces of two-by-four which have nails on their wider, flat sides. He tied a

piece of string between the nails on the two boards and laid them flat on the ground. Then he put some pebbles on the top of the smaller board. He slid the larger board over the soft, damp soil pulling the smaller board along, leaving the board's smooth imprint on the soil. As he pushed the board along, he made a mechanical sound with his mouth, "Errr, errr, errr"

"Your truck is pulling a loaded trailer," acknowledged Bobby McDonald. "Can I play with it?"

"It's for you, Bobby," Joaquin told. They both giggled.

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Two weeks had passed since the two boys had entered their pact. Joaquin was listening to Bobby, but was mouthing the words to the song, Cupid, which was being sung on the radio.

Cupid, draw back your bow,  
and let your arrow go,  
straight to my lover's heart  
for meieeeee...

Bobby was working on a taco, sitting in Benancio's chair. "My mom 'sin Little Rock," he said. "My parents got divorced. And she got married to this lawyer. I don't see her but ever once in a while and she has a baby girl."

"You have a baby sister? I don't have a baby sister, but I almost had one."

Joaquin's younger sister had not survived to term. Joaquin's mom had been past forty. His mom often cautioned that women should not have kids when they're too old. Otherwise the children don't survive or else they're albinos or remain bald for life.

"She would have looked so much like you, Joaquin," his mother would often sadly reminisce as she studied his features. "Now, she's in heaven." But etched in Joaquin's imagination was a little blonde angel with rigid, translucent, vein-webbed wings, ascending into heaven.

Bobby clarified, "I have a step-sister. That's different. I wrote my Mama a letter, but I guess she didn't get it. 'cause she never did answer it."

Joaquin searched his memory, gesturing thoughtfully as he did it. I've never known anyone getting a divorce.

"In my letter, I told her I wanted to visit her this coming Summer."

"What's a step-sister?"

"That means we have the same mother, but different fathers," Bobby answered as it if were all very

academic.

“Oh” Joaquin held the thought for a second. He was not able to fully conceptualize this “different father” phenomenon. He set the thought aside knowing subconsciously that he would figure it out whenever it became necessary.

It was Joaquin’s turn. “My Papa, he doesn’t know how to write real well. So my mom writes these letters to grandma and he signs ‘em. I read and write Spanish real well, So I always read ‘em and they always say the same thing (smiling and punctuating the words with his head), ‘I hope you find yourself in good health, as for us, we are all doing well.’ Usually they put our school pictures in the letter so grandma can see just how much we’ve grown. Our grandma is about 95 years old, and,” making a face, “she smokes smelly Mexican cigarettes.”

Bobby followed up. “My mother’s real pretty; she has long fingers and pretty finger nails. She always combs me when we go to church and she checks my ears to make sure they’re clean.” And then,” Bobby added, as if reminiscing, “She used to say, ‘hey Froggie --she called me “Froggie” on account of my voice-- clean your ears real good, God likes clean ears.’ No one calls me Froggie, ‘xep fer her.”

Joaquin wets his lips, smiling at Bobby, tauntingly, and exaggerating the sound of the “f”, blurting out comically “fffff...fffffroggie.”

Bobby frowned.

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The following day, Joaquin had some words of encouragement for Bobby.

“You know what my momo says?

“About what?

“About moms! She says that all moms are special.” Then, making a face as if in discomfort... not entirely certain he himself understood what he’s saying, Joaquin added, “She says they have to hurt a lot when you’re born. That’s why they put up with a lot more from the children than a father does.

“Yea,” Bobby smiled appreciatively.

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All the kids Joaquin and Chacho hung out with looked up to their neighbor, Johnny Castellano.

“Johnny can outrun us all,” Joaquin had once told Chacho. Joaquin also told Chacho that Johnny had once felled a white wing perched on a telephone line with a single toss of a stone. Chacho told Joaquin

that was just so much garbage and that he would have to actually witness that to believe it. But he conceded to Joaquin, "I do know that Johnny Castellano will never let you down, and he always shares. If he has a soft drink, he will always offer you some. No one else does. And you're obliged to take a quick sip that barely wets your lips. Then, if he says, "take a bigger gulp," you can. If he doesn't tell you to take a big gulp, you just better not."

Joaquin had a crush on Johnny's older sister, Juanita, who was very old. She must have been about thirteen or fourteen.

Two years before. Johnny had changed his name. It happened over the Summer. Johnny's family travels somewhere every Summer. Johnny has two older brothers who are married. They pack up their pick up and their cars. They join families who leave San Felipe as well. All these Chevies and Fords head out in a long caravan. Then in September or October they come back.

Johnny had always been known as "Juan". But the older boys would taunt him with a nasty rhyme they repeated every chance they got—"Juan barragan, come piedras y hace pan." ("Juan barragan, eats stones and bakes bread"). When Johnny returned last Summer, he told all the boys that he never wanted to be called Juan again. Henceforth, he would be "Johnny". And so after that, "Johnny" it was. But Joaquin found it very difficult to call Juan "Johnny". "Johnny" was like a movie star name or a country singer's name.

"HEY GUYS, BOBBY'S NICKNAME IS 'FROGGIE.'" Joaquin couldn't help himself. There were about seven boys around the ebano tree.

Bobby gritted his teeth and clenched his fist playfully at Joaquin. Everyone giggled and chuckled.

Johnny Castellano urged, "Hey, Froggie, take off your shirt, let's see your masos (transliteration, "muscles")."

Bobby had picked up on the boys' pecking order. "I'm not supposed to take off my shirt," he cried out and looked over to Joaquin. Joaquin interceded, assuring Bobby, "That way we all look alike." Bobby reluctantly took off his shirt. It was an obligatory ritual, but harmless. Bobby's skin was pale and translucent, revealing a network of blackish-blue veins.

"See, now you're one of us," Johnny poked playfully at Bobby and got in a sympathetic wrestler's neck hold.

Joaquin's mom had found some cut-offs which Joaquin had grown out of. These were reserved for Bobby McDonald. Every afternoon, when Joaquin got home from school, they both jump into their shorts and headed for the ebano tree, to be joined later by the rest of the neighborhood boys. There they played

with their pieces of wood and made all sorts of mechanical sounds. Before returning to the tent as the day darkened, Bobby McDonald would be properly fed, dusted and transformed back to his soiled white shirt and dusty slacks.

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Joaquin had carte blanc to the circus. He was allowed to harass the stinky spider monkey at the entry booth. After angering the monkey Joaquin would soften him up with a carrot. The monkey would slump into Joaquin's arms and feed on the carrot. A photo, a black and white Kodak glossy Joaquin's mom has tucked away somewhere, records how he often rode on the parade's lead elephant, along with Bobby. In the photo, they're both beaming from ear to ear, shirtless and barefooted, el guero y el prieto. Bobby McDonald is hanging onto Joaquin's neck feeling the warmth of Joaquin's back on his cheek.

Joe McDonald had kept his circus caravan in San Felipe longer than he had anticipated. And the neighborhood eventually lost its tolerance. For the first couple of days, the elephants had been exercised around the dusty neighborhood streets as children stood in awe along the parade route. Children could gain entry to the shows by bartering food for the animals. Chickens were the male lion's specialty. Many years later Joaquin would admit that his mom's own chicken coop had mysteriously lost two hens. But thankfully, his brother had blamed it on possums. It seemed also that the older boys had been taking to the surrounding vegetable fields to harvest their entry fees to the circus. The farmers who grew vegetables across the irrigation canal had complained to the city council.

The men of the circus were fond of alcohol. They would sit around in small groups, late into the night, drinking their alcohol. This often made them act in stupid ways. Often they would shout or fight each other and the police would be called. The men of the circus were also fond of the young ladies of the neighborhood. This did not set well with the dons of the Sociedad Mutualista. Their wives were complaining to them that great concern had grown in the neighborhood that some of the girls might get pregnant. Rumors abounded that in some of the surrounding communities where the circus had visited girls had given birth to children with blonde hair or colored eyes. This had apparently shamed those girls' families forever.

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Stench from the elephant dung now permeated the entire neighborhood. And the night-time, low bass mutterings among the elephants radiated sound waves which seemed to travel through the ground

and up through the walls of the neighborhood homes. You swore it shook the house. It kept Joaquin's mom up all night. The final straw came when Joe McDonald Jr. reported to the Sociedad Mutualista that there was going to be no profit-sharing. The president of the Sociedad Mutualista had finally been dispatched, hat in hand, to advise Joe McDonald Jr. that his time in San Felipe was up.

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As usual, Joaquin was distracted during Mrs. Greenwood's last period of his second grade class. But on this day, his distraction was even more pronounced. There were only three days left until school would be out for the Summer. But also, Bobby McDonald had promised him that this very day, he was bringing all of his toy soldiers to the Ebano tree. Joaquin was beside himself all day. He even skipped the bean taco he typically had for lunch, contributing it to his lunch pals who divided it as equally as they could. He neatly folded the Reynolds Wrap foil and filed it away in his handkerchief pocket. His mom had complained, "I pay a penny for each paper sack and the portion of tin foil. If you get a new sack and tin foil every day of the week, that totals 10 cents per week— a ridiculous waste of money."

"This is going to be the best day of my life," Joaquin relished, "We're all going to play toy soldiers beneath the ebano tree."

After school, Joaquin cut across the recently planted cotton field, heedless that his "tennie" shoes were filling with the sandy dust. It would take him about ten minutes at full speed to make the run home. Joaquin was two blocks away when he could finally get a partial view of el Salon. He stopped, and bent at the waist to catch his breath. From where he stood, he figured it odd that the semi-trailer which served as the east wall of the carnival encampment was not there. After a few additional steps, more of the sand lot became visible to him. The circus trucks were gone; so were the tents. Joaquin now became acutely aware of the hot sun on his back and the salty sweat sliding into his eyes. His deep breathing was gone.

He had forgotten how empty the sandlot could appear unless it was full of the neighborhood kids playing flag football or baseball.

They probably went to the next town, Joaquin hoped, as he kicked at a stack of bottle caps someone has neatly placed where Bobby McDonald's tent had stood. Besides, all that means is that someone will probably have to drive Bobby McDonald to come to see us every afternoon and play with us beneath the ebano tree.

Joaquin stood in the middle of the sand lot. It is such a small place—this, El Salon, Joaquin thought. He amazed at how this small tract of land in San Felipe had been transformed for a couple of weeks into a

fascinating world of lions, monkeys and elephants, a raggedy band of strange men, and a best friend named Bobby McDonald.

As he opened the sagging, screen door to the kitchen, Joaquin was startled. He quickly wiped the tears from his eyes. His mother was never home this early. She worked for Mrs. Jackson, about half a mile away, at the Valley Vista Courts. The place was just down Iowa Street, across the Missouri Pacific railroad tracks, where the smelly produce sheds were, and across Highway 44. Mrs. Jackson Courts were small, white-stuccoed with flat roofs. These, she let out to the mostly elderly couples who spent their Winters in San Felipe, seeking refuge from the cold up in Ottawa and Illinois and Wisconsin.

Joaquin's mom was at the stove, a natural gas, two-burner, mashing and refrying beans in a pan. She steadied the pan with her left hand and mashed with the right, with a large slotted spoon. Occasionally she eyed the tortilla on the griddle. Joaquin was already as tall as her. He acknowledged her by touching her arm. His mother turned and pecked him on the forehead. Taking in her comforting scent, Joaquin slouched into his father's chair.

"La Senora (the lady) has closed the rooms for the Summer. I will have to find a job," she explained to Joaquin. Joaquin was not paying attention, already distracted by the smell of the warm tortillas stacked up on the table.

"Am I glad that mendigo (terrible) circus finally left. The elephants have kept me up nights," she complained.

Joaquin's thoughts razed back to Bobby McDonald. Where had the circus gone to? It occurred to him that he knew none of the others from the circus encampment; not their names, not even their faces, which he now desperately tried to focus on and recall. But their features were blurred. It was as if it had all occurred in a dream a long time ago. If he were to see one of these people in the future, how would he recognize them? Whom would he ask about Bobby McDonald?

"M' ijo, no me oyiste?" ("My son, did not you hear what I said?")

Joaquin finally realized his mother was talking to him, "What, Mama?"

"I said, 'by the way, Bobby left his toy soldiers.'"

"What," a surprised Joaquin asked. "Where?"

"Beneath the ebano tree, she told him. 'Poor boy. he forgot his toy soldiers.'"

Joaquin ran toward the ebano tree. Underneath the cool shade, he found Bobby McDonald's entire toy soldier collection—both Union and Dixie infantrymen, the ever popular super GI, even Indians, cowboys, the Davie Crockett, the gray cavalry, the green infantry and some soldiers with black

headaddresses and bright red coats. These had been placed all around the ebano tree, poised for battle. The Union and Dixie infantrymen were facing each other – they were colored blue and gray. The rest had been placed alongside and on the “two-by-fours” in caravan style, forming a circle around the thick ebano tree, along with the tanks, the amphibious landing force and the mortar guns, all except Bobby’s “two-by-four”, which was gone.

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