

Tio's Work

Ramon was perplexed. Absentmindedly he picked up his Dos Equis as he placed the telephone back on the kitchen counter, took a swig, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "*Mierda*," he said aloud. How could Antonio ask this of me? He began to pace up and down the kitchen, frowning, mumbling to himself. Martín was like his own son. It was just plain wrong. He asks too much.

He looked out the back window seeing his reflection. Thirty-four this next week, not too bad looking for an old man he thought.

Out in the back yard he took another pull at the bottle, tried to kick the old chicken through the goal he had made for his son to practice. They had named the rooster "Jefe" after Ramon's uncle who had a limp and insisted he was the boss of everyone. He smiled as Jefe hopped away from the heavy boot aimed at his behind. Ramon often said that this venerable rooster was so mean you would see teeth if you pulled back his beak.

His wife called through the window. "Martín is here, Ramon." He took another shot at the hobbling old rooster and turned around. *Dio*, he thought. Big kid. Already a man's body. The boy stood, hat in hand, small smile. "*Tio....Buenos dias.*"

"Can you help me, Tio?" the boy asked. For God's sake, Ramon thought, when he calls me uncle, how can I not help? He stood up, frowned, spat at the old rooster now looking dolefully at a hen in the corner of the yard.

"*Que cosa, chico?*" he asked. "What's up?"

"Can I work for you?" The boy wouldn't look him in the eye,

"Doing what, Chico? You're a baby. Go to school, finish, then come to me."

"I'm not a baby. I'm old enough to be a man. I hate school, Tio. It's so boring. Who cares who Julio Caesar is? He lived a long time ago. I want to make some money. I want to be like you, Tio."

"Look, Martín. Go to school. Time enough to be a man. Be a child as long as you can. If you start to work now you will never be anything but a laborer like

me. You're a smart kid. You can be a doctor or a business man. Go back to school."

The boy stood shifting back and forth.

"Do you know how hard it is to work with me, Martin? You will be so tired at the end of the day you won't be able to eat. You will breath *polvo*...dust...and cough all the time. You will learn to smoke ugly cigarettes. You will get married, have babies with your baby wife and never have anything. You will get drunk with your friends all the time. Look at me, for God's sake. I can read, I can write, I can work and I can never be more than I am." And, he thinks, he prays, please Virgin de Guadalupe, please. Save this baby.

They sat down in the back yard, chickens waltzing to the noises in the street. Jefe strutting as usual, supervising.

"Martin, please listen to me. You are smart. You can be a doctor. Or a boss. But you need school to do those kind of things. I left school the same age as you are now. Learn computers, Martin. Learn math, pay attention to Julius Caesar too even if he has nothing to say to you."

"No, Tio. I want to work. Nobody cares about school. Even if I finish secondary what kind of job is here anyway?"

He looked at his nephew, stared him down. "Ok, Martin. I'll pick you up at 6:00 tomorrow morning."

Martin got up, hugged his uncle. "*Gratias*, Tio," he said, and disappeared into the house. Ramon sat for a long time, said a short prayer to the Virgin. The rooster got too close. Ramon watched, immobile....then sprang, kicked the damned rooster half way across the yard, squawking and clucking in surprise. "*Mierda*," Ramon said again as he walked into the house, a rude gesture to the Jefe as he left.

"Today we need to tear down this pantry wall, Martín. Here's your tools. Be careful. We don't know what's inside, maybe rebar, maybe bricks, maybe nothing to hold up the rest of the house. Call me if you need anything." He handed the boy a small hand sledge and a chisel. The boy looked at him uncomprehendingly.

“What do I do, Tio?”

“Start at the top, keep pounding into the wall. Don’t go all the way through until we find out what’s inside.”

The boy looked at the receding figure of his uncle, picked up the chisel and began hammering. Little pieces of cement came down on the tarp below him. He hit the chisel as hard as he could, more cement. After a half hour, he hit something with a clang. Rebar, small cylindrical strips of metal. Wire wrapped around the four strands. Brick surrounding the metal in the column. He looked at his watch. It was 12:00 and his fingers were bleeding, muscles in his shoulders beginning to cramp. He swore under his breath and began pounding the chisel again. At 2:00, lunchtime, he was too tired to eat. He slept the whole hour on his back, dreams of pretty girls floating until he felt the rough hand on his shoulder. “Back to work, Chico,” his uncle said.

The day dragged on relentlessly, the wall barely relinquishing its materials, strands of rebar and wire in and out of the bricks and cement. He fell asleep on the bus home. The bus driver laughed and pushed him out the door. “Stupid kid,” he muttered under his breath as Martin staggered down the street to his house.

The days passed. The first wall took two weeks to dismantle, careful scrutiny by Ramon, hydraulic posts in place from floor to ceiling to make sure the column wouldn’t cause structural damage when they finally removed it. Ramon himself kicked the last brick out, the workers observing the event. The old rooster, Jefe, came to mind. Martin stood by himself, watching. None of the other workers talked to him. Why, he thought? I work as hard as they do.

“Ok, Martin. Here’s the second wall. We need to get it down in one week. Plumbers and electricians are coming.” His uncle turned his back, went up to the second floor to supervise something. Music came out of the borrowed radio. Martin listened to his uncle sing at the top of his lungs, some song involving “corison.” All songs have corison, all songs sing of heart and love he mused. He looked at his uncle, arm around another worker, joking, the two of them singing the next song together. Martin picked up the chisel and slammed it into the new wall. The wall was stronger than his arm as he cursed again. Damn wall.

“*Amigo*,” his friend said. “You know I love you as if you were my brother. How is Martin doing? He never talks to me.” Antonio looked at his friend. There were minutes of silence.

“I’m working his ass off, Antonio. More than that I cannot do. He works hard. He likes working, but he is beginning to see what that means. I, too, have three kids...none of them talk to me either. That is the way of living, don’t you think? Martin will make up his own mind. We are doing what we can to help.”

The afternoon passed, little children running around, a cat slinking, two lazy dogs moving ever so often. The friends parted as the sun set. “Ramon, many thanks. I will do the same for you. I have noticed Andreas...he envies Martin. He, too, hates school. How would he like to shuffle papers for me for a couple of days?”

The two friends hugged, laughed loudly.
“Kids,” Ramon said. “Kids,” Antonio echoed.

As the third wall came down, Martin sighed. He talked to his uncle going home on the bus at the end of the day.

“Tio....I’m going back to school.”

“No! Absolutely not! You can’t do that to me, Martin. I have jobs lined up for the next two months. I have not hired anyone to replace you. You are a fine worker. Why not make this your profession. I’ll teach you everything I know how to do, plumbing, building, electrical, design...it is a wonderful life. You said you were through school.”

“No, Tio. I don’t know what I want to do, and I love you for helping me, but...well, you told me to go back to school. So I’m going.”

“You must finish the week, Martin. That will give me time to replace you.”

They finished the bus ride in silence.

The final wall came down. Martin put his hammer and chisel on the rubble. He heard his uncle singing at the top of his lungs, completely out of tune. The other workers yelled in disharmony, each going to their homes at the end of the day. On the bus together, they talked of school, of work, of their families, at ease again, hugged as they parted, Ramon skipping on down the street, waving his arms as he sang something with *corison* in the lyrics.

That night, watching his father try to kick Jefe, the two of them circling, skirmishing in their nightly dance, the rooster's wary eye nimbly avoiding the inevitable, perhaps a game they both enjoyed, who knew?

Martin watched them with affection. Then in a flash of insight, "My God....Tio loves his job."