



Artwork by Jin Han

Pretty Boy

The Story of Bonzo Madrid

by Orson Scott Card

How do you systematically destroy a child with love? It's not something that any parent aspires to do, yet a surprising number come perilously close to achieving it. Many a child escapes destruction only through his own disbelief in his parents' worship. If I am a god, these children say, then there are no gods, or such gods as there be are weak and feeble things.

In short, it is their own depressive personalities that save them. They are self-atheists.

You know you have begun badly when you parents name you Bonito -- "Pretty Boy."

Well, perhaps they named you after a species of tuna. But when you are pampered and coddled and adored, you soon become quite sure that the tuna was named after you, and not the other way around.

In the cathedral in Toledo, he was baptized with the name Tomas Benedito Bonito de Madrid y Valencia.

"An alliance between two cities!" his father proclaimed, though everyone knew that to have two cities in your name was a sign of low, not high, pedigree. Only if his ancestors had been lords of those cities would the names have meant anything except that somebody's ancestors were a butcher from Madrid and an orange picker from Valencia who moved somewhere else and came to be known by their city of origin.

But in truth Bonito's father, Amaro, did not care for his ancestry, or at least not his specific ancestry. It was enough for him to claim Spain as his family.

"We are a people who were once conquered by Islam, and yet we would not stay conquered,"

he would say -- often. "Look at other lands that were once more civilized than we. Egypt! Asia Minor! Syria! Phoenicia! The Arabs came with their big black rock god that they pretended was not idolatry, and what happened? The Egyptians became so Muslim that they

called themselves Arab and forgot their own language. So did the Syrians! So did the Lebanese! So did ancient Carthage and Lydia and Phrygia, Pontus and Macedonia! They gave up. They converted." He always said that word as if it were a mouthful of mud.

"But Spain -- we retreated up into the Pyrenees. Navarre, Aragon, Leon, Galicia. They could not get us out of the hills. And slowly, year by year, city by city, village by village, orchard by orchard, we won it back. 1492. We drove the last of the Moors out of Spain, we purified the Spanish civilization, and then we went out and conquered a world!"

To goad him, friends would remind him that Columbus was Italian. "Yes, but he had to come to Spain before he accomplished a damn thing! It was Spanish money and Spanish bottoms that floated him west, and we all know it was really Spanish sailors who did the navigation and discovered the new world. It was Spaniards who in their dozens conquered armies that numbered in the millions!"

"So," the daring ones would say, "so what happened? Why did Spain topple from its place?"

"Spain never toppled. Spain had the tragic misfortune to get captured by foreign kings. A pawn of the miserable Hapsburgs. Austrians! Germans. They spent the blood and treasure of Spain on what? Dynastic wars! Squabbles in the Netherlands. What a waste! We should have been conquering China. China would have been better off speaking Spanish like Peru and Mexico. They'd have an alphabet! They'd eat with forks! They'd pray to the god on the cross!"

"But you don't pray to the god on the cross."

"Si, pero yo lo respeto! Yo lo adoro! Es muerto, pero es verdaderamente mi redentor ainda lo mismo!" I respect him, I worship him. He's dead, but he's truly my redeemer all the same.

Don't ever get Amaro de Madrid started on religion. "The people must have their god, or they'll make gods of whatever you give them. Look at the environmentalists, serving the god Gaia, sacrificing the prosperity of the world

on her altar of compost! Cristo is a good god, he makes people peaceful with each other but fierce with their enemies."

No point in arguing when Amaro had a case to make. For he was a lawyer. No, he was a poet who was licensed and paid as a lawyer. His perorations in court were legendary. People would come to boring court actions, just to hear him -- not a lot of people, but most of them other lawyers or idealistic citizens or women held spellbound by his fire and the flood of words that sounded like wisdom and sometimes were. Enough that he was something of a celebrity in Toledo. Enough that his house was always full of people wanting to engage him in conversation.

This was the father at whose knee the pampered Bonito would sit, listening wide-eyed as pilgrims came to this living shrine to the lost religion of Spanish patriotism. Only gradually did Bonito come to realize that his father was not just its prophet, but its sole communicant as well.

Except, of course, Bonito. He was a remarkably bright child, verbal before he was a year old, and Amaro swore that his son understood every word he said before he was eighteen months old.

Not every word, but close enough. Word spread, as it always did, about this infant who listened to his brilliant father and was not merely dazzled, but seemed to understand.

So before Bonito was two years old, they came from the International Fleet to begin their tests. "You would steal my son from me? More importantly, you would steal him from Spain?"

The young officer patiently explained to him that Spain was, in fact, part of the human race, and the whole human race was searching among its children to find the most brilliant military minds to lead the struggle for survival against the formics, that hideous race that had come two generations before and scoured humans out of the way like mildew until great heroes destroyed them. "It was a near thing," said the officer. "What if your son is the next Mazer Rackham, only you withhold him. Do you think the formics will stop at the border of Spain?"

"We will do as we did before," said Amaro. "We will hide in our mountain fortresses and then come back to reclaim Earth, city by city, village by village, until --"

But this young officer had studied history and only smiled. "The Moors captured the villages of Spain and ruled over them. The formics would obliterate them; what then will you recapture? Christians remained in Spain for your

ancestors to liberate. Will you convert formics to rebel against their hive queen and join your struggle? You might as well try to persuade a man's hands to rebel against his brain."

To which Amaro only laughed and said, "I know many a man whose hands rebelled against him -- and other parts as well!"

Amaro was a lawyer. More to the point, he was not stupid. So he knew the futility of trying to resist the I.F. Nor was he insensitive to the great honor of having a son that the I.F. wanted to take away from him. In fact, when he railed to everyone about the tyranny of these "child-stealing internationalists," it was really his way of boasting that he had spawned a possible savior of the world. The tiny blinking monitor implanted in his son's spine just below the skull was a badge for his father.

Then Amaro set about destroying his son with love.

Nothing was to be denied this boy that the world wanted to take away from Amaro. He went with his father everywhere -- as soon as he could walk and use a toilet, so there was no burden or mess to deal with. And when Amaro was at home, young Bonito was indulged in all his whims. "The boy wants to play in the trees, so let him."

"But he's so little, and he climbs so high, the fall would be so far."

"Boys climb, they fall. Do you think my Bonito is not tough enough to deal with it? How else will he learn?"

When Bonito refused to go to bed, or to turn his light out when he finally did, because he wanted to read, then Amaro said, "Will you stifle genius? If nighttime is when his mind is active, then you no more curtail him than you would demand that an owl can only hunt in the day!"

And when Bonito demanded sweets, well, Amaro made sure that there was an endless supply of them in the house. "He'll get tired of them," said Amaro.

But these things did not always lead where one might have thought, for Bonito, without knowing it, was determined to rescue himself from his father's love. Listening to his father and understanding more than even Amaro guessed, Bonito realized that getting tired of sweets was what his father expected -- so he no longer asked for them. The boxes of candy languished and were finally contributed to a local orphanage.

Likewise, Bonito deliberately fell from trees -- low branches at first, then higher and higher

ones, learning to overcome his fear of falling and to avoid injury. And he began to understand that he was not nocturnal afterward, that what he read in the daze of sleepiness was ill-remembered by morning, but what he read by daylight after a good night of sleep stayed with him.

For Bonito was, in fact, born to be a disciple, and if his mentor imposed no discipline on him, Bonito would find it in his teachings all the same. Bonito heard everything, even that which was not actually said.

When Bonito was five, he finally became aware of his mother.

Oh, he had known her all along. He had run to her with his scrapes and his hungers. Her hands had been on him, caressing him, her soft voice also a caress, all the days of his life. She was like the air he breathed. Father was the dazzling sun in the bright blue sky; Mother was the earth beneath his feet. Everything came from her, but he did not see her, he was so dazzled.

Until one day, Bonito's attention wandered from one of his father's familiar sermons to one of the visitors who had come to hear him. Mother had brought in a tray of simple food -- cut-up fruits and raw vegetables. But she had included a plate of the sweet orange flatbread she sometimes made, and it happened that Bonito noticed the moment when the visitor picked up one of the crackers and broke off a piece and put it in his mouth.

The visitor had been nodding at the things that Father was saying. But he stopped. Stopped chewing, as well. For a moment, Bonito thought the man intended to take the bite of flatbread out of his mouth. But no, he was savoring it. His eyebrows rose. He looked at the flatbread that remained in his hand, and there was reverence in his attitude when he put another piece in his mouth.

Bonito watched the man's face. Ecstasy? No, perhaps mere delight.

And when the man left, he stepped apart from the circle of admirers around his father and went to the kitchen.

Bonito followed him, leaving his father's conversation behind in order to hear this one:

"Señora, may I take more of this flatbread with me?"

Mother blushed and smiled shyly. "Did you like it?"

"I will not insult you by asking for the recipe," the man said. "I know that no description can capture what you put into this bread. But I beg you to let me carry some away so I can eat it in

my own garden and share it with my wife."

With a sweet eagerness, Mother wrapped up most of what remained and gave it to the man, who bowed over the paper bag as she handed it to him. "You," the man said, "are the secret treasure of this house."

At those words, Mother's shyness became cold. Bonito realized at once that the man had crossed some invisible line; the man realized it as well. "Señora, I am not flirting with you. I spoke from the heart. What your husband says, I could read, or hear from others. What you have made here, I can have only from your hand." Then he bowed again, and left

Bonito knew the orange flatbread was delicious. What he had not realized till now was that it was unusually so. That strangers would value it.

Mother began to sing a little song in the kitchen after the man left the room.

Bonito went back out into the salon to see how the man merely waved a brief good-bye to Father, and then rushed away clutching his prize, the bag of flatbread.

A tiny part of Bonito was jealous. That flatbread would have been his to eat all through the next day.

But another part of Bonito was proud. Proud of his mother. It had never happened before. It was Father one was supposed to be proud of. He understood that instinctively, and it had been reinforced by so many visitors who had turned to him while waiting for their chance to say good-bye to Father, and said something like this: "You're so lucky to live in the house of this great man." Or, more obliquely, "You live here in the heartbeat of Spain." But always, it was about Father.

Not this time.

From that moment, Bonito began to be aware of his mother. He actually noticed the work she did to make Father's life happen. The way she dealt with all the tradesmen, the gardener and the maid who also helped her in the kitchen. How she shopped in the market, how she talked with the neighbors, graciously making their house a part of the neighborhood. The world came to their house to see Father; Mother went out and blessed the neighborhood with kindness and concern. Father talked. Mother listened. Father was admired. Mother was loved and trusted and needed.

It took a while for Father to notice that Bonito was not always with him anymore, that he sometimes did not want to go. "Of course," he said, laughing. "Court must be boring for you!" But he was a little disappointed; Bonito saw it;

he was sorry for it. But he got as much pleasure from going about with his mother, for now he saw what an artist she was in her own right.

Father spoke to rooms of people -- let them take him how they would, he amused, delighted, roused, even enraged them. Mother spoke with one person at a time, and when she left, they were, however temporarily, content.

"What did you do today?" Father asked him.

Bonito made the mistake of answering candidly. "I went to market with Mama," he said. "We visited with Mrs. Ferreira, the Portuguese lady? Her daughter has been making her very unhappy but Mother told her all the ways that the girl was showing good sense after all. Then we came home and Mother and Nita made the noodles for our soup, and I helped with the dusting of flour because I'm very good and I don't get tired of sifting it. Then I sang songs to her while she did the bills. I have a very sweet voice, Papa."

"I know you do," he said. But he looked puzzled. "Today I argued a very important case. I won a poor family back the land that had been unjustly taken by a bank because they would not have the patience with the poor that they showed to the wealthy. I made six rich men testify about the favors they had received from the bank, the overdrafts, the late payments that had been tolerated, and it did not even go to judgment, the bankers backed down and restored the land and forgave the back interest."

"Congratulations, Papa."

"But Bonito, you did not go to see this. You stayed home and went shopping and gossiping and sifting flour and singing songs with your mother."

Bonito did not grasp his point. Until he realized that Father did not grasp his own point, either. He was envious. It was that simple. Father was jealous that Bonito had chosen to spend his day with his mother.

"I'll go with you tomorrow, Father."

"Tomorrow is Saturday, and the great case was today. It was today, and you missed it."

Bonito felt that he had let his father down. It devastated him. Yet he had been so happy all day with Mama. He cried. "I'm sorry, Papa. I'll never do it again."

"No, no, you spend your days as you want." Father picked him up and held him. "I never meant to make you cry, my Bonito, my pretty boy. Will you forgive your papa?"

Of course he did. But Bonito did not stay home

with Mother after that, not for a long while. He was devotedly with his father, and Amaro seemed happier and prouder than ever before. Mother never said anything about it, not directly. Only one day did she say, "I paid bills today, and I thought I heard you singing to me, and it made me so happy, my pretty boy." She smiled and caressed him, but she was not hurt, only wistful and loving, and Bonito knew that Father needed to have him close at hand more than Mother did.

Now Bonito understood his own power in the house. His attention was the prize. Where he bestowed it mattered far too much to Father, and only a little less to Mother.

But it worked the other way as well; it hurt Bonito's feelings a little that Mother could do without him better than Father could.

A family filled with love, Bonito knew, and yet they still managed to hurt each other in little ways, unthinking ways.

Only I do think about it, Bonito realized. I see what neither of my parents sees.

It frightened him. It exhilarated him. I am the true ruler of this house. I am the only one who understands it.

He could not say this to anyone else. But he wrote it down. Then he tore up the paper and hid it at the bottom of the kitchen garbage, under the orange rinds and meat scraps that would go out into the compost pile.

He forgot, for that moment, that he was not actually alone. For he wore on the back of his neck the monitor of the International Fleet. A tiny transmitter that marked a child as one of the chosen ones, being observed and evaluated. The monitor connected to his neural centers. The people from Battle School saw through his eyes, heard through his ears. They read what he wrote.

Soon after Bonito wrote his observation and tore it up, the young officer returned. "I need to speak to young Bonito. Alone."

Father made a bit of a fuss but then went off to work without his son. Mother busied herself in the kitchen; she was perhaps a bit noisier than usual with the pots and pans and knives and other implements, but the sound was a comfort to Bonito as he faced this man that he did not well remember having seen before.

"Bonito," said the officer softly. "You wrote something down yesterday."

Bonito was at once ashamed. "I forgot that you could see."

"We thought it was important that you know two things. First, you're right. You are the true ruler of the house. But second, you are an only child, so you had no way of knowing that in any healthy family, the children are the true rulers."

"Fathers rule," said Bonito, "and mothers are in charge when they're not home."

"That describes the outward functioning of your home," said the young officer. "But you understand that all they do is meant for you -- even your father's vast ambition is about achieving greatness in his son's eyes. He doesn't know this about himself. But you know it about him."

Bonito nodded.

"Children rule in every home, but not in the ways they might wish. Good parents try to help their children, but not always to please them, because sometimes what a child needs is not what gives him pleasure. Cruel parents are jealous of their children's power and rebel against it, using them selfishly, hurting them. Your parents are not cruel."

"I know that." Was the man stupid?

"Then I've told you everything I came to say."

"Not yet," said Bonito.

"Oh?"

"Why is it that way?"

The young officer looked pleased. Bonito thought: Do I also rule him?

"The human race preserved itself," said the young officer, "by evolving this hunger in parents for the devotion of their children. Without it, they starve. Nothing pleases them more than their child's smile or laughter. Nothing makes them more anxious than a child's frantic cry. Childless people often do not know what they're starving for. Parents whose children have grown, though, they know what they're missing."

Bonito nodded. "When you take me away to Battle School, my parents will be very hungry."

"If we take you," the young officer said gently.

Bonito smiled. "You must leave me here," he said. "My family needs me."

"You may rule in this house, Bonito, but you do not rule the International Fleet. Your smile won't tell me what to do. But when the time comes, the choice will be yours."

"Then I choose not to go."

"When the time comes," the officer repeated. Then he left.

Bonito understood that they would be judging him, and what he did with the information the young officer had told him would be an important part of that judgment. In Battle School, they trained children to become military leaders. That meant that it would be important to see what Bonito did with the influence he had discovered that he had with his parents.

Can I help them both to be happy?

What does it mean to be happy?

Mother helps both me and Father, doing things for us all the time. Is that what makes her happy? Or does she do it in hopes of our doing things in return that would make her happy? Father loves to talk about his dreams for Spain. Does that mean he needs to actually achieve them in order to be happy? Or does his happiness come from having a cause to argue for? Does it matter that it's a lost cause, or does that make Father even happier as its advocate? Would I please him most by adopting that cause as my own, or would he feel like I was competing with him?

It was so confusing, to have responsibility for other people's happiness.

So now Bonito embarked on his first serious course of study: His parents, and what they wanted and needed in order to be happy.

Study meant research. He couldn't figure things out without learning more about them. He began interviewing them, informally. He'd ask them questions about their growing up, about how they met, whatever came into his mind. They both enjoyed answering his questions, though they often dodged and didn't give him full explanations or stories. Still, the very fact that on certain subjects they became evasive was still data, it was still part of understanding them.

But the more he learned, the less clearly he understood anything. People were too complicated. Adults did too many things that made no sense, and remembered too many stories in ways that did make sense but weren't believable, and Bonito couldn't figure out whether they were lying or had merely remembered them wrong. Certainly Mother and Father never told the same story in the same way -- Father's version always made him the hero, and Mother's version always made her the suffering victim. Which should have made the stories identical, except that Mother never saw Father as her savior, and Father never made Mother all that important in the stories.

It made Bonito wonder if they really loved each other and if not, why they ever got married.

It was disturbing and it made him upset a lot of the time. Mother noticed that he was worried about something and tried to get him to tell it, but he knew better than to explain what he was working on. He didn't really have the words to explain it, anyway.

It was too much responsibility for a child, he knew that. How could he possibly make his parents happy? He couldn't do anything about what they needed. The only thing he controlled was how he treated them. So gradually, not in despair but in resignation, he stopped trying to make their behavior and their relationship make sense, and he stopped expecting himself to be able to change anything. If his failure to help them meant the I.F. didn't take him into space, well, that was fine with him, he didn't want to go.

But he still kept noticing things. He still kept asking questions and trying to find things out about them.

Which is why he noticed a certain pattern in his father's life. On various days of the week, but usually at least once a week, Father would go on errands or have meetings where he didn't try to bring Bonito -- where, indeed, he refused to take him. Until this research project began, Bonito had never thought anything of it -- he didn't even want to be in on everything his father did, mostly because some of his meetings could be really boring.

But now he understood enough of his father's business to know that Father never hid his regular work from Bonito. Oh, of course he met with clients alone -- it would disturb them to have a child listening to everything -- but those meetings weren't hidden. There were appointments that the secretary wrote down, and Bonito sat out in the secretary's office and wrote or drew or read until Father was done.

These secret meetings always took place outside the office, and outside of office hours. Sometimes they consisted of a long lunch, and the secretary took Bonito home so Mother could feed him. Sometimes Father would have an evening meeting after he brought Bonito home.

Usually, Father loved to tell about whatever he had done and especially what he had said that made someone else angry or put him in his place or made people laugh. But about these secret meetings, he was never talkative. He'd dismiss them as boring, pointless, tedious, he hated to go.

Yet Father never seemed as though he hated to go before the meeting. He was almost eager to go -- not in some obvious way, but in the way

he watched the clock surreptitiously and then made some excuse and left briskly.

For long months this was merely a nagging uncertainty in Bonito's mind. After all, he had given up on trying to take responsibility for his parents' happiness, so there was no urgency to figure it out. But the problem wouldn't leave him alone, and finally he realized why.

Father was in a conspiracy. He was meeting with people to do something dangerous or illegal. Was he planning to take over the Spanish government? Start a revolution? But whom could he meet with in Toledo that would make a difference in the world? Toledo was not a city where powerful people lived -- they were all in Madrid and Barcelona, the cities his parents were named for but rarely visited. These meetings rarely lasted more than an hour and a half and never more than three hours, so they had to take place fairly close by.

How could a six-year-old -- for Bonito was six now -- find out what his father was doing? Because now that he knew there was a mystery, he had to have the answer to it. Maybe Father was doing secret government work -- maybe even for the I.F. Or maybe he was working on a dangerous case that might get him killed if anyone knew about it, so he only had meetings about it in secret.

One day an opportunity came. Father checked the time of day several times in the same morning without saying anything about it, and then left for lunch a few minutes early, asking the secretary to walk Bonito home for lunch. The secretary agreed to and seemed cheerful enough about it; but she was also very busy and clearly did not want to leave the job unfinished.

"I can go home alone," said Bonito. "I'm six, you know."

"Of course you can find the way, you smart little boy," she answered. "But bad things sometimes happen to children who go off alone."

"Not to me," said Bonito.

"Are you sure of that?" she answered, amused.

Bonito turned around and pointed to the monitor on his neck. "They're watching."

"Oh," said the secretary, as if she had completely forgotten that Bonito was being observed all the time. "Well, then I guess you're quite safe. Still, I think it's better if you ..."

Before she could say "wait until I'm done here," which was the inevitable conclusion of her sentence, Bonito was out the door. "Don't worry I'll be fine!" he shouted as he went.

He could see Father walking along the street, briskly but not actually fast. It was good that he was walking instead of taking a cab or getting the car -- then Bonito could not have followed him. This way, Bonito could saunter along looking in store windows, like a kid, and still keep his father in view.

Father came to a door between shops, one of the sort that held stairs that led to walk-up shops and offices and apartments. Bonito got to the door and it was already closed; it was the kind that locked until somebody upstairs pushed a button to let it open. Father was not in sight.

The buttons on the wall had name tags, most of them, and a couple of them were offices rather than apartments. But Father would not be having a manicure and he would not be getting his future read by a psychic palm-reading astrologer.

And, come to think of it, Father had not even waited at the bottom long enough for somebody to ring him up. Instead he had taken a long time getting the door handle open ...

Father had keys. That's what happened at the door, he fumbled with keys and opened the door directly without ringing anybody.

Why would Father have a second office? Or a second apartment? It made no sense to Bonito.

So when he got home, he asked Mother about it.

She looked like he had stabbed her in the heart. And yet she refused to explain anything.

After lunch he became aware that she had gone to her room and was crying.

I've made her unhappy, he thought. I shouldn't have been following Father, he thought.

And then she came out of her room holding a note, her eyes red from crying. She put the note on the kitchen table, folded, with Father's name on it, and then took Bonito to the car, which she almost never drove, and drove to the railroad station, where she parked it and got on the train and they went to Grandma's house. Mother's mother, who lived two hours away in a small town in the middle of nowhere, but with orange groves -- not very productive ones, but as Grandma always said, her needs were few and her son-in-law was generous.

Mother sent Bonito into the back yard and then cried to her mother. Bonito tried to listen but when they saw him edging closer to the window they closed it and then got up and went to another room where he couldn't hear them without making it obvious he was trying to spy.

Yet he knew, bit by bit, what had happened, and what he had done. From the scraps of words and phrases he could overhear, he knew there was a "she" that Father was "keeping," that it was a terrible thing that Father had the key, and that Mother didn't know how she could bear it or whether she could stay. And Grandma kept saying, Hush, hush, it's the way of the world, women suffer while the men play, you have your son and you can't expect a strong man not to wander, one woman could not contain him ...

And then they saw him a second time, sitting directly under the window where Mother had walked to get some air. Mother was furious. "What did you hear?"

"Nothing," said Bonito.

"The day you don't hear words that are said right in front of you, I'll take you to a hearing doctor to stick needles in your ears. What did you hear?"

"I'm sorry I told you about Papa! I don't want to move here! Grandma's a bad cook!"

At which Mother laughed in the midst of tears, Grandma was genuinely offended, and then Mother promised him that they would not move to Grandma's, but they'd visit here for a few days. They hadn't packed anything, but there were clothes left there from previous visits -- too small for him now, but not so small he couldn't fit into them.

Father came that night and Grandma sent him away. He was furious at first but then she said something in a low voice and Father fell silent and drove away.

The next day he was back with flowers. Bonito watched Mother and Father talk in the doorway, and she refused to take his flowers., so he dropped them on the ground and left again. Mother crushed one of the flowers with her shoe, but then she picked up the others and cried over them for a long time while Grandmother said, over and over, "I told you it meant nothing. I told you he didn't want to lose you."

It took a week before they moved back home, and Father and Mother were not right with each other. They talked little, except about the business of the house. And Father stopped asking Bonito to come with him.

At first Bonito was angry at Mother, but when he confronted her, Mother denied that she had forbidden him to go. "He's ashamed in front of you," she said.

"For what?" asked Bonito.

"He still loves you as much as ever," said

Mother.

Which left his question unanswered. That meant the answer was very important. Father was ashamed of something, ashamed in front of Bonito. Or was that Mother's kindly-intended lie, and Father was actually very angry at Bonito for spying on him?

For days, for weeks Bonito didn't understand. And then one day he did. By then he was in school, and on the playground a boy was telling jokes, and it involved a man doing something bad with a woman that wasn't his wife, and in the middle of the joke it dawned on Bonito that this was what Father had been doing with some other woman that wasn't Mother. The reaction of the boys to the joke was obvious. Men were supposed to laugh at this. Men were supposed to think it was funny to find a clever way to lie to your wife and do strange things with strange women. By the end of the joke both women were deceived. The boys laughed as if it were a triumph. As if there were a war between men and women, both lying to each other.

That's not how Mother is, thought Bonito. She doesn't lie to Father. When a man comes to her and flirts with her, she sends him away. That's what happened with that man who liked her flatbread.

The final piece fell into place when they were visiting Grandma again -- briefly, this time -- and Grandma looked at him and sighed and said, "You'll just grow up to be another man." As if hombre were a dirty word. "There's no honor among men."

But I won't grow up like Father. I won't break Mother's heart.

But how could he know that? It wouldn't be Mother's heart, anyway, it would be the woman he eventually married; and how could he know that he wasn't just like his father?

Without honor.

It changed everything. It poisoned everything.

And when they came to him only a few days before his seventh birthday, and took out the monitor, and asked him if he'd like to go to Battle School, he said yes.

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