THE ACCIDENTAL

MERCENARY

By Tom Angotti

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Antonio sat on the hilltop overlooking Cajamarca. He often spent the whole day there, following the cars and trucks and people as they crept through the narrow streets, between the patchwork of tile and tin roofs. One of his friends pushed him and his wheelchair up the rough graveled road in the morning and another would come to wheel him down at night.

He looked out from Santa Apolonia Hill thinking about the pieces of his life, taking it apart and putting it together again in the hope that somehow, miraculously, it would turn out differently. Like the low winter clouds of Cajamarca, Antonio's thoughts slid over the hills and into the valley, where they met the murmuring cars and trucks, the fractured barking of dogs and the crowing of roosters.

Antonio searched the details of his life in San Juan, the little town outside Cajamarca where he was born and raised, Lima, the United States, and Central America. He always started at that happy moment when, full of hope, he stepped off the plane in Miami.

THE USA

He felt on top of the world, handsome in his new cotton suit. He knew he was a striking *Indio*, young and strong. Everything in the United States was so new and luxurious to him. He had made it.

Antonio was met at the airport by a Mr. Gómez (was that his real name?) who drove him to a small, musty motel in Little Havana, and the next day took him out to the countryside. He spent three months at the training camp.

At first he was excited by everything, loved to walk into town, stroll through the

streets and watch the North Americans. They were so different, so serious all the time. If you passed one walking along the road, they wouldn't say a word to you. It was like they didn't even notice you.

After a few months Antonio started to miss Peru. Most of the other recruits were from the Caribbean and Central America, and they had their own customs. There were also a lot of *gringos* with Latino names who spoke so fast and mixed up English and Spanish so you couldn't understand a word.

He stopped going into town after an incident that left him frightened of North Americans. One day Antonio went to his favorite coffee shop in town. In the next booth, a group of teenage boys were joking and laughing noisily. He didn't understand what they were saying, but he thought they were talking about him. One of them, with a big freckled face and fat neck, kept pointing to him. He thought it odd that they were so loud, because he thought all North Americans were serious.

A tall, skinny one with long blond hair down to his shoulders and a marked up face came over and started talking to him. He spoke with a high shrill voice, but was smiling -- although Antonio wasn't sure whether he was friendly or not. The boy asked him a question, but he didn't understand. The boy sat down in the seat across from him, leaned over and asked him again. Antonio shrugged his shoulders to show he didn't understand.

The tall, thin one turned around and said something to his companions and they all laughed. All right, Antonio said to himself, he could take a joke. But the joking went on for a half hour, maybe more, and the boys became more and more animated. At one point, the long-haired blonde yelled something in his face, which made him think he might be in trouble.

A Cuban waiter came over to Antonio and spoke to him in Spanish. "Listen, my friend," he said, "I think you better get out of here as fast as you can. These guys are getting mad at you because you're not answering their questions."

"But why do I have to answer their questions? I didn't do anything to them. I don't even know what they're saying."

"*Coño, hermano,* all they asked is if you're Black."

"And so what?"

"What *are* you? Where do you come from?"

"I'm Peruvian."

The Cuban turned to the white boys and said in English, "Listen, fellas, he's from Peru. All right? He's no nigger, you see? So why don't you guys leave him alone?"

This only touched off a bigger argument among the white boys, and they got louder and louder. They shouted something together at the Cuban waiter, who moved away from them saying "okay okay" and nothing more.

Antonio, more frightened than ever because he couldn't understand what they were angry about, went to the register and paid his bill. But the tall, thin blonde followed him, yelling at the top of his squeeky voice, flapping his fleshy red lips. Antonio was scared when the white boy got so close he could feel his body heat. No North American ever got that close to him. Staring into the *gringo's* eyes Antonio saw war.

After this incident, Antonio spent all his free time at the camp, laying down on his bunk. He thought about the times he went into Cajamarca with his father. He would spend the whole day sitting on Santa Apolonia Hill while his father went about his business. He always thought he was seeing the future in the muted bustle of the mountain city. Once he saw a plane quietly sneak over the far mountain and glide softly to earth. But after that he never saw another plane until he took off for Miami.

His thoughts shifted from Santa Apolonia to the hill overlooking his home town, San Juan. There you could hear every sound in the village -- the babies, the *burros* and the pots. If there was an argument it bounced off the hillside and fell in everyone's yard. At night the valley became a concert hall when a group gathered in someone's house to drink *aguardiente*, sing, dance and get drunk.

In the United States, thought Antonio, there are no mountains or hills. Just a lot of trees and swamps. There is no place to sit and watch and listen. There are no plazas, no mountaintops.

SAN JUAN

Antonio remembered his father's long lectures. They sat in their hut for hours listening to the heavy rain thrash the bare mud slopes around them. "Come here and listen carefully, Tonito," his father would always begin. "There is too much Evil in the world, and too many people who think only of themselves. You have to go out and do the Lord's work like me, but only better than me. You have to take the initiative in life or you'll just become another agent of the Devil. Antonio, God is punishing the poor peasants for not loving Him. They don't know the difference between Right and Wrong, and that's why they're poor. They can break their backs the rest of their lives but they'll never do anything else because they don't know God."

He always reminded Antonio that his own father had been only a *peón* without land, but when Don Vílchez sold his plantation Antonio's father was the only one in town to get a piece of it. He now owned five hectares, two of them in the valley.

When it rained his father would drink a lot and give sermons, slurring what seemed to be wise words, sometimes mumbling inaudibly. But he liked to listen quietly while his father's shiny and proud black eyes glowed with enthusiasm for God and enterprise. Carlos

Yupánqui León was the most respected peasant in San Juan. Peasants came to him to resolve fights over everything from water rights to accusations of adultery. He would squint his deep black eyes and pronounce his verdict. It was almost always final.

Whenever the authorities came to San Juan from Cajamarca, they went directly to Carlos Yupánqui. No one else enjoyed the trust of the entire community and at the same time was willing to recognize the government's supreme authority. When they came to dig the irrigation canal and needed volunteer labor, Carlos Yupánqui organized work parties. When the priest from Cajamarca came with the government extension agent to start a cooperative, Carlos Yupánqui brought all the peasants together and collected their money. Carlos Yupánqui León, trusted civil leader, was named the Lieutenent Governor of San Juan by every government, because he was loyal.

Antonio's father worked hard in the fields. The first time he went out with his father to harvest the barley, Antonio knew he never wanted to work as hard as his father. As he squatted along the field clumsily sweeping the scythe across the silvery weeds, Antonio's legs hurt so much he had to keep standing up every few minutes. His father would turn up the corner of his wide lips in a scolding smile. Then they piled the stalks and threshed the grain. They worked all day for three days until finally the small patch of grain was leveled. That was the last time he had worked so hard because the next three years most of the crops were destroyed by heavy rains -- the corn, lima beans, barley and coca. And then Antonio left for Lima.

Antonio missed his mother after he left San Juan. He always remembered her sitting on the dirt floor of their hut spinning wool from her staff onto a ball of thread. Magdalena Yupánqui de Ramírez weathered all of her husband's sermons, his meetings with the authorities, and his constant preoccupation with the farm. She had a stoic character, but when she did show affection, it was usually towards Antonio, the youngest of their four children. She had lost two before him, and when he survived past weaning she was elated. The other three surviving children, all older than Antonio, left San Juan when they finished primary school and settled with their families in the coastal city of Trujillo. They rarely visited San Juan.

Magdalena was a loving and efficient wife. She washed Carlos Yupánqui's legs when he came in from the swampy fields caked with mud. She prepared all the meals and they were always ready when Carlos Yupánqui finished his work. Magdalena's soft brown hair and intense blue eyes made his senses revive even after a long day's work, and when he called Magdalena into their bed in the corner, she always came. They undressed under the heavy wool blankets, quietly pressed their bodies together and made love. Her soft, freckled skin made him moan with satisfaction and she responded with sighs.

When Carlos Yupánqui became a Seventh Day Adventist Magdalena did too. The Adventist brothers seemed to make so much sense to Carlos Yupánqui. They were different from the Catholic priest who only came around once a week for Mass and disappeared. They were very proper with their white shirts, dark suits and ties, like *gringos*. They served Christ exclusively, while the Catholic priest, it was rumored, had secret love affairs with

several women in San Juan.

When the Adventists built their chapel in San Juan, Carlos Yupánqui organized the peasant men to work on it while Magdalena made and served them food. When the *gringo* brothers spent endless hours talking about the Scriptures with Carlos Yupánqui Magdalena nodded agreement and spun her wool into thread.

LIMA

As soon as he finished high school, Antonio took the twenty hour bus ride to Lima. To Antonio, Lima was all pitted streets, giant buildings and narrow alleys. The city, insulted by him, shouted his name. During the hot summer months, Lima shouted out loud, attacking the *Indios* who came from the mountains to live in its shanties.

Lima is, after all, the Imperial City. Antonio spent three years trying to shake off humility and learn the laws of the Imperial landscape. But no matter how immune he became to urban insults he was still marked by the modesty of the mountain people. To Lima he was still just an *Indio*.

He felt himself shrink as he walked down the monumental avenue that gracefully sliced through the wealthy Miraflores district. The bright, tall *gringo* apartments scolded him. From the portals of the walled mansions, an army of private security guards whispered in unison to Antonio the orders they were trained to repeat: "Keep walking, *Indio*."

He jumped on the bus to Callao, where his aunt lived. The bus was packed with the humble and Antonio hung himself halfway out the door. Looking back on the stinking heat inside he stretched his neck out to catch the breeze. But when the bus turned a corner his face was forced into the crowd and gassed by the exhaust blasting up through the soft floorboards. He felt sick.

Antonio lived in Callao with his aunt, uncle and eight cousins. The two room mud and stick hut was divided internally by curtains so the girls would have privacy. Antonio shared a corner with the six boys -- Roberto, Luís, Rosendo, Wilson, José and Henry. He slept on a thin mattress on the floor, but the other boys had beds which they shared, three on each.

Antonio was a tall *Indio*, taller than all his cousins. Despite his height, however, he still looked like a short and stocky peasant because of his low hips and wide chest. His broad nose and cheeks were unmistakably *Indio*.

His aunt was usually harsh with Antonio, when she was not indifferent. Having eight of her own, Aunt Alicia thought of Antonio as another problem in her life, one she had to bear because he was part of her family. When she started working for the *gringa* in Miraflores, cleaning the house every day for six hours, everything at home weighed her down even more.

As Antonio walked in the house she bluntly issued him orders. "Go to the corner and get me a package of soap."

"Okay."

"Hurry up. Get a small package. Your cousins will be home from school any minute."

Alicia wiped her face with an old rag. She was always pale, but the summers seemed to drain all the blood from her body and now her face was chalky white. In Cajamarca, her home town, her white complexion would always flush all over with red from the mountain sun and the heavy farm work. But in Lima the blood stagnated somewhere deep in her soul.

Antonio never realized that he was an extra burden on his aunt and uncle. He gave them 5,000 soles a week from the money earned selling tapes and radios on the street. He was trying to save enough money to go out on his own and only waiting for his savings to inch up to the price of a one-way ticket out of Peru. That's how he got out of Cajamarca and that's how he would get out of Peru.

That night Antonio took the bus back to Miraflores. He sat in the park, as he often did, along the beachfront. There, in Miraflores, he expected something extraordinary would wrench him from his dismal existence. With all the *gringos* around and the money on the street, something was bound to happen to him.

He made friends with some of the other teenagers hanging around the park -- reluctantly, because they were really just poor *Indios* or *Cholos* like himself. And how was he to tell who could be trusted? They often came around and threatened him or tried to get money from him.

Then there was Pato Loco, one of the few kids he could get along with. Pato Loco sometimes let Antonio help him wash cars and gave him 100 soles or more each time. Pato Loco washed cars all day and had been doing it since he was ten; to Antonio he seemed like an experienced, mature worker, loyal and resigned to honest labor for the rest of his life, like Carlos Yupánqui. This discipline was by now an enemy to Antonio's dreams.

"Antonio, listen, I know you're looking for something different to do. My brother just told me about this place, a school, where you go and study for six months and then they give you a job where you can make 500,000 a month. What do you think about that? All you got to do is pay for the classes, 100,000 soles spread out over the six months. You take a test and pass a physical and you're in. Sounds pretty good, huh?"

"What kind of work is it?"

"I don't know, something to do with the military. You know they pay good and you get all kinds of other privileges and you make as much as doctors and engineers."

"Well if it's so good are you applying?" asked Antonio.

"It's not for me. I've got my car washing. I'd never make it anyway because I'm too short and everything. But you're just right, just the kind they're looking for. Besides, me and my brother get 10% on everybody who signs up and if we get fifty people we're already making 500,000 a month. They want guys like you from the country, big and strong, know what I mean?"

The next day they both went to the school. They stood on line for two hours before they could talk with the secretary, who then gave them an application and a mimeographed booklet and told them to come back the next day with the 10,000 sol application fee.

The "Instituto Pre-Militar Almágro" was located in a section of an old colonial building that had been subdivided into at least five separate offices. The sparse furniture and unpainted walls in the reception room were not obvious only because the room was so packed with young men waiting for their Spartan opportunity. Antonio, for one, was already adding up the money he could save and figuring out what he could buy with it.

The training opened up a new world for Antonio. He was up at six in the morning doing exercises in the small courtyard, going to classes all day, taking target practice and learning martial arts. The instructors, who Antonio looked up to, were all *Cholos* and *Indios* like him. He began to learn about communism for the first time. He had heard his father and the priests talking about it before. The *gringo* priests were experts on it. He now started to realize what it was all about. The instructors pointed out how the communists had taken over the city government and could even win the national elections. How the national work stoppage, when the streets of Lima were totally abandoned, was organized by the communists. How the students that attacked the police with rocks and bottles were put up to it by the communists. And how even many priests were being duped by the communists, thinking they were helping the poor. If something wasn't done about it, the communists would take away everything people had and make them into slaves. Every night, Antonio went back to his aunt's house in Callao, worn out from the training and another four or five hours selling radios and tapes. He almost never saw his family any more. He went right to sleep and not even the sickly smell of burning trash in the street could keep him awake.

Antonio was only one of two students out of the original class of sixty who finished the course. The others dropped out but more always came to fill up the classrooms. His instructors told him he could now apply to join a regular army unit or the *Guardia Civil* and they would recommend him highly. Antonio protested that he had been promised a job paying 500,000 soles when he finished the course.

"I never made a promise like that, Antonio," said the school's director. "Who told you that?"

"Pato Loco, my friend. He recruited me."

"I don't know your friend. But if you're interested, I know how you can make your 500,000 soles, and you'll get to travel too. Here, talk to this man."

He wrote a name and address on a piece of paper and gave it to Antonio.

CENTRAL AMERICA

After his three months of training in the United States, Antonio went right into combat. He flew to Honduras and only two days later was inside Nicaragua on the front lines.

At first he won the admiration of his unit. Twice he surprised village militia and gunned down their leaders, opening the way for the rest of his unit to sweep through the town, torch the houses and wipe out the militia as they fled.

The first spurt of blood from that peasant's mouth made his heart leap. But after that every shot was routine. It was part of a job that was going to make him enough money to buy all his dreams. Thus, insulated from his own emotions, Antonio was always out in front. He thought very little about what was going on around him -- the war, the destruction of villages, the mass peasant graves. He thought more and more about his future farm in Cajamarca, maybe ten or twenty hectares depending on how much he saved.

After a while, the meticulous plans he laid for his Cajamarca farm consumed every thinking moment. He became obsessed with thoughts of Cajamarca's countryside, of raising sheep and goats and harvesting barley. He constructed in his mind, brick by brick, a high school, hospital and water tank for San Juan, all made possible by the bountiful harvests from Antonio Yupánqui's farm.

Then he began to see every Nicaraguan town as a modern San Juan. It was as if every town he attacked was a replica of his own town, only a new and improved version, shining from the improvements he imagined he had brought it. He no longer led the attacks like he used to but instead stayed behind to secure the rear in case of a retreat. Without Antonio up front his unit had less and less success. They would advance on a village, moving in cautiously with all their artillery, but by the time they got there no one was around. All they could do was set the houses on fire and destroy the crops so when they left nothing remained for the enemy. When they did come up against the militia most of the firing was done by helicopter crews or artillery from a distance.

Antonio became a close friend of a dark half-Miskito Indian who had trained with him and fought with his unit from the start. Miguel Ramírez had been in the National Guard under Somoza, left the country when the Sandinistas came to power, and was recruited in Miami to fight with the contras. Miguel never thought he would be able to go back to Nicaragua and was looking forward to a comfortable life in the United States. But after his bodega in Little Havana folded he had trouble finding a steady job. Left to rely on the charity of a distant cousin who worked in an auto parts store in Miami, Miguel was desperate.

Miguel and Antonio talked for hours whenever they camped. Miguel talked

constantly about his family in Managua and his father's grocery store.

"My father loved the store," said Miguel. "He opened up every day at 7:00 AM, before any of the other stores, and closed after 10:00 at night when everyone else went home to eat. He usually closed down for only an hour at lunchtime but often stayed open. He would have my sister bring him lunch and he'd eat standing up at the counter. The store was dark. There were no windows at all. And he sat there all day behind the counter without stepping out in the sun. A lot of times I'd go to the store and my father was asleep in the lounge chair near the door. People knew if they wanted anything they could just help themselves and leave the money. The store was his whole life. He was lost without it. And a lot of people would have had a hard time getting by if it wasn't for my father. He was very generous and always gave credit. He sent me and my six brothers and sisters to college -- three of us in the United States."

Miguel spoke like a *gringo* -- he was much more educated than Antonio -- but looked like a Miskito, like his mother. Miguel's narrow black eyes crowned expansive cheeks and a capacious mouth.

"So when my father lost his store in the earthquake," he continued, "it was a tragedy for him. He got up in the morning and sat there at the kitchen table, staring out of the window, reading the newspaper over and over again. He didn't see any of his old friends any more. My father waited for a loan to rebuild his store but it never came through. The government was slow and there were a lot of dishonest people. My father started rebuilding by himself with the money he saved up. He went every day to help and supervise. He was so excited about the new store and anxious to open up again that he simply couldn't keep away. The new store was exactly the same as the old one. The foundation was strong and the walls were made of concrete and brick. The counters and shelves were all made of polished hardwoods. It was a beautiful store.

"But it was only open a month before he died of a heart attack, all of a sudden at the age of fifty. My father was a *gringo* and had a good business sense. He invested in some small mines and had some money in sugar too. But my mother didn't know anything about business and none of us wanted to take it over. So the store just stayed there boarded up for five years. Then the Sandinistas took it over. Maybe some day we'll get it back."

"My father worked hard, too" said Antonio. "And still does. But he works on the farm, and spends all his spare time working for the community, so his whole life is work, every minute, except during the heavy rains. And what does he have to show for it? How can he ever make anything with the rocky soil in the mountains? It's not like the flat plantation land on the coast. And then he's always giving his money away or spending it on us."

Antonio and Miguel talked about their families and life in their communities and often ignored orders to go on patrol. They usually found a comfortable shady area near a stream or on a hillside where they could talk.

Slowly their unit began to dwindle in numbers. Most of the soldiers decided to leave

when their contracts were up. And then there were defections and in-fighting among the officers who were jockeying for better positions and more money. Officers were replaced often, increasingly by *gringos* from the United States who leaned even harder on the men, which prompted even more of them to quit.

"I don't know," moaned Miguel one day as they sat in a muddy field. "They said the communists had no support and that we'd be in Managua in a year. I don't know, but we don't seem to be going anywhere."

"What difference does it make?" sighed Antonio. "We just make our money and get out of here. With what we can save you can open your store and I can have my farm in Cajamarca."

"But how long is this war going to last?"

Miguel and Antonio frowned together, staring at their heavy mud-caked boots.

The next day Miguel was taken prisoner during a raid on a small village. There was a fierce firefight and as their unit withdrew, Miguel walked out from behind a fence and surrendered to the militia. Antonio never heard from him again, though he asked his commanders many times if they could find out where he was.

In the following weeks, Antonio held back even more from the fighting, consciously seeking to move away from combat zones. He kept thinking that Miguel might be fighting on the other side. Miguel always said how he didn't think there was much difference between the two sides. And Miguel hated the *gringo* officers because of the way they spoke to him.

When Antonio's unit advanced towards the enemy he tried to find a tree or other high place far from the combat area. He would look out over the countryside and imagine San Juan and his new farm in Cajamarca. The only time there was any gunfire in San Juan, as far as he could remember, was the time a *Guardia Civil* shot a drunken peasant who wouldn't pay his rent.

The *gringo* officers caught on to Antonio's game and moved him behind the Honduran border where he was put on guard duty. "We're gonna see how you do back there," said the *gringo* officer. "If you don't shape up we're gonna have ta knock ya down in rank and salary. This ain't no picnic, y'hear? Lots of men ready ta take yer place, y'hear, so you just better git on it."

Antonio just wanted to hold out for another month.

PEACE

His insurance covered his flight back to Peru in a wheel chair and then some. His right leg was completely gone. The last he saw of it was a mangled clump of black bones

and flesh. To punish him for sleeping on guard duty Antonio had been sent on patrol over the border and got hit by a grenade.

He had enough money to live on for at least six months. He decided to put all of it into a little shop in Cajamarca that he expected would support him for years to come. He didn't want to go back to San Juan. There were no paved streets or sidewalks and everything was so hilly he would have to stay in his parent's house all day.

Antonio could wheel in and out of his little grocery store. He slept in back behind a partition, on a cot. Next to the cot he kept a hot plate and small wooden box for food. He hired a twelve year old boy to buy his food, clean up the store and wheel him around town. The boy worked hard and Antonio treated him like a brother.

He tried not to think about the war but every day the radio brought more news about the battles in Central America and his mind turned dark with the memory of the attacks he watched from the trees. He didn't understand why there was a war. Sometimes he would go into fits of depression for hours. He would sit awake at night in the dark store with only slices of street light creeping through the cracks in the door and think about Miguel. And he cried.

"Open the door, Carlitos," he begged of his helper in the morning. The powerful smells of flour, soap and kerosene blew away with the rush of morning air from the front door.

Antonio punctuated his sleepless nights with tired, listless days in his store.

Three years after returning to Cajamarca he was forced to sell his business. Then he started to go to Santa Apolonia every day.

He saw every detail of his life through Santa Apolonia's looking glass. From San Juan to Lima, to the United States to Nicaragua, and finally back to Cajamarca. But the more he took it all apart the more difficult it became to put it back together again.

After a year of daily brooding from Santa Apolonia, Antonio ran out of savings and sold his wheelchair. Then he had nothing else to sell. He sat in the plaza all day and slept there at night.

When he died years later, the children who played in the plaza laid a wreath where he used to sit. It had a large white ribbon with the word, "*PAZ*."

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Atahualpa was killed with the gold
Antonio died without it.