

Immanuel Gonzales

Roland Menge

Immanuel Gonzales 2

Immanuel Gonzales is under U.S. copyright protection. All Rights Reserved. This is v0003.

To contact the author, use email address, roland.menge@gmail.com. The author responds to all polite inquiries.

This story may printed or shared, but only in its intact form with no changes in wording, format, or font.

The author has websites at rolandmenge.com and againstthewarnovel.com.

Immanuel Gonzales 3

for Jeanne

"Tell me the truth, my friend. Is my face good
or is it bad?"

Immanuel Gonzales

1

The village of Tezontepec, in Hidalgo, Mexico, is now surrounded by the suburbs of Mexico City, which lies 15 miles to the south. In 1905, when this story takes place, it was still a rural village with one church, and sleepy villagers who gave little thought to the capital and only went there on special occasions.

In Tezontepec at that time, there lived a young man named Immanuel Gonzales. Unlike the others in the village, he saw the city every day. He was a carter, and every morning he picked up his fellow villager, Dr. Alfredo Rota, and carried him to a hospital in the center of the capital. In the evening, he brought the doctor back to his mansion by the village mall.

This Immanuel Gonzales was an industrious young man. Other carters were satisfied with renting their carts by the day, but in the course of ten years' time, by working from sunrise to sunset, he had managed to save enough money to buy his own cart; and he was only 33.

"Immanuel has worked very hard," his fellow villagers would say. "Now, he should relax a little bit before he gets old."

But it seemed as though it was in his very nature to keep working and moving. He never slowed down.

"One day, Immanuel will have a big house," the young women would observe. "He's just the man to marry."

But Immanuel kept to himself. He lived with his old mother in a little adobe house on the edge of town, on the road that led to the shrine of the Virgin.

When Immanuel wasn't working, he took care of his mother. She was crippled and going blind. She rarely left the house, and, in fact, had become more and more eccentric. She stayed in the house behind closed drapes and never lit a lantern.

Immanuel was so tired by the time he got home that he never bothered to light one either. He ate his beans and rice and watched the fireplace, and thought about the capital

where everything was more exciting than the village.

Immanuel was proud of his contact with the city. There was an outdoor swimming pool by the school where the boys and men gathered in the evening. Immanuel was usually too tired to join them, but when he did, he talked about the city.

“You know,” he once told them, “I can read the signs in the city. Even in Dr. Rota’s hospital. I can read the big words in the hall.”

His friends laughed and patted his back. They had forgotten how to read and didn’t need to. But Immanuel was different; he had always been smart.

One time he brought home some special cookies from the city. They were frosted with white cream and had cherry jelly in the middle.

“See what they make in the city,” he said to his mother. They were standing together in their little living room. It was dark and cluttered with old furniture and pictures. Only by the fireplace was the floor clear enough to stand.

His mother felt a cookie with her fingers, and then bit off a tiny piece of it and chewed on it with a thoughtful expression on her face.

“From the city,” Immanuel repeated.

His mother looked up from the cookie, and smiled a toothless grin at him.

“You are very smart,” she said. “I always knew you were a very smart boy.”

2

One day Immanuel had an accident that changed his life. His face was crushed by a fall from his cart. The fall left his nose hideously broken and his mouth distorted.

How he had fallen, Immanuel couldn’t say. He could only remember that a snake had hissed and the horses had bolted. When they found him, he was lying face down in the sand with the reins wound around his wrist. The horses were in front of the cart, chewing on grass as if nothing had

Immanuel spent three weeks in a hospital and returned home. Only his blind mother treated him the same. He was met

with stares wherever he went, and the children made fun of him.

Dr. Rota came by to see him.

Is there anything they can do for me in the city?" Immanuel asked him. He was sitting in the cluttered living room by the fireplace. Though Dr. Rota had ventured no further than the door, he could see that the carter was terribly deformed. The flickering light made him look all the more hideous.

"Well, yes, there is," said the doctor, "something called plastic surgery. But I'm afraid it would cost very much."

"More than a cart?" Immanuel asked.

"More than ten carts," the doctor answered.

Immanuel considered this a moment, and then slumped back in the dark.

3

The next day Immanuel went to the market place. Some little children laughed at him. He chased them with a stick while they cried, "Monster! Monster!"

He went home and searched the cluttered room until he found a piece of a broken mirror. He cleaned it off with some spit and looked at himself by the light from the fire.

His nose was flattened in to his face, and his skull above his left eye had been flattened in. His mouth bent downward on the right side.

After this, Immanuel led a reclusive life, never leaving the house and yard. Besides his mother, there was only one person in the village who seemed to understand him, an old man who lived by himself further down the road, and walked by every day with a cane and a burlap sack. For no reason at all, this old man was called Sr. Pajaro. No one knew his real name.

Immanuel often saw Sr. Pajaro come by but never talked to him. Whenever he saw the old man coming, he hid in the house.

One day Immanuel was pulling out some weeds by the wall, taking advantage of siesta time to come out of his house undisturbed, when the, old man came walking so

quietly that he caught the carter by surprise. When Immanuel saw the old man so close by, he gave a little shout of embarrassment, covered his face with his hands, and tried to hide behind a cactus.

“For God’s sake, man!” cried Sr. Pajaro, “what are you whimpering about?”

“About nothing,” said Immanuel. “I’m ashamed of my face.”

The next day when the old man came by, Immanuel greeted him and the old man smiled. A week later, Immanuel invited him for coffee.

“When I’m with you, I forget how ugly I am,” Immanuel said.

“That’s because I’m ugly, too,” said the old man.

Sr. Pajaro had spoken truly. He was, in fact, quite ugly. He had a beaked nose and little slits for eyes, and his face was so wrinkled and dry that he looked like a lizard.

Even so, in decent clothes the old man was at least presentable; whereas, poor Immanuel, in any clothes, still looked like the wrath of God. Already, the boys from the village were making night-time excursions to watch his house, thinking that the deformed man was in league with the powers of darkness.

And all this because of that single day in his life when he had been so unfortunately injured.

4

“You know, Sr. Pajaro, my life used to be very different. I used to get up every morning and drive my cart into town when the sun was just rising. Then all day long, I’d ride around looking at the houses and trees. Now I live in this stupid house alone. It’s all because of my stupid shame.”

So said Immanuel Gonzales one morning when Sr. Pajaro stopped to talk to him. The old man had set his burlap sack on the ground beside him. He was standing with his hands cupped over the end of his cane. The cane was just long enough for him to rest his chin on his hands. Leaning on his cane in this way, with his wrinkled face sitting on top of his brown hands, he looked like a lizard on top of a rock.

It was a hot day. The sun was high in the sky above the village.

“Well, tell me this,” said Sr. Pajaro, “is your case hopeless?”

Immanuel thought for a moment.

“I don’t know,” he said.

Several days later, Immanuel’s mother was surprised to hear him going outside. She heard his footsteps going toward the village.

A crowd of children was behind him when he returned. Some were throwing rocks at him, and some bowed, pretending he was a king.

Immanuel came in, slammed the door behind him, and went in the cluttered room to sulk. His mother was sitting in the dark. It was too hot to have a fire.

“I must be even more ugly than I was before,” Immanuel said.

After this, he didn’t even go out at siesta time.

5

“You asked me once if my case is hopeless,” said Immanuel one day to Sr. Pajaro. “I’ve been thinking about it, and my answer is no. I’ve been making a plan.”

“What kind of plan?” the old man-asked. He was leaning on his walking stick with his chin resting on his hands, and he smiled from the corner of his mouth.

“I’ll tell you if you help me,” Immanuel answered.

The old man gave a little snort of contempt, and looked to one side. For a moment, Immanuel saw a profile of his pointed nose raised up in the air like the beak of a bird. Then the old man looked back again, rested his chin on his hands, and smiled once again from the corner of his mouth.

The next morning, Sr. Pajaro drove Immanuel’s cart to the town mall.

There were two men sleeping by the grocery store, one with a tan sombrero and the other with a brown one.

“Isn’t that Sr. Pajaro, the old man who always has a burlap sack?” said the man with the tan sombrero, waking from his sleep.

The second man woke up and blinked his eyes.

“Why, yes it is,” he said.

“Isn’t that Immanuel’s cart, that he worked so hard to buy?” the first man asked.

“It certainly is,” the second man said. They both looked a moment, and then fell asleep again.

The old man drove into the market place and stopped at the tavern. He came out with a jug of tequila, and rode off again.

“Well, now” said the man with the tan sombrero, when the noise from the cart woke him up again, “isn’t Sr. Pajaro driving Immanuel’s cart toward the road that goes to Mexico City?”

They both looked a moment.

“Or do my eyes deceive me?” the first man added.

“He certainly is,” said the other man, disregarding the second question. With that, they fell asleep once more, and the town mall was quiet.

When Sr. Pajaro had passed the last adobe house of the village, and the cart was surrounded by nothing but sand and cactus plants, he stopped and looked to the back of the cart. There was a load of hay in the cart, and on top of the hay there was a brown blanket. He lifted up the blanket and reached the jug of tequila into the hay.

“Thank you, my friend,” said Immanuel Gonzales, and the two men laughed.

The road soon passed through some low hills where they stopped to have cactus pears. They held them with a piece of leather, cut open the thick green skin with a knife, and then sat eating the juicy fruit.

It was now safe for Immanuel to come out. He sat on a rock, eating, and now and then taking a gulp of tequila from the jug. The old man sat beside him, chewing very slowly, and looking out toward the hills. There was no sound except the soft breeze. A tiny twister swirled up the dust. The landscape before them was brown and rocky, but there were some green bushes on the hillside. It was spring. The bushes had little white flowers, and there were some bright red flowers among the dull red rocks.

“It’s been so long,” Immanuel said.

The ride through the countryside was only the beginning of Immanuel’s plan. They continued on to the city and stopped at the hospital where Dr. Rota worked. In the back of the cart beneath the blanket, Immanuel was going through all kinds of contortions. At last, he came out. He was dressed like an old woman with a long silk dress and a fan. He had a fancy hat on his head, and his face was covered by a shawl.

He walked up to the hospital door.

“Permit me to ask you who you are, Senora,” the doorman said.

Immanuel waved the fan and bowed.

“I am Senora Rota, Dr. Rota’s mother,” he said. “I’ve come to see my son.”

The doorman also bowed, but much lower than Immanuel had. “My honor, Senora,” he said.

Once inside the hospital, Immanuel went right to the library. He came back with a big book beneath his skirt.

Under the blanket, he looked at it with Sr. Pajaro. It had a black cover on which the words “Plastic Surgery” were written in gold letters.

Immanuel opened the book and looked at it. The book was so heavy he could hardly hold it up, and the pages were filled with long words in tiny print. He raised up his ugly face and nodded thoughtfully, while the old man stood beside him, smiled from the corner of his mouth, and shook his head.

6

Immanuel’s first operation was unsuccessful though he had taken every precaution to do things right. First, he had boiled all his instruments and three pairs of gloves. Then, assisted by Sr. Pajaro and his blind mother who wore white gowns that his mother had made, he injected his chest and his face with something red.

“What is that red stuff?” asked the old man.

“It kills pain,” said Immanuel.

“Why does it kill pain?” the old man persisted.

“Because the book says so,” said Immanuel.

“My son is very smart,” said Immanuel’s mother.

After the various preparations, he cut a square of skin from his chest and applied it to his face. In doing this, he had followed the pictures in the big black book. But the application died as the wound healed, and merely formed a large scab which fell off in pieces like a snake molting its skin.

After this, Immanuel went back to his book. For days on end, he lay on the floor by the fireplace, poring over the pictures, with an immense dictionary beside him.

Sr. Pajaro found him some cardboard in the market place. Immanuel cut it up in pieces and used it to write words on that he was trying to learn. He had never learned to write longhand, so he printed instead.

He arranged the words in neat rows, as such:

CELL DEGENERATION

OXYGEN

CELL TEMPERATURE

Immanuel filled up many pieces of cardboard with words, and kept them in a stack in a special corner of the cluttered room.

One day he wrote:

NERVES

The next afternoon he stopped Sr. Pajaro when he was walking by with his burlap sack and his cane.

“We have to get some frogs,” he said.

“Frogs?” said Sr. Pajaro.

“Yes, frogs,” said Immanuel.

Outside of town, there was a pond where Immanuel had played as a boy. They went there the same night in Immanuel’s cart. A long time had passed since Immanuel had been to the pond, and it was a beautiful night with a full-moon and a soft wind that rustled through the reeds.

When he saw this boyhood place again, Immanuel forgot all about the frogs for a little while. He dived in the dark water and swam on his back, looking up at the moon and stars as he had done as a boy. The old man stood by and watched.

Immanuel was doing this when he heard a frog croak

and remembered why he had come. They found two frogs and put them in the burlap sack. By the time they left, it was already getting light.

7

Immanuel hid beneath the blanket in the back of the cart as they drove back to town. Inside the burlap sack, the frogs went thump-thump, thump-thump; the wheels creaked as they went around; and the wood of the cart groaned as they bumped along the road. It made Immanuel sleepy; he fell asleep like a little boy.

Several days after this, Sr. Pajaro came by and entered the cluttered room to find Immanuel on the floor cutting up a frog. He had cut open its chest with great care, and had pinned back its insides and tacked them to a board.

Immanuel pointed to a little white thread that ran between two tiny pink sacs.

“Nerves,” he said, nodding his head.

“How do you know?” the old man asked.

Immanuel nodded toward the big black book.

“The skin died because I didn’t put it by a nerve,” he said, “so now I’m learning where the nerves are.”

“In a frog?” said Sr. Pajaro.

It’s all very much the same,” said Immanuel Gonzales.

He raised his head up proudly, looked toward the book, and then looked again to the white thread of the nerve.

The second operation was a great success. The application healed well. Immanuel was now engaged in drawing large maps of faces on the sand in the back of the house. Every day, he got up at sunrise and worked until it was too dark to see. Then he went in the house and sat by the fireplace looking at his book and his pieces of cardboard. The next day he’d be outside again. This continued for many weeks.

“You are becoming crazy,” said his mother. “All day long in the sun will turn anybody crazy. And yesterday, Sr. Pajaro told me that the boys are watching you from the rooftops.”

Immanuel looked surprised.

“What is this to me?” he said after a long while.

“They think you’re crazy,” said his mother. “All day long in the sun will turn anybody crazy.”

He turned to look at her but she was standing in a shadow in the cluttered room. He could only see the dark outline of her figure.

“A good work takes time,” he said. “All I need is a little more time.”

In the next year, he did five more operations. He had learned how to take little chunks of bone from other parts of his body and put them in his face. He spent all his spare time looking in the piece of mirror. He had succeeded in making a nose and shaping some bone around his left eye, but his new face was still far from normal. He looked more like a kind of reptile or frog than a human being because the nose was too flat and wide.

His old mother could not see well enough to make out his new face, but she could see his blurred figure bent over the mirror.

“Did I bear a daughter or a son?” she said to Sr. Pajaro. “Does a son look in the mirror like he’s going to a dance?”

Immanuel heard her make this comment. “All I need is time,” he repeated. When he wasn’t looking in the mirror, he was out in the yard, drawing in the sand. Now that he knew the boys were watching him, he couldn’t help watching them back from the corners of his eyes. As he drew his plans in the sand, he sometimes looked up at them with his strange new face.

Sometimes, too, he met their gaze directly, wondering what they thought of him. They didn’t look at him as if he were an enemy. It was more as if he was something they couldn’t understand. Some of the boys were clearly afraid of him, he noticed. They thought he had magic powers.

He started to like the boys. Now and then, he waved at them and a few waved back. One day a little boy came up to him and offered him a flower. This little boy had keen black eyes and curly black hair. He seemed so fresh and innocent that Immanuel hardly knew what to do. He took the flower and bowed low in gratitude.

To his surprise, there was a roar of applause. He looked up at the rooftops and saw that a great crowd of boys had gathered to pay their respects to him.

8

One afternoon, Immanuel noticed that there were some well-dressed men among the boys on the rooftops. Near sundown, these men came over to Immanuel's house.

Immanuel and his mother retreated to the darkest corner of the cluttered room behind an old wood chest, and listened to the knock on the door.

"Immanuel Gonzales," said a deep voice.

"Here I am," answered Immanuel weakly.

"Shh-h-h!" whispered his mother, covering his mouth with her shriveled hand.

"Immanuel Gonzales," said the voice a second time, this time more loudly.

Immanuel didn't answer.

"Immanuel Gonzales!" boomed the voice.

"I'm here! I'm here!" Immanuel cried, rushing to the door.

He opened the door and saw that two well-dressed men were standing in front of it. There was a young man with handsome features and a German hat, and an older man with a little beard and a monocle.

When Immanuel opened the door, the full light of the sun fell on his face.

"Astounding!" said the older man, raising his monocle to his eye.

"Incredible!" said the younger man, taking off the German hat and tilting it to one side to shade his eyes from the sun, which was now low in the sky.

"Sr. Gonzales," said the older man with a tiny bow, "we are plastic surgeons from the city. We've come to pay you our respects."

Immanuel came out of the door into the sunlight and raised his frog-like face in pride. The men stood looking at his face, shook his hand, and then departed.

On the road back to the capital, the man with the

German hat looked at his colleague. “This could be a public health problem,” he said.

“How is that?” said the older man.

“I mean, if people think what we do is simple...this man is a peasant.”

“Think of the damage to our reputation.” said the older man.

“Even so,” said the man with the German hat, “his face is quite hideous.”

“Repulsive,” said the older man, scratching his beard, “the poor man looks like a frog.”

The next day, Immanuel walked down to the village, feeling very proud. He had never been sure how to regard his new face, but the well-dressed men had given him such compliments that he felt reassured.

It was market day. The mall was full of booths where people were selling everything from fruits and vegetables to old shoes and second-hand clothes. There was a great crowd of people in the market place.

Immanuel walked into their midst, smiling. This created a general hubbub. Wherever he walked, the crowd scattered to all sides. He went home in great confusion and looked in his piece of mirror, trying to decide if the people had acted this way because his face was good, or because it was bad.

The next day, he said to Sr. Pajaro: “Tell me the truth, my friend; is my face good, or is it bad?”

Sr. Pajaro looked at him a moment, leaning on his cane. “To me, it’s a good face,” he said at last. “Yes, I would say it’s a very good face, a beautiful face.”

He asked his blind mother to feel his face with her fingers. “Is my face good or bad?” he said.

“You worked so hard on it,” his mother said. “Didn’t we all—you and me and the good Sr. Pajaro? Didn’t we dress up in white gowns? Of course, it’s a good face.”

“Immanuel Gonzales,” said the deep voice.

This time Immanuel was not afraid. “It must be the doctors from the city,” he said to himself. “They’ve come to

pay me their respects again.”

Immanuel opened the door. The man with the German hat greeted him with a smile, but Immanuel’s attention was immediately drawn to the young woman who stood next to the doctor. She was dressed magnificently in a long white dress with a pink sash, and she had a wide-brimmed white hat with a pink flower on one side of the brim.

She was so beautiful that Immanuel couldn’t think of anything to say. He lowered his eyes, put his hands in his pockets, and shuffled his feet.

“This is Sr. Gonzales,” said the young doctor. “As you can see, he’s done a most remarkable job of reconstructing his own face.”

“Amazing,” the woman exclaimed. She had a low, husky voice, and almond-colored eyes.

Immanuel flushed with pride and raised up his face into the full light of the sun, so that they could look more closely at his craftsmanship.

“Sr. Gonzales,” said the doctor. “A most extraordinary thing has taken place. An honorable lady has offered to pay the full cost of finishing the marvelous job you’ve begun on your face. It will all be done at no expense to you, and you can return to a normal life.”

Immanuel nodded his head slowly. He thought for a long time and then he said: “I’ve drawn out some plans... Will they do it according to my plans?”

“Of course,” said the doctor.

“Of course,” said the young lady with the almond eyes, pressing Immanuel’s hand with her own. Her hand was soft and moist.

One day soon after this, Immanuel was brought before a class at the medical school. How this happened, he didn’t know. First of all, he was walking down a shiny corridor behind a little group of men in white coats; then, they went through a door and he found himself in an immense room that was packed with white coats and serious eyes. All the seats in the room were full; and besides, there were people in the aisles and seated on the floor.

The woman with almond eyes was standing to one side

beside the young doctor, who now was dressed in a white coat and didn't have his German hat. When the young lady saw him look at her, she smiled and waved. He smiled and waved back.

A man in white standing next to Immanuel began to talk: "As you can see," he said to the group, "this peasant has made a valiant effort, but has completely failed. Here on the nose, for instance, you can see what child-like molding he has done."

Back in his room in the hospital, Immanuel brooded alone. "I've been thinking I want to leave," he said to the nurse when she looked in the door.

"You can't leave now. All the papers are signed."

Immanuel was still lost in thought when the woman with almond eyes came by to see him. He was overjoyed. She was dressed as magnificently as before but in a completely different outfit, a long blue dress with a low neckline that revealed the top of her breasts. She had set this off with a heart-shaped amulet that hung from a gold chain necklace.

"Do you think my face is good?" Immanuel asked.

"I think it's unique, very unique," she answered.

She was still with him when they came to take him away on a hospital cart. "Are they going to follow my plans?" he said from the cart. He had some pieces of cardboard in his hand.

"Of course, they will," she replied, kissing his cheek.

10

When Immanuel awoke from his operation there was a crowd of men in white coats standing around him smiling. He was handed a mirror. They all were watching. Once again he looked like a normal peasant with everything where nature had put it.

Immanuel was so confused by the sight, he didn't know what to say. He wanted to leave as fast as he could. He bowed awkwardly to express his gratitude, while the men in white continued to beam at him. He made all kinds of obsequious gestures in order to leave.

Immanuel rode back to the village in the back of a cart.

Here and there, groups of people stood by the roadside, staring at him with curiosity. Some of them attempted to touch his new face. In one place there was a group of boys who watched him silently. As he rode along, he waved at the people like a carnival king.

Back in his house, he spent long hours looking at his face. "They didn't follow my plan," he said to himself. He looked in the mirror, then he got up and walked around the cluttered room, and banged his head against the wall like a man possessed. This continued day and night.

11

Sr. Pajaro went to the window to see who was coming in a cart. "It's the doctors from the city," he said to Immanuel and his mother.

The three of them retreated into the darkness of the cluttered room and listened to the footsteps coming toward the door.

Immanuel recognized the voice of the man with the German hat.

"Gentlemen," the voice was saying, "you will see that the job we did was truly amazing. When I first met this poor peasant, he looked like a frog. Now he looks as normal as normal can be."

There was a knock on the door.

"Immanuel Gonzales," the voice said several times. Immanuel didn't answer.

At last, the door was pushed open. A shaft of light shot into the room. Immanuel was standing in the corner of the room. His blind mother and Sr. Pajaro were in another corner, dressed in white gowns.

"Foolish man!" cried the doctor. "What have you done to your face?"

It was hard to see Immanuel where he was standing in the shadows, but there was enough light to see that he had deformed his own face again. He had cut off his nose and begun building another. His face was covered with scabs. Sr. Pajaro stood in the corner with his chin on his hands and a crooked smile on his face.

When the doctors had left, Sr. Pajaro went to the window. Immanuel was seated on the floor, looking at his face in the piece of broken mirror.

“All I need is time,” he mumbled to himself.

“Immanuel,” said Sr. Pajaro. “There is a little boy in the yard with a flower, and there are boys all over the rooftops.”

Immanuel looked up and smiled. “Tell them I’ll be out in a moment,” he said. “I’m going to talk to them.”