

What Money Can Buy

Carlos is my black buddy. Everybody's got one, or should if they don't. They make great companions. It's educational. He tells me things about being black, how they run their weddings, funerals, what it's like in their nightclubs, how good their women smell, salty and sweet like candied nuts. Even how they prepare their favorite foods, sometimes as if women and good food were the same thing.

I explain to him how it is to be white, going to the beach all the time, why we make the best serial killers and accountants, sometimes both at the same time, why we play golf and dress so funny to do it.

That's the point of Carlos and me a bunch of times. We discuss things in a way you always wanted to but never had the chance, questions you wanted to ask but would never just walk up to some one off the street and pop off without knowing them. It's nice to finally know a black guy well enough to ask certain things. I think it works for him that way too.

We're surveyors. We ride around Birmingham all day from job to job seeing how other people live, the rich and the poor, every layer of society. Because he's black and I'm white we can go anywhere. Not that we couldn't anyway, there aren't any official laws about that anymore. It's just that people don't. They stay in their place, the part of town where they're most comfortable, with their family and friends where things are simple and easy.

But because we're mixed we're always accepted. The sight of one allows for the other, making it okay. In Birmingham, like a lot of places, it's always one or the other. Never the two together. I guess that gets back to why its so cool to have a black guy to talk to. We live so close, close enough to bump into each other on the street and wonder, and yet so separate, different schools, churches, restaurants, barber shops, most everything. Work is the only thing that brings us

together, and I suppose that's only because it has to. Things wouldn't function if it did not. Bills wouldn't get paid, water and power kept flowing. Groceries wouldn't get bagged. Everything would grind to a halt. It didn't used to be that way but it is now. And that's a good thing. Nearly everyone agrees to that.

It's always fun to watch Carlos when we go to white people's houses. He gets real quiet and observant. Not just at the estates of Mountain Brook, which have the same affect on me given their frightening opulence. But even suburbs like I grew up in, full of middle class people, comparing the wealth to what I suppose he knew, the richness of life lived in a home pieced together by housewives with money and time during the work day to assemble a certain lifestyle, quaint, charming, appointed with little mail order catalog touches.

I sometimes have the same experience, but in a different way, when we visit particularly poor black homes. I'm stunned into silent respect by the poverty, and the industriousness in the face of it, that same energy white women put to patching together homey charm done on the cheap, painted tires for landscaping, brightly colored folk arty paint buckets for planters. I fall quietly away while Carlos hams it up with the owner as if sharing an inside joke.

When I talk to Carlos it makes me believe in how far we've come, and how close we are to finally working this thing out, racism, bigotry, whatever you call it. Much of it is just overblown at this point in my opinion. When you get down to people talking to each other it pretty much doesn't exist. That's where I see it now. People are people. So I don't understand why some still make so much out of it. It's like they need it too bad to let it go. Their livelihood depends on it.

Of course I talking about black people. White people never say anything unless they have to. It's just safer to keep your mouth shut. But it's the "black leaders", ministers, loud mouthed state legislators, self promoting civic kingpins heading up some coalition they themselves started and

hung with a pompous title like "The African-American Coalition for Economic and Social Justice." They're the ones always going on about it, like if they keep quiet the money will dry up and they'll have nothing to do, so that can't be allowed to happen.

I like to think of Carlos as a big brother since he's at least five or six years older. I can't tell for sure. He's never told me his real age. Every time I've asked he snaps back that I don't need to know that, like he's even older than I might think, and vain like a woman.

I'm the party chief so I'm Carlo's boss. I ought to be since it's my daddy's company and I've been doing this since I was thirteen. I've got a crazy amount of experience for someone my age. I'd even go so far to say it comes natural to me.

Of course I make more money when you get down to it. But it never does. Or at least we don't talk about that like we don't talk about his age. I don't think money has ever had anything to do with it between us anyway. That's one reason we work well together, because sometimes I get a little excited. I'll admit that, and I need someone like Carlos to dial me back when my temper gets away from me, if I run my mouth and I'm not careful I get myself in situations. It's been known to happen. But Carlos understands that. He's smarter about a lot of things. Nothing fazes him. He's seen it all. That's why he surprised me that day. He didn't act like his normal calm self.

We were parked behind a burger joint we were surveying having lunch. It's one of our best clients, Chuck's, a local chain. They're always expanding, so we're always off to some suburb around Birmingham to survey in extra space for a parking lot expansion. And I always get the same thing, the Chuck's Big Bacon and Cheese special. They're good, hand made patties, crinkle fries with special seasoning, everything's always fresh. Carlos was nibbling on his usual fare, something from home packed in his little blue hard plastic cooler, a sandwich and piece of fruit washed down by some off brand grape soda. We were slung back in our seats with the doors

open, feet propped up in the gaps between the chassis, feeling the breeze.

"You've got nothing at quarterback, you're starting a freshman, I don't care how talented he is that's at least two loses on the road, if not three. In this league it always works out that way and you know it," I blurted knowing he would have to agree. This was a truism that when every realistic fan's team time had come they had to acknowledge.

"Don't give me that crap George," he answered, voicing lifting, feigning indignation. "That used to be true but it's not anymore and you know it, the way things are now, how kids come into school ready to play, all the camps they get around to, the way they start as near babies learning the particular system they're recruited into. Freshman win championships all the time and you know it, do you want me to name examples, because I can if I have to."

"No you don't need to do that, and it's not just about your quarterback anyway. You've got a new defensive coordinator, and a young one at that, nobody knows his system. It's at least two years before he gets everybody on the same page and recruits the type of player that fit his style of play. Until that happens you going to get stomped by teams like mine that are stable, that have everything in place, that know how to win championships, that expect to every year because that's what we do. And that's if we don't we fire our guy. Because if he sucks we won't let him hang on like they do at some places just because he's a nice family man, goes to church, donates to the community. At the end of the day it's always a matter of expectations. That's something programs like yours never understand, and why we can have this same conversation all the time and it will always be the same and you know it."

"Man that's ridiculous," Carlos shot back, "you clowns are the only people that actually believe that, and it's crap like that that makes everybody hate you. You guys are hands down the most despised team in the league, including the fans, because you really actually believe that

garbage," and he was about to say more, looking off toward the ground getting wound up, and I think I know what it was, we'd had this conversation before, when he stopped suddenly, fixing on something on his side of the truck, then in an instant throwing himself to his feet onto the pavement following whatever it was, stalking, moving around the open door crouching beneath where I could see.

When he stood up he held it high and I could see it was money. I couldn't make out the denomination, but it wasn't a one. I could tell that, with a complicated pattern I didn't recognize.

"Look at this man, look what I've got, can you believe it, I just looked down. I knew it was something, I mean my eyes caught it and I could tell it was something," and now he held it toward me so I could read it. It was a one hundred dollar bill. I could see the little portrait of Ben Franklin, with that sort of placid Mona Lisa smile like he knew something like this might happen, in this case that Carlos would find him, and he was vaguely pleased about it, it made sense.

Carlos pulled it in close to his face, turning it over examining both sides, holding it up to the sun by the ends snapping it taut, seeing the watermarks pop out, confirming it was real. Then he looked at me smiling in a big over the top way, not saying anything.

I have to say I was jealous. I see that now. That was my first reaction. Why hadn't I seen it. It seemed just as possible. It was on his side of the truck but I had been right by there. I had stood nearly on that same spot tossing old beer cans and candy wrappers in the dumpster and didn't notice it.

And I didn't believe it. Nobody finds a hundred just like that. Nobody loses one hundred dollars without knowing it, leaving it laying there perfectly still for anyone to just look down and find.

"You planted that man, you put that there, you didn't find it, nobody finds a hundred dollars

just like that, I mean who would have lost a hundred dollars and not known it, I don't believe it."

"Well I don't care if you believe it or not," Carlos laughed, "you believe what you want, it suits me either way, all I know is that I've got a hundred dollars and it's my lucky day, I'll tell you that. All I did was look down and there it was. I didn't do anything. I just had to pick it up, it's the easiest money I've ever made," and the way he was smiling now, throwing it back in my face, looking at me and then back at the bill holding it high, it felt for a second like it was about me, as if he'd found it to spite me, a little edge coming out I hadn't known but did now that he enjoyed an advantage.

"Well you know it's part mine," I said, "since you found it on the job, I get a cut, well actually the company gets a cut but I am the company so it's the same thing, " and of course I was kidding. I knew that. But I didn't say it that way. I said it like I meant it, to see what he'd do, to stick a pin in his balloon.

"I forget what the exact number is but it's a percentage, at least thirty, maybe a little more, probably around forty, but I'm willing to negotiate, I won't hold you to a strict number, that doesn't seem fair," and all the while I spoke I expected him to smile, to see I was lying. Carlos is plenty smart enough about the way I do things to figure that out.

But he didn't. So I kept on, basing everything on his look, a sudden glaring edge, the cut of his eyes realizing my point, focusing closer, still not getting I was after something else. And my realizing in the course of this perhaps his vulnerability, to a flat out lie about money.

"I don't have the change on me," I went on, "but I don't mind running inside. I'm sure they'll break it at the cash register. They know we're out here working for them, and you know a place like this can do it, as much lunch business as they do. They'd probably do it just to get rid of some smaller bills." All the while I watched Carlos watching me. It was easy to keep a straight

face the way I was laying it on feeling it, getting deep into the details, selling it, and the way he glared back completely bought in. If he were a fish he would have swallowed the hook whole. All I had to do was reel slow. I couldn't believe this was so easy with Carlos. I expected more, and I didn't get many chances like this so I had to use this one every way I could.

"Are you kidding me," he spit out.

"Well why would I be doing that."

"Because if you are I don't think it's funny, I'll tell you that right now you sorry son of a bitch," and he looked at me a long time as if giving me the chance to come clean, his eyes big, expectant, like now would be the time. I looked back as plainly as I could, as if annoyed by his dragging this out.

"I'll tell you what, I can see you're a little hurt so I'll just make it thirty percent, and I'll even go inside and get them to break it up. All you have to do is sit here and I'll bring you the change. You relax, finish your lunch, and let me handle the rest. After all you're the one that found it, and that was the main thing. You've already done your share of the work." I held out my hand looking at him waiting, looking and waiting, as cold eyed and steady as I could, that requiring self control. Because for me the whole thing had become an experiment I was determined to see through. It wasn't about the money. I'd been known to blow several times that much bar hopping on a night out with my girlfriend. The next day I wouldn't even be able to tell you where it had gone.

But it was about the luck, where that had fallen, and between the two of us I was by all rights the lucky one. So in a way I guess I did mean it. I wanted my cut if I could get it, if only to convince Carlos it was mine. I'd do that by acting as if it were not a question up for grabs, any fool could see that.

Carlos slouched down in the seat letting my hand hang there. He looked out the windshield at nothing, eyes far away. I let my hand drop but kept looking and waiting, my body language and impatience maintaining my story.

He had been simply happy when he found it and showed it to me. Now that was tainted, all that glee evaporated. He was letting that sink in, like this was a thing he knew, had seen before, recognized it for what it was.

"I'll tell you what George," he said grinding out his words, "you take your thirty percent, I'll agree to that." He paused letting me absorb that, that I'd won, watching, smiling. "Then you take my seventy to go with it. How does that sound, the two of those together gives you one hundred percent, that's better than thirty isn't it, one hundred is better than thirty. I think you'll agree to that. Because I don't want it. It's all yours, every penny."

He handed me the one hundred dollar bill. And I took it. Not because I wanted it, or was expecting it, but because I reacted without thinking, like when some one throws you something unexpectedly, your hand flies up to catch it. It's reflex.

Carlos took a bite of his apple. It was usually the last thing he had for lunch, a sort of desert because it was sweet. When he sunk his teeth in it it crunched, juice trickled down his hand and sprayed into the sunlight. He sat back with cheeks full chewing, looking out the windshield. I was holding the bill toward him. It was mine. But I didn't want it.

"That's not what I was saying, you're taking this thing too far Carlos. I was just kidding, come on it's your money, you take it, you found it." But all he did with his mouth full was look at me and shake his head. He pinched my wrist like he was picking a speck, pushing it toward me, then looked away free of remorse.

"Well I'm not going to take it," I protested as if I were the wounded one. "I don't want it." My

voice faltered.

By now Carlos had worked the lump of apple down his throat and studied it for another bite.

"Well put it back, if you don't want it, put it back, let somebody else find it, somebody that really wants it. That won't have to give up thirty percent. They'll just keep it and be happy, without all the complications and little maneuvers people use when they can't abide somebody else's good luck." And he looked at me hard this time, plumbing me with his eyes, letting his words settle.

My face went flush. I was holding the bill but didn't feel it. I felt Carlos' eyes. And that I didn't want to do it. Suddenly the hundred seemed like more. It didn't matter how much I could blow bar hopping. I started thinking about how to spend it, how many times I could fill my car, or how much beer it would buy, how it might stake me at poker. When I began to break it down into useful particulars it added up to a lot more.

But I didn't have the choice anymore. When I looked at him he looked back, waiting for me to put it back. It meant nothing to him now that I had spoiled it, assigned it a price beyond what he would pay. It wasn't even money anymore, something to buy things, but was itself something that cost. So it was worthless. He had let it go, forgotten it. And I didn't have a choice. He knew it. So he smiled.

I climbed out going to the grass beyond the curb on my side of the truck where he couldn't see. There was a yellow chert rock, something nearly the size of the bill. I put it beneath it so that the bill barely showed. You would have to look directly at it to see even a corner of it poking out and think anything of it. Carlos couldn't see this. I knew he would have something to say if he did, about the exact way I arranged it, making it hard for anyone to find. If I couldn't have it no one would.

We spent the rest of the day finishing our job. Most of the work left to do was around the front of the property, locating the parking lot and building for expansion. Like I said Chuck's makes a tasty burger, real meaty. They don't rely on sauces or extra toppings to trick you out into thinking there's more to it than there is. It's easy to see why business is good. But even at that, working out front, I was able to keep an eye on the bill tucked under the rock. Because I knew exactly where to look, that bright yellow rock marking it. I could tell it was still there, the rock had not moved.

I got anxious about it only one time, when a young black guy took out the garbage, walking right by it. I watched him lug the heavy bag and heave it into the dumpster, focusing on his every move, afraid he would spot it and grab it and start smiling and be happy. I'd be able to tell from that distance if he'd found it. In a way it would be like watching the whole thing again, a black guy finding a hundred dollars, sounding like the first line of a joke, three guys walk into a bar, a black, a Jew, a Mexican...

Carlos was watching. When the guy finally went back in I turned and he was smiling and I got a little pissed about that, as if he were mocking me. I didn't feel I had to take that, that he needed to watch himself that's all. I looked back at him mustering a real stink eye, and I think he enjoyed that even more, how much the whole thing wedged under my skin.

It's been months now since it happened, and I haven't forgotten. Carlos won't let me. I've heard about that hundred dollar bill I don't know how many times, every time I stop to think to myself or get lost in a daydream and my thoughts wander, Carlos is there, piping right up with it, like a mosquito buzzing my ear.

"You can still see it can't you, I noticed that rock you put it under like nobody would find it, like you'd hidden it, you were thinking about going back for it. I bet you did too, ride back out there and get it. I bet you did. Or if it wasn't there you can't forget, like you should

have kept it the first time. I know how you are boy, how much you people love that money, how sometimes it bothers you folks more about what you can't have instead of what you've got."

There's always pure enjoyment in his voice, the type most people would pay extra to get. The way I calculate what money can buy, even if he'd kept that thirty percent, he's still gotten way more than his moneys worth out of it by now.