

Casa De Santos

Travis Ramos moved like a snake through the crowded, dirty streets. The temperature had reached ninety-two and a toxic, burning smell was a gift from the

day's heat. Travis had sold all his vials, given the money to his dealer, and still didn't have a penny to his name. Every cent he had went to the loan he'd taken.

He thought about the confrontation from last week. There were no grey areas in his business. It would have to be settled—kill or be killed. Travis cut across the avenue and entered Central Park. The park was a good place to get lost. He cut off the path and climbed onto the rocks. Travis got low and navigated the undulating boulders. Most people had no idea he was there. Climbing made him feel like a mountain lion ready to pounce.

He walked toward the illuminated fountain. Vibrant red and blue lights lit up the area. The fountain was circular with a walking path around it. The gentle waves of Central Park Lake framed the tranquil location. Travis ran his hand through the tepid water of the fountain and began collecting. Over the years he'd only been stopped once by a cop. People noticed but none said a word. Travis made the first round and pocketed the dimes, nickels, and quarters. It was nearing August so the fountain was full of change. He made two more trips around the fountain and headed back to the rocks.

Travis felt a stare and turned to one of the paths that entered into the fountain. A man and woman were looking at him and shaking their heads. His muscular body puffed up and his eyes shot out daggers. The couple quickly took off. He'd long ago lost the ability to feel humbled. When you were hungry, you found a way to eat. No questions asked. His pockets jingled all the way to McDonalds.

Travis felt exhausted from the walking and the feast at Mickey D's so he decided to take the elevator up to the apartment. It felt like being in a coffin. A

puddle in the corner stank like urine and the elevator hiccupped and shook as it ascended to the seventh floor. Travis had to jump up to get out because the elevator landed below the floor. The light on the floor faded in and out—one second, you'd have murky light and the next darkness. Pungent odors of rice and meat fogged up the area.

He struggled getting the key into the old lock. The door creaked open. His mother sat bathed in the glow of the television. The ever-present wine and bottles of pills were close by. A Spanish soap opera blared throughout the apartment. She didn't acknowledge his presence. He went to his room and shut the door. Travis's bedroom overlooked the courtyard and avenue. Shouts reverberated between his building and the one across from the yard. A small fan swooshed around the odors of unwashed sheets and mildew.

Travis reached under his bed and pulled out his old jelly jar. He went through his pockets and put the left-over change in the jar. Some of the coins had stuck together from the humidity and wetness. This haul had gotten him twenty-six dollars and forty-one cents.

He stripped off his clothes and a coin rolled toward the window. Travis got on the floor, smashed a roach with his palm and found a quarter near the closet. The fighting in the courtyard escalated into screaming. He went to his bed and rolled the quarter between his fingers. The shadows of cars from the street ran along the walls. Every night he dreamed of shootings and stabbings. Maybe tonight would be different. Travis closed his eyes holding the quarter tightly. Sleep came soon.

Travis leaned into the heavy boxes of liquid soap. Someone had stolen the dolly, and he was told that it would be a few days before they got another. His fingers ached and his scrapped knuckles throbbed and bled. As he continued stocking, thoughts of college flew through his head. It had been three years since he'd gotten out of high school. He always remembered the words of his counselor.

"Look, Travis, I know you've had difficulties in your life. I contacted St. Johns University. They have a solid computer science program. You have the grades and ability to do well."

Where would I get the money? Besides no one had ever gone to college from his family. Travis kicked at a box and wiped sweat from his brow. He'd leave this job in a minute if it wasn't for the insurance. He had Type 1 diabetes and needed medicine.

"Hey, Travis, we have a clean-up on aisle six. Someone spilled a jar of sauce. Can you do it for me? Ricky's sick."

His manager, Ted, stood on the balls of his feet. The overhead lights bounced off his bald head. He chewed gum at a ferocious rate. Ted played with his wedding band. When Ted hired a pretty employee, he'd take it off.

Travis sighed and made a big show of flexing his bleeding hand. "You think I can get a little more time on my lunch today. I have to get my medicine."

Ted stared and spit his gum into the garbage. "No can do. If I give you more time then I gotta give it to everyone. Take care of that for me."

Travis watched him walk away. Freaking jerk. Travis got the mop and bucket. Last week he had to clean up the bathroom. They were using him for the worst jobs. And he was letting them get away with it.

Red sauce splattered the floor like some crazed art work. A mother and her young son walked through the sauce and trailed it down the aisle. She gave him a dirty look to boot. Travis felt rage pierce him. Nobody respected him. Tonight, he'd get the respect he deserved.

Some of the sauce had gotten under the racks and Travis got low. His mop hit against something and he paused. He bent down and saw a purse wedged under the pasta. Travis checked both ways, grabbed the purse, and took off for the stockroom. The bathroom was empty, and he slid in.

The purse was black with brown fringes. It opened and the sides folded out. Credit cards filled the inside. There was a card for almost every store in the area—Target, K-Mart, BJ's, Walmart...it went on and on. Travis found three twenties and a ten. He pocketed the money. If he got caught with the purse his job would be gone in a flash. Where could he throw it out?

Travis went to close the purse when he got a glimpse of the driver's license. He pulled it out. She was a little older than him, twenty-three. Blond hair cascaded across her forehead and covered one eye. A tight smile played along her face. Travis saw a kindred spirit in her doll like eye. They were empty of life with sadness piled into them. Eyes that had seen what life had to offer and had given a resolute answer—I give up.

Travis hesitated but felt his hand reach into his pocket. He put the money back in the purse and left the bathroom. Ted was on the phone and put his hand up when Travis entered. The room felt like a box. Ted's desk was huge and took up half of the space. A computer sat next to it. Some pictures of his family were on the table. The walls behind him held data sheets evaluating how the store was doing. Ted finished his conversation.

"What do you want?"

Travis saw the impatience on Ted's face. He hadn't always done the right thing. Travis handed the purse to Ted. "I found it when I was cleaning the aisle."

Ted opened it making a show of counting the money. After a moment he sneered, "How much did you take?"

Travis's real job started as families shut their doors and settled into television time. He weaved through the streets and fingered the gun in his pocket. Some dealers from the east side had dared to come on his turf. If he didn't clean this up, he'd be done dealing in the streets.

Rolling clouds blocked a three-quarter moon. Humidity hovered and clung to him. He headed toward a darkened alley. A graffiti filled door stood near a dumpster. Travis took out a bread knife and jimmied open the old door.

A wave of hot air hit him. He wended his way around pipes and machines and went to the service elevator. Travis went to the tenth floor and walked up another flight of steps to the roof. A sign stating *If you open this door an alarm will sound* was above the roof door. Travis knew it was bogus and opened it

Another world enveloped him. Lights from nearby buildings sparkled with intensity. Travis went to the edge of the roof and stared down at the images—houses, cars, and parks that appeared miniature. In the distance he could make out the Empire State Building. He greedily sucked in a fresh smelling breeze.

Travis walked to the other side of the roof, took out miniature binoculars and scanned the streets. Nothing was brewing yet but it was only a matter of time. He sat and shut his eyes. Before long he dreamed.

The Quarter

Bits of broken glass filled his soaring mind. It flew around him like blowing snow. They joined together and he knew immediately what it formed—the Plexiglas

that always surrounded his father in jail. Travis watched as his mother screamed at his father for always making the wrong choices. He stared through the glass and wished he could touch his dad.

Thunder shook the night but Travis continued to dream. An eight-year-old Travis pedaled through the crowded streets of Manhattan. He flew through the area barely missing people and getting flattened by a car. Snow pounded the avenue. Travis stared at two men screaming at a group of people across the street. Guns got drawn and bullets flew. Paulie was just getting out of the car as shots were fired. Travis yelled at his brother to duck. Paulie stood up and a bullet slammed into his chest. Snowflakes melted into a river of blood. Travis moved closer to his brother. His outstretched arms lay against the snow resembling a bloody snow angel.

Raindrops woke him. He rubbed at the tears in his eyes and wished the pain in his heart would disappear. The sky had been blanketed by massive, dark clouds. He felt himself gripping something in his left hand. Travis opened his hand and saw the quarter. He must have pulled it out of his pocket when he was sleeping. He'd never done anything like that before. He'd been acting strangely lately—giving the wallet and money back and just now dreaming about his dad and brother. He never thought about them. It was too hard.

Travis examined the quarter—the front had the standard George Washington image but the back was different. It had a picture of New Mexico from 1912. It was called Land of Enchantment. He yawned and got up. Travis checked his phone and was surprised that he slept over an hour.

He got out his binoculars and scoped the area. The streets were empty. Lightning flashed across the sky followed by distant rumbling. Fat drops of rain splattered against the roof. He stared at the coin. His grandmother would know what it is.

Travis looked toward the street again. He was torn between finding out what he had in his hand and defending his turf. More lightning tore through the sky. The hell with it. Travis decided to take care of the situation on the block later. A cold, heavy rain pounded the roof. Travis headed home.

Travis found a seat on the IRT down town train to the Bronx. A smell like burning tires filled the train car. Most of the train riders dreamed of going to the Caribbean vacations plastered all over the train. Travis remembered these trips as a kid. Long days, ties that strangled his neck, and the creepy feeling he always got going to his grandmother's house.

Grandma Celina's house was called *Casa De Santos*, the house of saints. She could heal any sickness or solve any problem. The train screeched through dark, tight tunnels. Hot, sticky, smelly air came from the open windows. His mother would pray and beg for her son to come back from jail. That was one thing Celina could never do.

She did solve other dilemmas though. Their cousin Hector had been homeless and had tried to commit suicide. His life changed after meeting with Celina. He got a job and eventually got married. His cousin Cindy had the beginnings

of breast cancer when she went to Celina. A week later any signs of it were gone. Celina had succeeded far more than failed.

Travis navigated the crowded streets to Celina's apartment. A group of teenagers huddled near a corner eyed him like a tiger would size up its prey. Travis kept his hand in his pocket matching their glare. After a few tense moments they looked away. Predators knew predators.

Travis took the stairs to the ninth-floor apartment. The elevator was broken again. He caught his breath before he knocked on the apartment. His uncle Luis came to the door quickly. It had been a long while since he laid eyes on Luis. It looked like Luis had shrunk. His head looked miniature like when the tribes in the Amazon would shrink them. Luis's arms and legs looked rail thin in cheap, torn jeans and stained t-shirt. There were pizza boxes and wrappers on the coffee table. The rug had debris all over. Dishes and pots were piled in the sink. None of this bothered Celina though—she was totally blind and stayed in her room most of the time.

Travis hugged Luis and felt his bones and weakness. They spoke of the family and life for a few moments. Luis put his finger to his mouth and pointed toward the kitchen.

"She has been very upset for the last few days." Though Luis spoke fluent English it was still heavily accented. "She was calling your name before you called."

Travis listened intently and noticed that the quarter had appeared in his hand again. As Luis went on Travis thought he heard his name being spoken. Luis stopped and they both stared at the door. Luis grabbed the hand with the quarter.

“She is ready for you.”

Travis looked at the door and turned back to Luis. He felt the same fear he had as a child but this time he didn't have his mother's hand to soothe him. This time he was alone.

He opened the door and heard chanting playing softly from a small radio in the corner. Flickering candle lights danced along the blank walls providing the only light. A long table by the window held potions and books she used to heal. Two wooden chairs were on either side of her bed. A small fan circulated incense and filled the room with the cloying scent of sandalwood. He remembered it from his childhood visits.

Celina was sitting up with her arms extended toward him. Her gray hair looked like straw and her open mouth showed few teeth. Celina's eyes were milky. She reminded him of Luis in her frailty. Her nightgown looked a few sizes too large and fluttered from the fan's breeze. She resembled a ghost.

Travis never got over the resemblance of Celina to his father. His dad's face was etched along the contours of his grandmother's profile. He'd heard when his dad got sent to jail for murder, Celina withdrew into this room. Travis leaned into her arms. Her hug felt comforting. The quarter felt like hot coal in his hand.

She explored his face with her hands. Celina kissed him and he sank into the chair.

“Why are you crying, hijo?”

Her voice was low and soothing. Travis wiped away tears, and had no explanation. The music behind him was mesmerizing. She touched his left hand.

“Our family has been haunted. It is not for me to come to you but you to me if you want to be healed. Is this why you are here?”

Travis had wanted to change and be the better person his brother knew he could. Something had happened when he found this quarter. His dreams weren't filled with violence and going back to school seemed like a possibility now.

“Yes.”

Celina opened his hand. The quarter looked as though it was pulsating. Celina took it and squeezed. For a moment nothing happened. Then the candles went out and the room buzzed with an energy force. Celina moaned and Travis screamed when she grabbed his hand. He felt the quarter pushing out heat between them. Then he heard...

A deep hum came from large machines behind a bed. Beeps filled the area. Ventilators seemed to be sucking the air out of the room. Travis saw a man hovered over the bed. A wave of sorrow hit him when he saw the young girl. Her baldhead made her eyes look large and doe like. Tubes were crisscrossed across her bony frame. Flowers and family pictures surrounded her. A picture of her dog lay on her sunken chest.

The man turned and Travis met the man's hollow gaze. Large, dark bags ballooned under his eyes. His features appeared frozen into a frown. The man's shoulders slumped. The girl's sickness had taken permanent residence in him.

“Genevieve is on life support. She's going to be eight in,” the man slowly checked his watch. “Twenty-two hours and thirteen minutes.” He gently touched her face. “I don't think she's going to make it.”

Travis felt like an intruder. Why was he here?

“She looks like her mother. My wife can’t bear to be here. I sit here and watch her leave us and wonder what she might have become—veterinarian, teacher, doctor. My little girl bought every wounded animal to us. Such a beautiful heart. Maybe she could have impacted the world in a good way.” He caressed her bandaged face. “I don’t know if I can go on without her.”

The man pressed his cheek against his daughter’s. Travis saw tears streaming from the man’s face. The man got up and walked to within inches of Travis.

“You stole my wish.”

Travis expected the man to attack. He would never forget what happened next. The man hugged him and spoke in Travis’s ear.

“I hated everyone when this started. Now...” The man took a deep breath. “I’m not mad anymore. You took my wish. What are you going to do with it?”

A wave of dizziness hit him hard. The final words spoken by the man rattled through his mind. He felt a hand caress his cheek. Travis opened his eyes feeling nauseous and disoriented.

Celina touched Travis’s hand. “Every coin you stole had a wish. What are you going to do?”

Travis opened his hand and stared at the quarter. “I want to be better. But...”

Celina nodded. “It’s very hard to change. I know. Do you remember what your brother would always say to you?”

Travis had tried but could never remember the words. “No.”

Celina sat up. "He said you were the hope of this family. You were the salvation."

Travis slid into her arms.

Ten Years Gone

“Where’s mommy?”

Travis put the milk away and smiled at his daughter. She had taken after his side of the family—dark and curly hair with coal black eyes. He scooped her in his arms and danced around the kitchen.

“Mommy will be home soon, mi amor.”

He gave her a big hug and she skipped out. Travis felt his heart melt. Having Julianna was the greatest gift in the world. He walked to the door and stared outside to his vast backyard. Huge oaks and apple trees surrounded their property. The Cherry Trees were starting to blossom. Honeysuckle lent the air a perfumed fragrance.

Travis went into the business office and turned off his Air Mac. No more transactions for the day. He swore that nothing would ever be more important than his family.

Travis walked to the fireplace and looked at pictures of Luis and Celina. They had passed away five years ago within days of each other. He touched the picture frames. Without them he'd still be on the streets—or dead. His mother had also found salvation. The loan he'd taken to help with the cancer treatment had saved her. He thought of the years in school after seeing Celina. His move to Long Island to get away from the gangs. His mother waking from the fog of pills and alcohol to support him. So much had gone right after that night.

Sun beat through the windows. A sea breeze filled the room. Travis heard Julianna's footsteps down the hall. He checked his watch. It was uncanny how she always came at the same time.

She came holding a circular silver box. Crisscrossing patterns of swords covered the front and back. Engraved on its front was the word Aeternus. It meant forever. Travis went to a couch facing lush trees. Julianna sat next to him and gave him the box. They held hands and Julianna spoke.

“Eternal rest, grant unto her O Lord and let perpetual light shine upon her. May she rest in peace. May her soul and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.”

He kissed her cheek and opened the box. The quarter never failed to amaze him. Sometimes it would glow with brilliant colors. More importantly it represented salvation from a miserable life. Travis had told his wife and daughter of the miracle of this quarter. How important it was to honor Genevieve.

Travis closed his eyes and felt the warmth of the sun’s rays. His daughter nestled into his arms. He was at peace.

“Where were we, mi amor?”

