

## J. D. Smith

### Cost

Ana lifted the check from the dining room table, folding it in half so it wouldn't get lost among the bills in her purse.

This was not a big worry today. Four five-dollar bills and three one-dollar bills were all she had, and last night she was so tired she didn't even smooth them, although a wrinkled bill could get rejected by the Farecard machine or torn apart. When did she have time to take the pieces to the bank and get a replacement? Would the bank people believe her? In San Salvador other people were waved ahead of her in line because they wore better clothes and shoes, and they were whiter. Then, like now, she scrubbed and wiped and mopped in other people's houses, but the soaps and chemicals didn't bleach the *india* out of her. Once she dyed her hair, when she wasn't working after having Ivan, born in Maryland, a United States citizen. Even before the dark roots started showing the blonde hair made her look ridiculous like a clown or a whore with a round belly and floppy breasts swollen with milk and pain. Maybe that would have paid better, and maybe she could have stayed instead of coming to Washington and these cold winters. But it would have been sin, and leading others into sin.

There was no time to wonder about this now, just like there was no time to get groceries last night. By the time she brought Ivan and Mario home from their cousins' house it was nine o'clock or more. She couldn't leave the boys at home, either, and she didn't want them to see all the bad examples. The *mará* boys might try to take her money, or their little gang girls would be outside begging. "*Paisana*. Homegirl. I'm hungry." Maybe they could afford food if they didn't give their money to their pimp boyfriends and spend the rest on tattoos and cigarettes. Those people respected no one, and they believed in nothing.

Ana had twenty-three dollars in cash, yesterday's single check and today's check, with two more to come if nobody canceled at the last moment. Sometimes the second house did, and the third house did not want her to come before two in the afternoon.

There should be more checks and bills, but she couldn't think about that right now. Right now she needed to earn money, starting with the kitchen. It is big, maybe bigger than the shack she grew up in, but it is easy. Mr. and Mrs. Stevens did very little cooking. The stovetop looked almost as shiny as she had left it last time, and she wiped away a little dust with a soapy sponge. Maybe she is imagining the dust. It is a cloudy day, and a light in the ceiling has burned out. Only one spot requires real work: a thin stain of pale white threads in the shape of a cloud. Probably not *papas*. These were not the kind of people who chopped their own vegetables. With a few strokes the stain broke up and dissolved. Definitely not *papas*. They left a more stubborn stain. If their cupboards were any clue, they must have been boiling pasta. Why did rich

people eat so much pasta, anyway? They could afford all kinds of meat and eggs and cheese, but they were eating spaghettis and macaronis like people who had no money at the end of the month.

Maybe that was why some of the people she worked for looked so thin, above all the women. In their tight yoga clothes they looked like twelve-year-old girls. Or boys.

No wonder so many of them didn't have children. They didn't get their cycle, or the men got tired of touching their child bodies.

And so many of the skinny women looked worried when they didn't have anything to worry about. Maybe they looked for things to worry about, or they had pulled their hair back too hard. Did they get so thin because they worried, or did going around hungry make everything look worse?

Some day she would get Mario to write down some of her *recetas* in English, or maybe she could leave each house a *pastel de tres leches* around Christmas, when some people left an extra check. Ana could give, too, if not so much.

She wiped a few crumbs from the toaster tray and swept a few more from the kitchen floor before mopping. It was hard to imagine Mrs. Stevens eating *pastel de tres leches* or any other cake. They did not meet often — Ana came in with her own key most of the time — but when they did Mrs. Stevens was always on her way out of the house, and nervous, rubbing her fingertips across her sharp cheekbones and chin. When Ana called to reschedule she spoke the English she could, but she could hear Mrs. Stevens saying “Meester Estevens, Ana to you want to talk.”

He continued the conversation in Spanish, with his own heavy accent, because like her he did not learn the other language until he was grown. He said he studied Spanish in the university, and in cities where he took classes in the morning and was a tourist the rest of the day. That sounded nice.

Ana had taken her classes at night or on weekends, mostly in half-empty schools. Her first teacher was a tall, thin man who was always trying to kiss the single women on the cheek. Sometimes he missed. He was always offering them rides home too. Ana was protected at the time, since Walter had died only a few months before and she was still wearing her wedding ring.

In a few weeks everyone was protected. A woman started the class by saying Mr. Maxwell was not coming back and she would be the teacher from now on. Ana took her classes for another year until she started getting too tired after a day of work, when she was getting her first white hairs.

Mopping the kitchen took only a couple of minutes. Plunging the mop back into the bucket hardly broke down the suds or darkened the water beneath. It would be wasteful to empty the bucket so soon, and she would try to carry it upstairs to other rooms without spilling too much.

First, though, she took a glass from the kitchen cupboard and filled it from the tap, emptying the tumbler in two long swallows and one short as she pressed her nostrils with the fingers of her free hand, because water in

Washington smelled and tasted like things that were not water. At her last appointment the doctor said to drink more because she was in danger of getting kidney stones, and having them would hurt like giving birth, as if he knew. For that kind of pain, two times in a life was enough. Ana managed a second glass.

The tumbler could have gone into the dishwasher — it was nearly empty — but somebody might notice, and she was there to work and not make work for others. After a hand wash with a dot of liquid soap and a quick drying with a tea towel she placed the tumbler where she had found it next to other tumblers, mugs and wine glasses all mixed together. Some people were happy to live in disorder.

The dining room was easy also. It took only a little dusting and polishing on the sideboard, a few minutes to put the books and envelopes on the table into neat stacks and run the vacuum cleaner over the wood floor half-covered by a rug. The machine roared for a few minutes, but that was all. In another house a pair of little black dogs shaped like dust mops attacked the vacuum, barking and biting. Finally the owner left a note and a jar of peanut butter. She could lead them into the basement, where they could keep barking until she finished. The doctor's house with the orange striped cat just made her sad. It just sat and just watched, part of the time meowing and yowling. For that there was no remedy.

The living room was hard. Ana had to carry the vacuum cleaner up to the next level of the townhouse, and the rest of her supplies took another trip. The extra weight pressed on the place where they had operated behind her right big toe. Pressing the gas pedal would hurt once the car came out of the mechanic's, but she would be off her feet instead of standing on the Metro, then the long escalator ride at the Wheaton stop.

On the second trip up the stairs, soreness touched a different spot in each knee, but this had nothing to do with cleaning the living room. The books and magazines would not pick themselves up off the floor before she vacuumed. Some were mysteries and cookbooks, but many of the titles included the word "economics." She knew Mr. Stevens worked as an economist, but he must have really liked his job.

Once, when she arrived a little early, she asked him what economists do. A doctor could set a bone or prescribe a pill, and a lawyer could take care of your papers or talk for you in court. But an economist? ¿*Quién sabe?* After checking messages on his phone he said, "Economists try to find out how much things cost." At first that didn't sound hard. Here you just looked at a price tag or a sign, and back in her country she could defend herself and bargain down to a good price for a kilo of fruits or greens. But then he said he was talking about things on a very large scale, like how governments should spend their money. That sounded hard enough.

The place behind her big toe kept hurting as she dusted around the stacks of books on the coffee table and end tables. Getting more Tylenol was

something else she meant to do last night. She needed new shoes, too, but for now she had other bills. How much would it cost to get a pair that wouldn't fall apart in three weeks? Maybe some other economist could tell her which shoes to get.

With luck they wouldn't cost too much, since Mario was outgrowing his clothes. How could anyone avoid thinking about those things? One time a few years ago she went with Marta from Santa Tecla to her church, maybe the *anglicanos*, and they sang a hymn about how their saints did not count the cost. Those saints must have been too rich to care or so poor they had nothing to be counted.

But that visit still made more sense than the time Hilda, also from San Salvador, took her to a storefront next to a laundromat where a sign read "Christian Center / Centro Cristiano." There were rows of folding chairs, and a long sermon by a man in a suit and tie who called himself Freddie — a name for a child or a criminal.

There were no statues or pictures in the room, and no candles. It did not seem like a church. It didn't have to be fancy, but it didn't have to look like everywhere else. God was everywhere, sure, like the priests and nuns had told her, but people needed reminders. When she looked at the blank walls her mind started wandering, and she thought about her feet and her bills. The week after that she went back to Mass.

Vacuuming the living room made her right hip hurt a little. She would definitely have to get Tylenol tonight, or maybe she could find the *genérico*. Saving a dollar or two could not hurt, if she had time. She would have to wait until tomorrow to go to the bank and deposit her checks where they wouldn't take out any fees. Putting them in the ATM didn't feel safe. A check disappeared, and perhaps it was not recorded. One hundred dollars would not get a lot of attention from the bankers, and she would have to spend hours fighting and begging for what was already hers. Better to wait.

There was something else. Ana tried to remember as she cleaned the guest room. Nobody had stayed there since last time, and the bed was made she had left it, but a few books were lying around on the tables and the floor, and on a desk a couple of thick-bottomed glasses with a little water in them. The smell was more than water, though: whiskey. They usually didn't leave glasses lying around. When she went back downstairs she would take the glasses, and she could put them in the dishwasher without thinking about it. And why did these people have to drink so much? They had a good life, a rich enough life. They should not need to stop thinking about it, unless they felt guilty about something. Ana thanked God she had somehow remained without *vicios*, even in the hard times.

The guest bathroom didn't take much work, either, and in a few more minutes Ana carried supplies and equipment upstairs to the master bedroom. As she tried to keep her balance, she remembered the other thing. Her sister Veronica had called and asked her to wire some more money. Her husband

had lost another job and the children needed new uniforms for school. Sending money was fine, because that is what families did, but why did she want a *giro*?

Vero, she said one time after another, you are getting less that way. She could use a bank or PayPal and get everything instead of losing part of it in fees. And people might be waiting for someone like Veronica to walk out with cash, but she would not listen.

It would be so much easier if she could take a taxi home. What luxury it would be to take the taxi. No driving, no standing, no worrying about anything, just a few words and handing the driver some money. How much would that be?

Ana counted the cost. Last year when her car was at the mechanic and they were repairing the Red Line, again, she had to go to a funeral for Rosalia's son at the big church on Sixteenth Street.

What she had in her wallet right now was maybe enough for the fare if the rates had not changed and there was no extra to cover high gas prices. But she still could not pay a tip, and that wouldn't be right. The men driving the cabs, and they were all men so far, worked long days like here, and most of them came from somewhere else too: the men in turbans from India, the *morenos* from Ethiopia and Nigeria, the Arabs. It would be hard to face the driver if she ran into him again. It could happen. Once she ran into a friend from primary school at a shopping mall by the Pentagon.

The master bedroom took time to clean. It was another mix of wood floors and rugs, with places for dust to hide under the furniture and not just on top. The pulling and the reaching aggravated her aches, but they were nothing compared to her father's last days of the cancer that made him bend over in pain, with no money to treat it. In a little bit the bedroom was finished, and only the master bathroom remained.

Like the kitchen, the bathrooms made sense, all hard glass, porcelain and tiles, and a surface was clean or it wasn't. You scrubbed until you didn't have to scrub anymore.

This bathroom did not look bad today. Not many specks of toothpaste on the mirror, and no paste of soap and whiskers in the sink. No sprays or lotions stained the ledge in front of the mirror unless those stains were under the pile of coins on the right side. Maybe Mrs. Stevens had cleaned out a purse or a drawer. Quarters were mixed with nickels and dimes, and there were pennies with green spots. Some people were happy to live in disorder.

Should the coins be stacked like the books, or should the pile be left alone? It was strange to handle someone else's money. They could be testing her for some reason, though she hadn't given them one. But what if they weren't? For them this was not a lot of money, but for her a lot. A few quarters and some dimes might be enough to tip the driver. He would prefer all bills, sure, but he would understand.

Ana took a quarter from the top layer of the pile and turned it over in her fingers. Jorge Washington and the eagle, the eagle and Jorge Washington. She could flip the coin and leave the decision to chance.

A thin edge with ridges separated the two sides, and there was no telling which one would come up if she flipped the coin. If she took that quarter, and a few more, they might never know.

She would know, and knowing, she would find it hard to talk to the driver. Knowing, she would do her business and feed her boys and have nothing to tell them when they talked about how the *mará* boys had the cars and the girlfriends. Then it would not be worth the trouble to come here. If all she wanted was to steal she could have stayed home with family nearby and warm weather all year around.

Ana set the coin back on the pile and pushed the pile aside to clean the ledge beneath. Her foot still hurt, and her hip, and the different places in each knee. A taxi ride could offer only so much relief.

