

### God Bless America

The fourteen-month-old infant woke up coughing, wheezing, and crying.

“Ay, *mi hijita*,” Pura said, picking up the baby and patting her on the back to calm her.

“She has a fever. The *pulmonía* is getting worse.”

“Pneumonia,” Cristóbal said. Although Pura had agreed to practice English at home with him, he had to help her with the words she didn’t know.

“Maybe we can buy the medicine this week.”

“*No, mi amor*. We had eighteen dollars left last week, and we should have twenty-two left this week. But the drugstore said the medicine costs a hundred and eighteen dollars. We still have to wait.”

The baby started a coughing fit.

“But if we wait a month, or even a week, she may die. She is very sick.” Worry furrowed Pura’s brow.

Cristóbal took a deep breath and turned his head towards the wall. How could he look Pura in the eyes with what he was about to say?

“I will ask Diego to lend me his gun. There is a convenience store near here. They have money in the cash register.”

“You’re going to rob them? ¡Ay, *Dios mío, no! Es un pecado.*” The reversion to Spanish signaled that Pura was too upset to speak English.

“I know it’s a sin to rob. But it is a bigger sin to let our daughter die. I will lose my soul to save her life. Pray for me.”

Cristóbal took the brown paper bag Pura had fixed for him and walked out the door to the bus stop three blocks away from Econo-Lodgings, where the young couple rented a one-room apartment on a weekly basis.

As soon as the door closed, Pura lit a candle and set it on the table in front of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, whose picture she had taped to the wall. She took her rosary from her pocket, knelt on the floor, and, holding her baby desperately, began a Hail Mary: “*Ave María, llena de gracia . . .*”

\*       \*       \*

Some fifteen minutes later Cristóbal got off the bus on the corner of Thirteenth and Black Street, where the day laborers stood until someone hired them. A few always stood there all day long. Even though he was younger than the others, just twenty-one years old, he had been lucky. Every day for the last two weeks he had worked with a small crew landscaping a rich man’s house. The pickup would come in a few minutes to get him.

Cristóbal reached into the paper bag and pulled out one of the bean and onion burritos Pura had fixed for him. As soon as he took the first bite, he remembered how much better they tasted in Guatemala, where they grew and ground their own corn for the tortillas. But here they

had a carpet instead of a dirt floor, and though they didn't have a cow to give them milk, they could get water from the faucet without having to go to the river.

His crew would finish the landscape job today, and Cristóbal didn't know whether anyone would hire him tomorrow. If he went without work for two or three days, he couldn't pay next week's rent, and they would have to move out and sleep under the bridge again, where his daughter caught pneumonia three weeks ago. Cristóbal turned up the collar of his jacket. Although spring was just beginning, at 6:30 the cold morning wind still cut to the bone.

When a rusty red pickup stopped at the curb seven or eight minutes later, Cristóbal climbed in the bed and sat next to Diego across from two other men.

*"Buenos días, compadre,"* he said, extending his hand.

*"Muy buenos días,"* Diego responded, shaking his hand. *"¿Cómo estás, amigo?"*

*"Mal.* I have to ask you a favor after work."

*"Anything for you."*

Roughly forty minutes later they were on the job. Cristóbal surveyed the flagstone patio and walkways, the retaining walls, and the fountain they had built, the sod they had lain, and the trees and shrubs they had planted. Today they had to set hundreds of petunias, zinnias, and geraniums in the many flowerbeds they had dug around the trees and the palatial house. A warm sun had risen by now, and a refreshing breeze was blowing. But Cristóbal couldn't enjoy the fine spring weather, thinking about what he had to do after work.

When five o'clock finally came, he said to Diego, *"Oye, amigo,* that favor I wanted to ask you."

*"Sí,"* Diego said, ready to help his friend.

At just that moment an olive-green Jaguar pulled up. Out stepped a middle-aged man, who stood for a minute, looked left to right, and smiled with satisfaction. He strolled up to the workers.

“Good afternoon, *Señor* Reichman,” Cristóbal said, more confident of his English, or perhaps just more eager to practice, than the others.

“Hello, boys. You’ve done fine work here. I’m very pleased. Since today’s your last day, I wanted to give you each a little token of my appreciation for a job well done.”

“Oh, that is very kind of you. *Dios lo bendiga*. God bless you,” Cristóbal said.

Mr. Reichman handed them each an envelope, smiled graciously, and turned back to his car.

When he was driving away, Cristóbal peeked in the envelope. To his amazement he saw a hundred-dollar bill. But wait . . . There was another . . . And another . . . ¡*Dios mío!* There were ten of them.

He fell to his knees and raised both his arms to heaven. “*O Señor, gracias, gracias, gracias,*” he cried with tears streaming down his cheeks.

The rusty red pickup seemed to crawl back to the corner of Thirteenth and Black Street, and the bus ride home had never lasted so long. Again and again Cristóbal caressed the envelope in his left jacket pocket, imagining Pura’s face when he showed it to her. Finally they arrived at his stop. He pulled himself up by the pole in front of his seat, stepped out of the bus, and started trudging home with a slight limp. After he had bent over all day to plant flowers, his lumbago was acting up. It had given him trouble ever since last year when he fell from a tree while trimming the upper branches. But now he gave no thought to the pain and hurried home to their room at Econo-Lodgings as fast as he could.

\* \* \*

The man who had been sitting just across the aisle from Cristóbal noticed a white envelope on his seat. Was it a love letter or just grocery coupons? His curiosity got the better of him. Quickly he slid across the aisle, picked up the envelope, and glanced inside. As soon as he glimpsed the money, he stuffed the envelope in the inside pocket of his jacket before anyone noticed.

\* \* \*

“You’ll never believe what happened,” Cristóbal cried when he burst through the door.

“Oh, Cristóbal, what have you done? I prayed to the Virgin for you.”

“I didn’t do anything because the Virgin answered our prayers. Just look.”

He reached in his left jacket pocket, then the right; next he checked his jean pockets front and back; finally he unzipped his jacket and stuck his hand in his shirt pocket. Nothing.

“Oh no, where is it?”

“What?”

“The envelope.”

“¿*El sobre?*”

“Sí,” Cristóbal said, confirming she had understood him. “It was right here. It had a thousand dollars in it.”

“¿*Mil dólares?* Cristóbal, have you been drinking?”

Cristóbal collapsed onto the bed in the center of the room, buried his face in his hands, and sat there mute for the rest of the evening. This couldn’t be happening.

\* \* \*

The front door to the right side of a duplex in a rundown working-class neighborhood opened.

“How was your day at work, honey?” Madeleine said, looking up from her ironing. She sensed that something was different.

“Well, I have good news and bad news, as they say. The bad news is they were laying people off at the factory today, and I got cut,” Chase Argent said.

“One of the girls quit today—she’s pregnant and almost due—so I can get more houses to clean.”

“You won’t have to. The good news is I found a thousand dollars.”

“Get out of here.”

“Some Spanish guy on the bus left it in an envelope on his seat. Must have fallen out of his pocket.”

“Chase, you can’t keep that.”

“The hell I can’t. Finders keepers.”

“But it’s not yours.”

“It is now. Besides, where’s some Spanish guy gonna get a thousand dollars? He probably stole it himself.”

“He could have worked for years to save that money.”

“Hell, those Spanish guys come here from Mexico and take our jobs. Their kids go to our schools for free. They go to the emergency room for free when they’re sick. They’re just a bunch of freeloaders looking for a handout. They’re taking advantage of good, honest, hardworking Americans. It’s about time one of us took something from them.”

“And you’re the good, honest American who’s gonna do it?”

“It’s his fault, not mine. He should’ve been paying attention. I guarantee he wouldn’t give an envelope full of money back to me.”

“I’d rather work the extra hours, and you can find another job too.”

“Like an ex-con can find a job. I finally get one, and then I get laid off. No one wants to hire a guy with a rap sheet for breaking and entering, armed robbery, and credit-card theft. They’re all afraid I’m going to steal from them.”

“But you’ve changed. You have to give that money back. He probably needs it for his family.”

“Why should we give a damn about his family? He ain’t one of us. We gotta watch out for ourselves.”

“No, Chase, I can’t be a part of this. Either you give that money back tomorrow, or I have to leave. I can’t be with you if you go back to your old ways.”

“But it’s not stealing if I find it.”

“It’s the same difference.”

Chase stared at her, speechless.

\* \* \*

At 6:30 the next morning Cristóbal was standing on the corner of Thirteenth and Black Street, eating his bean and onion burrito and thinking about how he would ask Diego to borrow his gun tonight. The next hour brought work to five or six other men but not to him. About a quarter till eight a shiny new pickup pulled up and an Anglo man got out. Cristóbal immediately walked up to him and extended his hand while the remaining jobseekers stood there, waiting to be approached.

“Good morning, sir. I am Cristóbal. You need a strong worker for today?”

“One of my boys just called in sick with the flu, so I’m a man short. You ever laid concrete before, Chris? We have a driveway, a walkway, a porch, and a patio to do.”

“Oh, yes sir. I will do a good job. I promise.”

“Then, you’re hired. Let’s go.”

*Gracias, Señor Dios*, Cristóbal prayed silently. Maybe he would be able to pay next week’s rent after all. If his daughter had to sleep outside again, she would surely die.

Cristóbal tried his best to hide his limp as they walked to the truck. Throughout the day he ignored the pain in his lower back and worked as hard as he could. If he made a good impression, perhaps the Anglo man would hire him again tomorrow.

The crew Cristóbal had joined for the day finished up the job about 4:45. While the Anglo man was inspecting their work, his cell phone rang.

After a short conversation he said, “Hey, Chris, one of my other crews is running late and needs some extra help. They have to finish the job today. I’ll pay you an extra hundred dollars if you come over and help us out.”

“Of course,” Cristóbal said, smiling broadly. He wanted to jump and shout for joy. Now he could buy the medicine, and his daughter would get well.

As they were walking back to the truck at the end of the day, when the second job was finished, the Anglo man said, “You did good work today, Chris. My guy with the flu is gonna be out for a week to ten days. How would you like to take his place?”

“Oh, yes sir. You can count on me. I will work even harder tomorrow.” Cristóbal felt new strength in his tired limbs.

\* \* \*



Chase sat on the bench at the bus stop, muttering to himself. Was he a fool to choose Madeleine over the thousand dollars? Two buses had already come and gone, and the Spanish man hadn't gotten off. He would wait for one more bus, but that was it. If he came back with the money and she wanted to leave, then let her leave. He would still have a thousand dollars.

Finally the bus arrived, and the Spanish man stepped out.

Damn it.

Chase shuffled up to him, dragging his feet, and held out the envelope.

"You left this on the bus yesterday."

"Did you look inside it?" the Spanish man asked, his eyebrows raised and his eyes wide.

"Of course. Here." He held out the envelope a little farther.

The Spanish man's eyes lit up with amazement. "You came to find me and return the money?"

"Just because my girlfriend's making me. Do you want it or not? Take it."

"No, you keep the envelope."

"Huh? Are you crazy? There's a thousand dollars in this envelope."

"I know, and it's all yours," he said with a big smile.

What did that smile mean? This had to be some kind of trap. "What the hell are you trying to pull? Are you going to call the police and tell them I stole it? I can't go back to prison."

"No, amigo. In my country they say: *No te preocupes por el día de mañana porque el día de mañana se cuidará de sí mismo.*

"What the—"

"That means 'Don't worry about tomorrow because tomorrow will take care of itself.'"

“That doesn’t make any sense. Man, there’s a thousand dollars here.” Chase quickly looked around in all directions. Men and women still getting off the bus, others waiting to get on—they all looked like undercover cops to him. Were they just waiting for the signal to arrest him?

“I have work for another week,” the Spanish man said. “I have a wife who loves me. My daughter is going to get well. And I have saved my soul. What more could I want? Today I am the richest man in the world. You keep the money.”

No, this was too easy. It had to be a setup. With his criminal history, a grand larceny charge could mean another ten years in the joint. No way was he going to fall for this one.

“I don’t trust you Spanish guys, and I don’t believe a word you say.” Chase dropped the envelope on the ground, turned, and hurried off.

\*       \*       \*

Cristóbal stooped to pick up the envelope. When he straightened up, he looked inside. The money was all there. This time he folded the envelope and stuffed it into the right front pocket of his jeans, where it wouldn’t fall out.

The man nearest to Cristóbal sat on a bench waiting for a bus. Apparently, he had paid no attention to the entire scene between Cristóbal and the other man.

Cristóbal looked at him and said: “First an *americano* gives me an envelope with a thousand dollars and then another *americano* gives it back to me. God bless America!”

The man gave no indication that he had even heard Cristóbal. No matter. Cristóbal set out for home, not feeling the pain in his lower back or noticing his slight limp. Just wait till he told Pura what had happened!

*Glossary of Names*

Cristóbal: Spanish for “Christopher,” the Christ-bearer (Greek). He is meant to be a Christ-figure.

Pura: the pure one (Spanish)

Diego: possibly the “protector” (Spanish, ultimately from Hebrew),

Mr. Reichman: rich (*reich*) man (German)

Magdalena: the repentant sinner

Chase: a hunter or “chaser” (Middle English)

Argent: silver, money (French). Chase Argent is a chaser of money.