

The Value of a Dollar by Camden Chin '26.

Federico was watching Cadillacs when Jembo lost a finger. He should have been working, Baba was watching, but as always, he couldn't help himself. The first two cars had been modern, the ones family men buy for their wealthy wives, big SUVs with large chassis. But, the third, the third was modded for drag. Green, a wagon, with tinted windows and gunmetal rims and a new engine. 550 horsepower, give or take, sleek and beautiful. He couldn't stop staring at it, discreetly from the patio, the rag clutched tight in his hand, spray bottle in the other. Its owner knew cars and had money. What was it doing here crawling down the main street of Chester?

"Excuse me!"

Federico jolted to find Baba towering over him. Baba was large, from Lagos, with helping hands, and a fedora, and a black suit. The manager. Federico looked guiltily up at him, but Baba was staring straight ahead.

"Excuse me, man," Baba said again, and Federico scurried to get out of the man's way. Federico watched Baba disappear into the front of the restaurant. Where had the Cadillac gone? It must have turned down a side street. The hour was late. Maybe, it was heading for the highway—Free, open road. Federico continued to wipe absentmindedly. The table was uneven on the cobblestone sidewalk. It rocked back and forth with every swish of the rag. Where was Baba? He would have something to level it... Baba was inside. *But, Baba never went inside, not until the tables were up and the chairs put away.*

It was then, at last, that Federico realized that something was wrong. The other busboys, Carlos and Jembo, had disappeared. Ava Grace was still chatting with a pair of elderly men on the patio, her hands on her hips, but Baba was gone. Rob, the fat owner, was gone too.

Something was off. Federico put down the rag and silently made his way over to the entrance of the restaurant. What was going on? Staring through the glass doors, nothing looked amiss inside...

“No.”

Someone grabbed his arm. Ava Grace. He had not seen her come up behind him.

“Dico, no,” she said, shaking her head at him, “Stay out here”

He looked up at her. Ava Grace couldn't have been more than three years older than him, but she looked fully like a woman. Blond hair and a spray tan that came from a bottle and a tiny stud on the side of her nose. He had always been short for his age. He was the skinniest and the slightest in his year.

“What is going on?” he asked. He looked again through the restaurant doors. Sally, who always called it like she saw it, was tending bar. Patrons were still chatting at their booths. But, aside from Ava Grace, all the waitresses were gone.

Ava Grace motioned quietly at her left hand, drawing across her middle finger in a neat cut.

“Trust me, stay here,” she said. Ava Grace ducked inside the restaurant and disappeared. Federico paused wondering. Outside on the patio, tables 106 and 205 still needed to be reset. There were plates left on 101 and 311 too. If Rob, the owner, or Baba saw him away when there was work to be done... but, they couldn't fire him. Nobody worked at Vetrina, not really, not legally. It was cheaper that way, his father had once told him that. Cheaper for everyone. Everything under the table. So, what was happening? Federico followed Ava Grace's lead and ducked inside the restaurant.

They were all in the back, in the kitchen. He could see that now. Sally was making gin and tonics at the bar and drinking a non-alcoholic beer. But the rest of the staff, they were in the back. Ava Grace had been pointing at her hand...

Quiet as a ghost, he slipped through the restaurant, moving around the talking people. Suburban moms in their Burberry shawls twittering and frat guys from the University who only ordered the spaghetti and meatballs and gorged themselves on the free bread. Federico was so quiet that no one looked up when he passed by. He had always been quiet. Quiet feet, quiet hands. It's what Jembo had said when he first met Federico. *Carlos, look, his hands are so soft.*

Federico slipped inside the kitchen. The curtain moved aside for him like a cloak. But, the kitchen was empty too. There were plates with food waiting at the cooks' station, waiting for waitresses. There were still dishes in the sink. They had just left-

"Do you see this!? Do. You. See. This!?" Rob's voice boomed out of the open backdoor from the parking lot. They were all outside. "Do. You. See. This!?" Federico moved to stand at the doorway.

There was a strange sight out in the parking lot behind the restaurant, under the moon, under the phosphorescent flood lights. The waitress and cooks and dishwashers and busboy stood solemnly in a circle: Ava Grace, Carlos, Em, Emily, Tiana, and more Federico didn't know. Many were staring at their feet. All except for Jembo, who was kneeling in the center on the ground, clutching something in his hands. And Rob, the fat cat, the restaurant owner, was standing over him with a knife. He wore the same red pin-stripe shirt he always did tucked into his pants and he was fat and drove a Range Rover. The knife was not a kitchen knife, it was large like a cleaver with a wide blade, and it was dull.

“Step aside, Move,” Federico turned. Baba was coming out of the kitchen behind him, shoving Federico out of the way. “It is a cruel thing, Rob, what you are doing!” The waitress turned to look at him, they all faced Federico and the thunderous Baba. There were tears tracks on Ava Grace’s face, luminous.

“No, Baba, no Baba, it’s not,” said Rob. The owner’s hair was slick and combed back and he was not smiling; there was cruelty in every ounce of him. The waitresses were still crying softly. Jembo was crying on the ground too, eyes squeezed together. “And it’s already done,” Rob said.

He’s lost a finger, Federico realized, He’s lost a finger. Rob’s cut off Jembo’s finger.
Under the streetlights and the moon, the middle stump was bleeding. Baba was built like a wall and he pushed through the crowd toward Rob.

“You are a cruel man!” Baba said.

“Really!? What am I supposed to do with him?” Rob was yelling.

“Fire him!” Baba said, “You are supposed to fire him.” Baba stood taller than Rob and wider. Rob was pear-shaped and fat.

“But what about my fucking wine!?” Rob said, “He’s a thief. What am I supposed to do? I can’t turn him in to the police. He can’t go to the police. They’ll deport him. They’ll deport all of them. They’ll arrest me”

“He. Is. A. Child,” Baba said, “Jembo, stand up, I’ll take you to the hospital.”

“I can’t! I CAN’T” Jembo was screaming, he was rocking back and forth.

“You can. I’ll say you’re my son,” Baba was hauling Jembo up, and something dropped from Jembo’s hands. It was the finger. Red, and gushing blood. The finger. Federico looked down at his own small hands and flexed his fingers.

The waitress moved and Ava Grace was retching. Baba knelt and picked up the finger, using his hat as a glove.

“All of you!” Baba said, “Back inside. Get back inside—”

“No,” said Rob, “No. Wait. No. Listen, Tiana, Em, Emily, Miani, Mirriam, Ava Grace. Federico, yes, even you, Federico, none of you work here. You listen, all of you. I can fire Baba. Baba, I can fucking fire. But, *you*,” He was staring at Federico, into his soul, “*You* don’t work here. If I catch any of you stealing from me again, I’m not going to go to the police, I can’t. *This* is what it’s going to cost,” Jembo moaned on the ground, writhing like an animal, “A finger. Alright, Baba, I’m done...I’m done. I’m going home.”

“You can’t,” said Baba, “I’m taking Jembo to the hospital.”

“You can’t tell me what to do!” said Rob, “My restaurant.”

“But, I’m leaving,” said Baba, matter of factly, “Someone needs to run the restaurant and I’m leaving.”

“YOU CAN’T TELL ME WHAT TO DO!”

“But what if something else goes wrong,” cried Baba, “I’m leaving to fix your mess! You need to stay. Come on Jembo.” Baba dragged the boy up to his feet with his right hand, while the left balanced the hat, turned inside out, full of its cursed contents. “It’s clotting, Jembo, you will live, I assure you.”

Baba led Jembo towards a red Toyota. 2001 model with a broken tailpipe and a rickety transmission. In a moment they were gone, the car going out of the parking lot and onto the side street. Rob, the fat cat, still had murder in his eyes.

“Everyone go back to work,” Rob said, “Federico, stay.”

The waitresses filed back inside. Ava Grace was still crying softly, and Bill too, the lone waiter. And Bill never cried except when they had phoned him to tell him that his mother had passed.

They all filed inside leaving Federico and Rob. Rob was still holding the knife.

“Are you okay?” Rob asked, walking over, Federico nodded. His heart was beating in his brain, the sound was drowning out everything. “I’m sorry you had to see that. I told Ava Grace to keep you inside.” Rob put his hand on Federico’s shoulder, there were sweat stains under his armpits and he smelled strongly like cologne. “But, it might toughen you up. That’s what you wanted, wasn’t it? When you first came here, to be toughened up.” But, it wasn’t Federico who wanted that, it was his father. His father, who had wanted that when he had first marched Federico through the Vetrina doors and given him to Rob.

Federico nodded and Rob scratched the boy’s black curls with the hand that wasn’t holding the knife and then disappeared inside. There was a little trail of blood leading back inside.

The next hour was full with more people than was normal for a Thursday night. The hostesses sat people with a smile, and the waitresses smiled and smiled. And Rob played Baba’s manager role, going personally to pour wine for groups of pretty women and smiling with all his

teeth. Federico did not speak except to answer questions of the guests and even that he mumbled. He was thinking of Jembo's finger, curled in Baba's hat.

It was half past eleven and Carlos and Federico were busy clearing a big party's set of tables outside on the patio when Federico noticed that the Cadillac was back. It was still green and modded with money, and it was moving at a snail's pace past the restaurant like it was watching them. Federico tried to get a good look at the driver, but all he saw were the man's tan hands which seemed to have all their fingers.

"Do you know whose car is that?" Federico asked Carlos, but the older boy didn't. What was the car doing? It turned again disappearing down the side street.

Rob went home when the rush ended at twelve-thirty and there were only a few tables left inside with people. Then, the waitresses did, one by one, they went home and gave Carlos the tip-outs. Five percent of what each of them had made. The waiter and the waitresses. They had done well tonight, the money was going to be good.

Federico and Carlos, because Jembo was gone, put the patio to bed and then the small side of the restaurant. They swept the big side and put the stools up until all that was left was them and Sally. Sally, the bartender, was still there with them. The bussers sat up at the bar and Carlos began to count the money.

"It's really good tonight," said Carlos.

"I know," said Sally, "It feels very Mayan. Like a sacrifice. Blood for, well....," and then they all grimaced because the joke if it had really been that, had hit too close to home.

"Has he done this before?" asked Federico quietly, Carlos shook his head. Sally, laughed her Sally laugh.

“No, but he's psychotic,” she said, “I’m looking for a new job. Don’t know if I’ll find one.”

Carlos grimaced.

“ I liked working here, Sally,” Carlos said, “The restaurant raised me.”

“Me too,” said Sally, “But, we all need to leave. I worry about Baba. I wonder what Rob will do to him. Here’s your money, Carlos,” she said, “From the bar. Lock up, I’m going home.”

She handed him two twenty-dollar bills.

The money was exceptionally good, nearly 150\$ for each of them on a Thursday night, but maybe, it was good because Jembo was gone.

“I’ll tip Jembo out from mine,” Carlos said, “When I see him after school.”

Then, he went home, and Federico sat alone on the curb outside Vetrina in the dark.

There were hardly any people out in Chester. The drunks would come out tomorrow on Friday. Federico counted his money again, dollar by dollar. His hands felt like strange appendages. He didn’t like them. It was nearly two am. He would have to go to school in the morning.

There was a quiet murmur, a hiss, and a start. An engine. He knew that engine. He looked up to see the green Cadillac had returned, like an animal, alone, driving down the empty street. Federico stood up and backed away from the curb. He tucked his money away. The car stopped in front of Vetrina, waiting.

Federico opened the door and got in the back, and then the car drove off.

“Good night tonight?”

“No, Papa,” Federico said, “No.”

His father looked back at him smiling.

"I'm so happy you work there," he said, "I'm so happy. Rob and I worked at Vetrina too when we were your age. It's so good for you, Federico. It's so good for him to take you in. I'm gonna invite him to the shore again this summer. It'll be fun."

They had reached the highway, going fast. The road was empty.

His father was still talking.

"You always ask me for money, but now you know what fifty dollars feels like. The blood and sweat to make the money, Mijo. It's a good lesson to learn."

"Why were you checking on me?" Federico asked. His father laughed.

"I had the night off. I was curious. I like to see you out there washing tables."

The blood and sweat to make the money. Federico thought of Jembo and Baba, probably in some hospital bed somewhere. Jembo had been stupid to steal wine and he had been stupid to get caught too, but Rob had been cruel.

"You're a rich boy," his father said, "Actually, no. I'm rich, but you will be richer than me. You know what it feels like to work. It's so good for you. Working with your hands."

They were home now. They were driving up the driveway.

"How much you make tonight?" his father asked. Federico shrugged. "Ah. It doesn't matter. It's yours. You can do whatever with it. Buy a car."

Buy a car. He couldn't drive one yet. Buy a car. Buy strong fingers and a larger frame, that's what he wanted, like Baba. *I want to be tough.* Buy a car.

"Okay, time for bed," his father said, "Time for bed. Tomorrow is Friday, the money, I think, will be even better."

And it would be if Jembo was still gone. *Work with your hands.*

