

Cigarette Money

By Joe Romano

Green and brown glass rains down and the smell of liquor hangs in the air like a frat party at dawn. He stood staring at the bloody wreckage of what had recently resembled the face of a handsome, 50-something Middle Eastern man. A man who just moments ago had been standing in front of him, pointing a pistol he'd produced from God knows where.

He shook himself, attempting to clear his head and focus.

"Shit! Shit, shit, shit!"

With his free hand he grabbed the pile of bills lying on the counter top and shoved his gun into his waistband with the other. Turning, he bolted toward the glass doors, side-stepping the bloody, yet nearly perfect nose, lying near the magazine racks. Outside and away from the cameras, he removed his hoody and sunglasses and walked purposefully to his car parked around back of the 7-11. He climbed into the driver's seat, slammed the door, and promptly threw up in his lap. By the time he'd finished retching the red and blue lights of the patrol car blocking his exit were already reflecting in his rear view mirror.

Blake looked at the balance on their monthly Visa bill and released a sigh. He couldn't understand it; \$679.00 more than they were bringing in each month. He thought they'd been so careful.

Six months ago, when the factory had decided to move forward with some temporary layoffs (though not before promising Blake he'd be one of the first brought back when things picked up), he and Gayle had eliminated nearly everything but the bare essentials. They'd cancelled the cable and cut the phone down to just basic service. They never ate out and Gayle brown-bagged her lunch to school each day. When shopping for groceries he no longer purchased anything that they'd agreed was "unnecessary." No more potato chips, soda, frozen

meals, pre-packaged snack-type food of any kind. Even alcohol had been eliminated. So why were they still coming up short?

He scrolled through the purchase details looking for something out of the ordinary. Finding a \$119.00 charge at a downtown department store he remembered the dress his 16-year old daughter had needed for a school dance. Sighing again, he recalled how his wife had gone all over town, combing clearance racks in search of something affordable, yet still fashionably acceptable. It saddened him that his daughter had to suffer for his failures.

And then there were the cars, both over 15-years old; both on life support. Always in need of another procedure to replace some aged appendage. The \$412 charge from Joe's Automotive was the result of a Tuesday morning three or four weeks ago when the Sentra's water pump decided to give up the ghost.

That brought him to about \$500 and change. Looking further he found a few charges for local pizza joints, nights when neither he nor Gayle had been up to making dinner, and the kids refused to choke down another grilled cheese sandwich. That kicked it closer to \$600. Throw in a co-payment or two at the doctor's office, maybe a prescription and there you go. It comes in and it goes out, with nothing getting saved for those monthly surprises.

Pouring a glass of milk, Blake turned on the radio and dialed in an all-night 70's music station that broadcast out of a suburban strip mall. He sorted through the bills again, deciding on which to make the minimum payment and which he would allow to go delinquent. The bills stamped and ready to be mailed, Blake pulled a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and looked inside. He counted 7. Slipping one out, he tucked it into the corner of his mouth and struck a match. And then there were six; the last 6 he'd be smoking, since cigarettes had just made the unnecessary list. He'd been meaning to quit anyway.

He drank the milk and smoked and listened to the radio. Chicago's Colour My World segued into the news, and reports of an armed robbery at a downtown gas station. Blake listened about how two men with a "large handgun" had made off with over \$700 in cash and

lottery tickets from an AM/PM mini-mart.

“Seven-hundred dollars,” Blake thought to himself. “Just enough to cover the credit card, with a few bucks left over for beer and smokes.”

Blake crushed out his cigarette. He stood up and finished his milk, put the glass in the dishwasher, switched off the lights and the radio, and went upstairs to bed.

The next morning, after dropping his 10-year old son at school, Blake carried in the newspaper he’d found in the drive-way. He poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down at the kitchen table with the paper. There was a short article about the gas station robbery he’d heard about on the radio the night before. Two men, between the ages of 25-35 and of an indeterminate race, had brandished a large automatic pistol and demanded money along with several rolls of lottery scratchers. The proprietor, one Kwon Lee, escaped injury. Between the cash and the tickets, police now estimated that the thieves got away with nearly \$1,200. The proprietor was quoted in the article:

“This happens at least 3 or 4 times a year. It’s just one of the hazards of (working in a convenience store). Fortunately, I’ve never been hurt. I just give them what they want and report it to the insurance company. It’s not worth getting hurt.”

Blake reread the article three times, scratching thoughtfully at the two days worth of bristle under his chin. Then he fired up cigarette number six, sipped his coffee and flipped through the paper to the Help Wanted section.

“Let me try to figure it out and I’ll let you know,” Blake said, and hung up the telephone. Sitting at the kitchen table he placed his face in his hands and rubbed his eyes. Gayle had made plans to visit her mother and he’d made the mistake of bringing her car to the garage for a safety inspection prior to the 300 mile drive. The mechanic had just called to report he’d found nearly \$1,500 worth of necessary repairs; “necessary” if the safety of your wife and kids means anything to you that is.

“Life always comes down to money,” Blake thought to himself. People are forever saying money can’t buy happiness, but that’s just bullshit spewed by people who have money. The frustration of knowing that you’re capable of doing any one of the hundreds of jobs you’ve applied for, but yet you’re never given the opportunity to prove yourself; the despair of being nearly 50-years old and unable to support your family, truly makes one understand the mindset of suicide.

Upstairs in his bedroom closet Blake unfolded a stepstool, and from the top shelf removed a gray metal box from beneath a stack of sweaters and some back-issues of BAM magazine. Sitting on the bed he dialed the combination lock and opened the box revealing a black Smith & Wesson revolver.

He removed the gun and passed it from his right hand to his left and back again. The gun was heavier than he remembered. He’d bought it nearly 20-years ago, a knee-jerk reaction to having his car stolen. The world was clearly going to hell, he’d thought, and citizens were left with no choice but to arm themselves. He’d probably gone to the firing range three times at most in those 20-years, and he’d never needed it for protection. When the kids started growing up he’d locked it away in the closet.

Now he opened the cylinder and dumped the cartridges out on the bed then closed the cylinder. He pointed the gun at the floor and dry fired it. Even knowing that the gun was empty he still cringed slightly. He’d never felt comfortable holding the gun. It looked so natural on TV and in movies, but it didn’t feel natural in real life. He stood before the mirror holding the gun. He didn’t even look natural, though he had no idea exactly what makes someone look natural holding a gun. Perhaps his features weren’t rugged enough.

Blake reloaded the gun and placed it back in the lock box. He sat on the bed holding the box in his lap. He thought about 7-11’s, and Burger Kings and liquor stores. He thought about Kwon Lee and about how getting robbed is almost part of the job. Could it be that easy?

“Jesus. I don’t think I’m quite that desperate yet,” he thought, and put the box back on the top shelf under the sweaters.

But the next night Blake found himself turning into the parking lot of a Loaf 'N Jug convenience store, despite having just come from Safeway. He didn't park right in front of the store and he didn't get out of his car. He just sat there and watched; counting the number of customers coming and going, the clerk behind the counter reading a magazine between ringing up shoppers, the cars driving through the parking lot. He thought about risk assessment and exit strategies. Then he drove home.

Over the course of the week Blake cased at least a dozen different establishments, from burger joints to dry cleaners. And the more he watched, the more confident he felt. Kwon Lee had been right; nobody wants to get hurt. Like Tyler Durden, Brad Pitt's character in Fight Club had said, the average citizen will do just about anything to avoid a fight, particularly if one of the participants is holding a gun, Blake thought.

That night, Blake sat across from his wife at the table and picked at his supper. They discussed his job hunt, her day at school, and their son's struggles in math. But in his mind he thought of checkout clerks and dialogue.

Four nights later he hit a fish & chips place. It was 8:45 on a Tuesday night; a time, Blake had reasoned, when it would be relatively slow. He had also deemed it wise to follow the old adage, "don't shit where you eat," and had picked a place he'd never visited. He sat in his car for a few minutes to confirm the place was empty and attempted to quiet his heart, which was threatening to beat its way out of his chest. He wore a baseball hat and a hoody, waiting until he entered the restaurant to don the sunglasses. Knowing that time was critical he walked straight up to the elderly Filipino man at the counter and, lifting his sweatshirt just high enough to show the gun in his waistband, politely ordered the man to empty the register. The man said nothing. He didn't even look frightened, almost as if he'd been expecting Blake to ask for the money along with the Captain's Platter. He popped open the cash drawer and removed several thin stacks of bills. He even wrapped them in a rubber band before placing them on the counter.

"Do you want the change too?" he asked calmly.

Writing Raw

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“No, just the bills,” Blake said, and picked them up. “Now lay face down on the floor and count to 100. Don’t get up. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Blake had seen this done in a movie and figured it was a smart thing to do. Better than having someone watch you leave and possibly recognizing your car, or shooting you in the back. The man knelt slowly and flattened himself on the floor. Blake backed away from the counter, stuffing the roll of bills in his pocket. When he was sure that the man was down he turned and walked out the door, keeping his head down. Once outside he moved quickly, but not fast enough to draw attention.

He’d parked facing toward the street; door unlocked, key in the ignition. Risky yes, but better than fumbling with keys in a panic. He slid the gun under his seat with his left hand while simultaneously starting the car with his right. Glancing in his rear-view, he saw the top of a head peeking over the counter; so much for following directions. He threw the car in gear and gunned it toward the street, making a quick right and then he was out of sight of the fish man. Even if he were able to identify the car, there must be thousands of silver Sentras around. Nevertheless, best to get it home and off the streets as the fish man was likely on the phone to the police. Once home, he sat in the garage listening to the tick of the car’s engine, getting his mind back to the present. Shortly, he got out of the car and removed the strips of duct tape he’d used to disguise his license plate. Balling them up, he tossed them into a corner of the garage. Then he grabbed the gallon of milk from the back seat, his alibi for having gone out, left the gun under the seat and went inside.

The next morning he searched the paper and some of the local news websites. Sure enough there was a small article about a robbery at Ahab’s Fish & Chips. The robber had been described as a white male about 6 ft tall, medium build, between the ages of 25 and 40. Blake did not feel particularly worried about the detailed description. He’d counted the cash after Gayle had gone to bed; \$465.00. He put the cash inside the pocket of a jacket hanging in the hall closet, and the next day transferred it to the lock box that used to hold his handgun.

The following Tuesday he knocked off a Subway, following the same MO as before – a

Tuesday night, about 15 minutes before closing, at a shop he'd never visited. This time he'd made a point of not shaving for about four days prior in order to add a little something to his disguise. There was a Hispanic girl behind the counter when Blake approached, sunglasses and hoody in place.

"Don't scream. Don't panic. Just relax and give me the money," he said, lifting his sweatshirt to reveal the pistol.

"Son of a bitch," she said almost under her breath, her eyes looking past Blake's shoulder for a possible rescue from a passer-by. "Fuck you."

"Shit," Blake thought. He'd assumed it would go easily like the fish man. Blake removed the gun from his waistband and pointed it at her chest, carefully shielding any view of the gun with his body. He raised his voice. "You stupid, bitch. Open the register, put the bills in a stack and shut your fucking mouth, or I will kill you." With that, thankfully, she buckled; her hands visibly shaking as she emptied the tray of bills. Blake wondered if she noticed that his hands were also shaking.

"Get the ones underneath too," he said, knowing that bills of larger denominations were typically placed under the tray. She pulled out a fifty from beneath the tray and added it to the stack. Blake reached across the counter and grabbed the money, folding the bills in half before stuffing them in his back pocket. "Now lay down flat on the floor and count to 100. Do not look up, do not stand up. Do nothing but count and breathe and this will be over. And don't ever talk back to a man with a gun again. Your life is worth more than a few hundred bucks."

Blake backed out of the shop. Removing his hoody and sunglasses, he ran past the closed real estate office and the nail salon, around the building to where he'd left his car. He drove home very carefully.

Over the course of the next few months, Blake managed to work out a pretty regular routine. Each Saturday he would stop shaving. Over the weekend he'd consult his list of

possible targets, making a final decision by Sunday. After church on Sunday night he'd create some excuse to go to the store, or to get gas while Gayle made dinner. He would then scope out his next target. Sitting in his car he'd picture the whole event from start to finish. When he was comfortable with every detail he'd drive home. On Tuesday night he'd pull the job, and once home, shower and shave.

The remainder of the week he was a regular Joe, working a part-time job and helping to raise his family. By paying cash for groceries and gas, he'd managed to reduce their credit card bill by nearly \$1,500 a month. He still stuck mostly to buying only those items deemed necessary, so as not to arouse Gayle's suspicion, however he did buy a bottle of Cabernet each Friday, which Gayle enjoyed at the end of a long week. He also decided that maybe he wasn't quite ready to give up his cigarettes. Through careful spending, he managed to build a little "surprise fund" in their savings account, and after two months he even began making plans to take the family to Disneyland come springtime, though he kept this plan a secret.

On the second Tuesday of the eleventh month, Blake received a call from the factory, telling him to report back to work on the first of following month. Elated, Blake shared the news with Gayle, promising to bring back an expensive bottle of Cabernet with which to celebrate.

"Maybe you could also shave in celebration," she said, as Blake headed out the door.

"Just as soon as I get back," he winked.

The End

Joe Romano bio: Joe Romano is a Northern California-based writer. His work has appeared in the SoMa Literary review, Out of the Gutter, Literary Beginnings and in his mother's scrapbook.