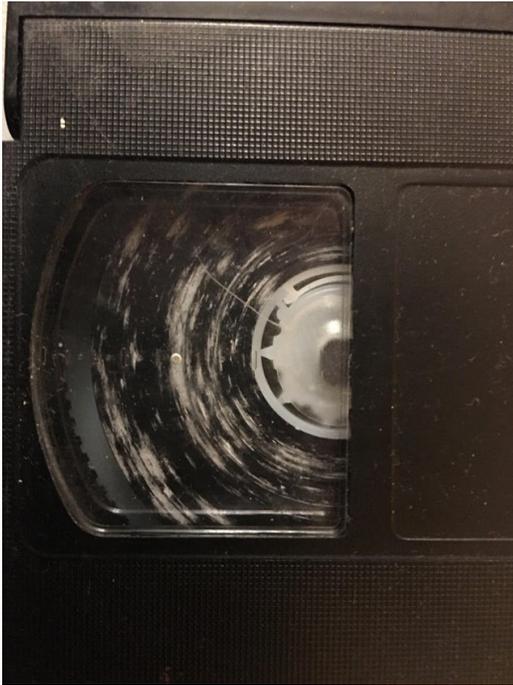


4. The Jar

by Carla Zaccagnini



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he house in São Paulo—the house with the pool—had an outlet with a hidden safe. The neutral, the hot slot, or the ground was in actual fact a lock. It was possible to take out the entire metal box from the wall by turning a long nail. And in that hole was the key that would open the box to reveal what we had learned to call “the burglar’s dollars.” The idea was that, in case of an armed robbery, and after a certain resistance the length of which had to be defined in situ, the contents of this safe would be surrendered.

Meanwhile, the true treasure was much better concealed. The savings, in US dollars and some German marks, were rolled up in cylinders of the same height and different thickness, and stuffed inside a plastic jar with a screw cap that I recall to be red, sealed with silicone. The jar was buried, like a good treasure, in a hole covered with a fine layer of cement. It was hidden underneath the bidet in my parents’ suite. The bathroom, in turn, was accessible through a door that was behind another door. Almost a secret passage: it was a wall with closets, the third wardrobe was a hallway.

The bathrooms of this house were enormous, almost the size of the bedrooms. And back then they still had the floors, tiles, and artifacts chosen by the previous inhabitants at the end of the 1970s. In the master bathroom the tiles on the floor were brick color, and those on the walls were bright orange, more intense at the edges and subdued in the center. They had white arabesque decorations made with little white dots similar to sesame seeds in relief. That early morning, I found them covered in torn dollars.

My maternal grandmother used to dry the handkerchiefs like this. She washed them and put them on the bathroom walls, stretching them with the pressure of her long fingers. Because of the water, they stuck to the tiles and became “so well ironed,” she said. She would say this with a hidden sense of pride, with a smile that wasn’t common on her face. It was the subdued pride a scientist may display, when explaining to a colleague, in a bar, the enviable results of an experiment about which he doesn’t want to brag but can’t resist to partially reveal among other themes and below other voices.

My father had bought a few cars and needed money. He unscrewed the bidet and moved it to the side. He broke the cement and took away the dirt. He snapped the seal, put his hand inside and pulled it back immediately. Inside the jar, the money had become a paste, as if it had returned to a previous state. From dust to dust, only more humid.

One by one—or rather: fraction by fraction—he separated the bills. As if he were peeling a very fine and brittle onion layer by layer. In the center he found a ball that had already become a solid object, like the stone of an avocado that also holds its secrets. He stuck the bills he could save, in pieces, to the tiles. They stayed there the whole next day and maybe even one more. My father remembers ironing them; I don’t think that would have been necessary.

He called his friend Jorge, the one who was almost like a brother, who then came from Buenos Aires to travel with him to New York. Even when completely ironed out, money that has been moist takes up more space. It requires more air around it, as if it’s afraid of drowning again. They stuffed the dollars inside VHS cases and hid those between clothes in their luggage. I imagine the kind made of plastic, that opened like books. If the dates coincide, it’s possible that they were of the many tapes my father had bought from the local video store when DVDs became the norm and they had to switch out their entire holdings. There were movies of all kinds, from Snow White to Amarcord. Over time, the tapes had become moist: on both sides of the rolled up film you could see white lines in a spiral shape. Never again were these tapes rewound, as one had to do prior to returning them.

They opened a bank account in the Banco de Galicia, where he could deposit the most passable half of the dollars, those that were, as Nacha Guevara sings in Vuelvo, “rotos pero enteros” [“broken but in one piece”]. The rest they brought by train to Washington D.C. to exchange in the US Mint.

In the first office, they were referred to another one. But on their way out and seeing a bank on the corner, they thought they would try to deposit them at once and avoid yet another taxi ride. They started by showing two one hundred bills. The clerk went inside to consult and came back a while later to say that, if they would be so kind to wait, a staff member would come to assist them. And no, that they shouldn’t leave for lunch.

The staff was a man and a woman, both young, tall, and beautiful, according to the description I recently obtained. They asked if there were more bills, they asked how many, they wanted to hear the story, they asked to follow them. They all got into a blue sedan (I imagine it to be of a dark metallic hue). The back doors did not have door handles inside, nor did they have controls to open the windows. Any month of the year, it would feel too warm inside. They arrived at a garage and were received by men in dark suits. They were accompanied to a small room that had a wall with an inscription warning: "anything that is said can be used against you". They invited them to have a seat on chairs fixed to the ground with silver-colored chains. Opposite them, one of the men sat down, unbuttoning his jacket so as to reveal the grip of a handgun.

Pretty much the same questions: how many bills, why did they hide them pretending to bring movies. Why did they not declare them? It was 30,050 US dollars, they hid them because in their countries it was forbidden to have foreign currency, and, yes, they had in fact declared them by ticking the box next to "more than ten thousand." No-one had asked them how much more, which was later confirmed by a customs agent.

He left and came back. He rocked back and forth in the chair. He looked askance, a half smile. Do you want to hire a lawyer? He left and came back. Serious-looking. They are all false. He rocked in the chair. That's not possible, with all due respect. They were acquired in different years, from different sources, they can't all be false. He left and came back. As he sat down, he straightened his suit. Serious-looking. Half are false. He looked them in the eyes. That's still not possible, as I told you, they arrived in my hands in different moments, in different places. Moreover, we know dollars, we have made a little machine—see how interesting—that reacts to the magnetic ink and warns you when a dollar isn't real. He made himself comfortable in the chair, stretching backwards. Call us tomorrow and we'll give you more news. We suggest you don't leave Washington. He recommended a hotel.

It's important to clarify that all of this is remembered by someone who believes to have ironed those dollars (and maybe a few German marks, too), even if they had already been stretched by the prolonged contact with the tiles. It's possible that nothing actually occurred in this particular way.

Jorge called at ten am and didn't get any news. He called again and they were expected. This time, they were seated in chairs without chains. They received a brown envelope, requests for apologies, a kiss on the cheek from a tall, beautiful, young woman, wishes for a nice afternoon, and the correct address for the Mint. I picture a room with a marble floor in different shades of grey. A woman welcomed them, she was neither friendly nor unfriendly, she had a wide body and dark skin. How many? She filled out a receipt with numbers and letters that corresponded to the mentioned total, without even glancing inside the envelope.

A month later, a check arrived in the mail.

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