

An excerpt from:

TWENTY CENTAVOS

BY

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PROLOGUE THE VISITOR

Tobey Cross opened the door, and with an unconsciously elegant gesture, invited his killer inside.

What a fraud, the visitor thought, an Ivy League fake. Fingering the .22 caliber Beretta automatic in the pocket of his Burberry trench coat, he stepped through the doorway. Cross always kept the entry to his gallery locked, might as well post a sign that said, “Sophisticated Clients Only.” Suckers Only might be better. The visitor stared at the back of Cross’s gray suede jacket as they walked across the garden, imagining a bullet hole halfway between collar and vent. Maybe two. But it wouldn’t be in the back—he wanted to see the look on the antiques dealer’s face.

What kind of name was Cross anyway? English? Irish? Or just something that fit his sanctimonious personality?

The late afternoon sun of a Méxican January teetered at the edge of the high garden wall. With any luck Cross’s wife would be at the market getting things for dinner. If she was home and came into the gallery it would be her problem.

“I’ve got some new things in,” said Cross, over his shoulder, “however, they’re still at the warehouse. But there is that head from Copan you were considering.” There was a mildly hopeful note in his voice, promising that satisfaction of sole possession that any collector coveted, but without going more than a degree beyond, “Take it or leave it.” The visitor had never been able to read the dealer well, despite his years of business experience.

“I’m not here for another piece,” he said, suppressing a quaver in his voice. Cross didn’t respond.

They passed up the steps from the garden, through the *loggia* and into the great room beyond that housed the gallery. The visitor felt a wave of desire pass over him as he always did upon entering the room. The shelves of Mayan ceramics, the colonial paintings and silver, the gold and silver shipwreck coins and jewelry never failed to stimulate his collector’s instinct, in spite of what he now knew.

“What can I do for you then?” said Cross, his custom-made shoes moving over the fringe of an opulent Shiraz carpet onto the tile. As he leaned against the edge of his desk he plucked a speck of dust from his cuff as he waited for the visitor to reply.

“They’re fakes,” the visitor spat out. “A bunch of damned fakes.”

Tobey Cross regarded him coolly. “Surely you can’t be serious.”

“I dropped one of the ceramics on the floor. It shattered.”

“Regrettable, I’m sure.” He folded his arms and looked across the room at something else, something more reasonable, maybe more interesting than a client working himself into a rage.

“I want my money back on the whole batch, all of it, even the one I dropped.”

A look of genuine puzzlement passed Cross’s face. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Look, I’m sure you’re very knowledgeable about business, but I doubt you know much beyond that. As for coming in here and thinking you’re able to pass judgment on my offerings, the idea is nothing less than laughable. You’re just a businessman, nothing more. I offered you the same arrangement as the rest of my clients. You have a week after you take a piece home to decide whether you want to retain it. After that, all sales are final. Now, if you should wish to sell back a couple of pieces, at wholesale rates of course, I might be interested, although the market is a little soft right now. I can think of two I might be interested in, the others probably not, for quality reasons.”

“Odd, isn’t it, that they were all top notch items when I bought them?” His index finger found the trigger inside his pocket.

“As you will recall, the choices were all yours,” Cross said.

“Write me a refund check for the lot and I’ll have them brought around in the morning. No one else need know about this. You can go on just as before.” Despite himself, the visitor found his voice shaking. He already knew what the answer would be.

“Don’t be a fool.” Cross turned away, as if the meeting were finished. As he was staring at a display case of seventeenth century silver coins from the Lima mint, he heard the faint click of the hammer being pulled back on a pistol. He whirled and took two steps forward as the visitor raised the gun to his face and fired once.

Tobey Cross fell straight backward, his head striking the tile, and didn’t move, the dull thud echoing in the room. His open eyes and mouth held an expression of surprise, but not outrage. The visitor watched him for a few seconds, listening for a response from further inside the house, but there was none. The only other sound had been a slight ping as the ejected shell casing struck the coffee table, then dropped to the floor and spun away out of sight. The visitor sank to his knees, reached into his pocket, and withdrew a small object and dropped it into the dead man’s mouth. Then he pocketed the pistol and sat down at the desk, searching for a ledger or book of sales receipts, but saw none. He picked up the Rolodex, tried to jam it in his coat pocket but found it too wide, so he simply held it in his hand as he searched for the spent shell casing. He was on his knees before the sofa, just about to bend over to look beneath, when he heard the door on the other side of the garden open and then close firmly. He was instantly on his feet.

From the third set of French doors on the far left of the *loggia* he watched as Marisol Cross traversed the garden to the kitchen entrance at the right. When she entered and disappeared from view, the visitor slipped out through the garden along the fountain

wall and opened the street door. A chorus of *mariachis* came from the main plaza two blocks away. A sharper note sounded above the music, the sound of a woman screaming within the gallery. A string of firecrackers went off, covering the sound as the visitor closed the door silently behind him and briskly walked away into the deepening shadows.

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