

Magic Coins

The magic man appeared when Jake was busy cleaning up the lot—picking up the broken beer bottles and the soiled diapers—sorting through the urban refuse of another one hundred and five degree day in Fort Worth, Texas. The man was Hispanic—Jake still called them Mexicans—and muscular but not too tall. He wore baggy pants that sagged low on his butt, and he had shed his shirt because of the heat. His upper body was covered with tattoos: gang markings (*Sur XIII*), women’s names (*Maria, Marta*), and odd, pre-Columbian designs that resembled abstract art. The tattoos seemed to move and swarm beneath the sweat that glazed his chest.

“Hey,” he demanded, “you work here?”

No, Jake thought, I’m sweeping used diapers off of this stinking lot for fun. But he put on his best retarded-geezer smile and said, “Yeap, how can I help yee?”

“My coin, man. I lost my magic coin. I want it back.”

He pointed to one of the wash bays, and Jake realized that the man had deposited his “magic coin” into the slot that dropped quarters into a bay safe.

“What kind of coin is it?”

“Like a quarter, man, but gold. There’s a picture of a naked girl on it. Titty side reads ‘Heads I Win.’ Ass side reads ‘Tails You Lose.’ It was a couple of weeks ago I lost it here.”

Jake knew then that he would probably never find the coin. Either it was buried beneath all the quarters he needed to count or it had slipped through the counting machine and was in a thousand-dollar bag that, by now, would be sitting in the Federal Reserve Bank in Dallas.

“It’s important I get my coin back.” The tattooed man shifted his eyes to a car parked in one of the drying bays.

It was a primer-blotched Chevy Impala with four gangsters hanging onto the doors. The gang members glared at Jake.

“I’m only the clean up guy. But I can ask the owner if he found any coin like yours. Can you leave a number?”

Jake got a pen and one of the refund forms he left in the mailbox for those who lost money in the machines. The magic man wrote out his name, Cruz, and his number, a 924 exchange that told Jake that he lived somewhere nearby, probably in one of the dilapidated rent houses west of the Baptist Seminary.

“The coin, man. It stands for our honor. We never lose.”

“I get it,” Jake chuckled. “Heads I win, and tails you lose.”

Cruz gave Jake the evil eye before walking away to join his amigos.

Jake knew what sort of coin the man was talking about. Every six months or so he would find one mixed in with the quarters. The coin was a token, the kind that guys fed to the machines at the video-sex shops. Usually, Jake tossed these porno coins into the pits with the other slugs people used to cheat the equipment. But he hadn’t seen any porno coins for a long time because—in a raid that was the subject of an ongoing lawsuit—Tarrant County’s sheriff had shut down most of the X-rated video parlors.

The magic man wasn't the first to lose something at the wash, and if it were possible, Jake was glad to retrieve lost keepsakes. At least once a week someone lost, or thought he lost, a precious ring in one of the vacs. Then Jake would have to unlock the vac trap and shovel through the accumulated dust and filth in search of a lost treasure that, more often than not, would never be found. One time a guy dropped his false teeth into one of the bay pits, and Jake helped him fish them out. Jake warned the man that people had been known to relieve themselves in the pits. And there was the time a fellow from the Philippines accidentally deposited a New York subway token in the coin slot. The man begged Jake to look for it, saying it was his good luck charm, the first thing he got when he came to America. Jake emptied the safe and found the man's token. But that had been easy. The subway token was only in the vault a few minutes when the man asked for it back. It was unlikely that Jake could find a coin deposited weeks ago.

"Magic coin my ass," Jake mumbled to himself as the gangsters drove away.

Jake never put much credence in magic; he was a logical, reasonable American who got up every morning, went to work, and put his faith in electricity, physics, and mechanics—all the things that kept the machines at his car wash moving, pumping, turning, working. Magic was okay for others, he thought, but not for him. As much as he might like to, he couldn't wave a juju, grigri, fetish, amulet, or talisman over a broken pump and expect it to repair itself. He couldn't blow some cigarette smoke out his nose, recite an incantation, wave his arms around and expect a broken hose to seal its wound. No, machines did not work that way, and neither did the world, at least not the world according to Jake.

Jake had owned the wash ever since his father died and Jake quit his job teaching industrial arts at Paschal, one of the city's largest high schools. Jake was tired of dealing with high school kids—many of them were gangsters or wannabe gangsters and some of them were mean as panthers—and he found that his skills came in handy at the wash; there was always something that needed repair. He was good at mechanics and welding when he started working the lot, and over the years he improved as an electrician.

After years of working indoors, Jake liked being out in the elements—the blistering summers, the winter days that started off at seventy then dropped to twenty with a forty mile per hour north wind, the sudden spring hail storms, the floods and droughts. The years on the lot dulled his gray eyes and weathered his face to a scowl; the street life he encountered each day sharpened his nerves.

Really, Jake thought, although Cruz looked pretty wild in his baggy gang pants and his illustrated-man tattoos, he was not that unusual. So Jake wrote off the magic-coin man as simply another character—not too different from the lost souls he encountered at the car wash from time to time: the abused young woman begging for bus fare, the deranged man who threatened Jake with a machete, the crack cocaine addicts pleading for coins, the occasional prostitute, the stream of hobos, bums, drunks and confused persons. Car wash life was the street life, and anything could happen on the street.

Jake finished cleaning up the lot, set the alarm, locked the barred doors that protected his equipment room and bill changers, and drove home.

He lived on the edge of Westcliff, near Granbury Road and Seminary Drive. It was a good house, close to Jake's job at Paschal and near to TCU where Lucy had worked in the admissions office. But now the house was getting old, and after Lucy's death, Jake had let the place go. After all, there was no one to impress, no kids, no grandkids, no nephews or nieces, and Jake had lived there so long that the neighbors forgave his ways. The gray paint was faded inside and out, the yard needed mowing, and the burglar bars were rusting away. There was a handgun in each room, a shotgun behind the front door, and thousands of dollars in quarters stacked up in the room Jake called his "office." He hadn't felt like banking lately, even though he knew it was dangerous to let the money pile up. It was possible, Jake thought as he eyed all those buckets of uncounted quarters, that the "magic" coin was still there.

With Lucy dead, Jake shared the house with an old hound, a gray, long-furred dog named Dutch that he and Lucy found dumped at the car wash fourteen years back. Dutch slept most of the day, and at night he stayed with Jake, at the foot of the bed Jake had shared with Lucy for so long, listening, as the dog had always done, for anyone foolish enough to attempt a break in. Jake had made it his *raison d'être* to outlive the old dog.

Jake fixed the hound some supper, counted enough coin to stock the changers the next day, took a shower, turned on the TV, and fell asleep after drinking a beer. He had completely forgotten Cruz and the magic coin.

Cruz hadn't forgotten. He was at the lot—with his gangster buddies—the next afternoon, waiting for Jake to arrive in his old pickup. Although he had plenty of money, Jake drove an old Ford truck, dressed in rags, and acted like a "retardo" to keep the customers from thinking it would be worth their while to mug him. It had worked for years, but Jake always carried a .32 auto in his pocket, just in case.

It was 104, and Cruz was shirtless; his tattoos swam under a glaze of sweat as he spoke.

"Find my coin, man."

Jake sensed a threat.

"I asked about it." Jake glanced at the car full of gangsters who were eyeing him. "But I don't think the owner can find it."

Cruz stared at Jake for a moment, as if he were considering what to do next.

"You tell that guy I need to talk to him. He had better give me back my coin. It's my magic, our symbol."

"Well, I can ask again, that's all I can do."

"You tell him to give me back my coin or there will be trouble."

Cruz turned and walked to his car; he and his friends talked a moment and then stared hard at Jake as they pulled off the lot and speed away with a squealing of tires. Jake noticed that the rear window of the Impala had etching on it: "Heads I Win. Tails You Lose."

At home that evening, after he fed Dutch and satisfied his thirst with a tall brew, Jake began counting coins. Counting was a chore that was never really completed—and Jake was glad of that—because it meant that business was steady. The money had stacked up for weeks, but Jake was tired, and he only ran a couple of buckets through the counting machine, looking all the while for the “magic” coin. There was an occasional slug and several quarters with holes drilled through them—a vain attempt to cheat the machines by attaching a string or wire to the quarter— but there were no “magic” coins, no coins with naked women on them.

Jake supposed that he could visit every porno-video shop in town, looking for the “Heads I Win. Tails You Lose” coin, but he couldn’t do that. Lucy had declared those places off limits the day they had married, and he wasn’t about to break one of her rules, even now that she had been gone for two years. Besides, Fort Worth’s rogue sheriff, a fundamentalist Christian who had established a “God Pod” in the county jail, had closed down most of the porno video shops anyway.

“To hell with the magic man and the coin with the naked girl.”

Dutch watched him bag another thousand in quarters.

“Do you know about honor, about magic?” Cruz demanded. “If the magic goes bad, or if you lose your honor, things go wrong.”

Jake listened patiently; what else could he do? The “magic” man came by every afternoon and waited, with his unsavory pals, so he could ask again about the “magic” coin.

“I don’t think we’re going to find your coin. It’s probably in the bank by now.”

“Listen, if my luck changes, so does yours.”

Cruz’s tattoos gleamed purple in the deadly 109 degree sunlight.

Jake took a rag from his back pocket and wiped the sweat from his face.

“Look fellow, I don’t want trouble. If you think a machine cheated you, I can give you a refund.”

Cruz snorted and spit and Jake could see the anger rise in his eyes. Then Cruz turned and joined his friends who were waiting near the low-rider Chevy. The gangsters consulted a minute, climbed into their Chevy, and sped down the street.

Jake let his hand slide into his right front pants pocket where he carried his .32 auto. The fully loaded gun—eight shots of hollow-pointed power resting behind a double-action trigger—made him feel better. That was magic okay, he thought, deciding that from then on he would also carry a .38 revolver in a waist-band holster, as if the two pistols were the charms needed to protect him against the cruse of a mad, “magic” man. He locked up the door to the equipment room and went home, sure that the gangsters would destroy something that night.

Much to Jake’s surprise when he returned the next morning, the wash seemed undamaged: no graffiti, no cut hoses, no smashed vending machines. But

inside the equipment room Jake discovered that the float valve on his hot-water holding tank had broken; three inches of water flooded the floor.

For a moment Jake looked at the flooded equipment room and considered how easy it would be to make a mistake, to accidentally touch one of the 220 wires while standing ankle-deep in water. The big shock would take him out, instantly. That was sure to be better than what happened to Lucy. He stood at the doorway, considering his move, until Lucy's voice rang out in his mind: "No!"

So he stepped back, used the wooden handle of a broom to clear the debris from the floor drain, and watched the flood recede.

Cruz did not appear that day. The temperature soared to 107. It was the fifty-third day in a row without rain.

The next morning, Dutch moved a little slow and was not interested in sharing Jake's breakfast, very unusual. And Jake too, feeling slightly off, ate only half of his eggs and toast.

Again, nothing was destroyed at the lot. There wasn't even any gang graffiti to indicate that Cruz and his buddies were interested in the place. But mechanical problems seemed to pop up everywhere: two vac motors down, a busted low pressure pump on the tire cleaner, strange wiring problems that took forever to trace. It was as if the car wash gods were angry.

"Must be that curse Cruz put on me," Jake thought.

The problems were, no doubt, related to heat stress. After all, in the summer months, temperatures inside the equipment room could reach 130 degrees Fahrenheit. There was nothing magic about it. No, Jake thought, there would be no magic for him, thank you, only electricity, physics, and sweat. That's what really keeps the world going, no matter what the New Age shamans might claim. No matter what Cruz, with his gang buddies, his "magic coin," and his swarming tattoos might think. You live, you work, you die, and if you're a little bit fortunate, as he had been with Lucy, you love a little. Nothing very magic in that, only the normal course of human existence, Jake philosophized as he methodically repaired each vac and fixed the low-pressure pump.

The vet's office was adjacent to the car wash, but years ago the vet built a tall fence around his lot to protect his employees (they had to walk the dogs that were kenneled) from Jake's customers. The vet was a bony fellow with a shock of carrot-colored hair that always needed trimming. He had treated Dutch from the day that Lucy and Jake found the poor, abandoned pup.

"I don't see anything, but he's getting really old. Let's give him a cortisone shot and half an aspirin. I'd hate to have to put him down."

The vet's comment scared Jake. That night, the second night in a row, Dutch wouldn't eat. That night the kitchen nearly caught on fire. Jake was always worried about fire. You had to worry about fire when every door and window in your house was barred shut.

It wasn't a major blaze, only a pan of bacon grease that flamed and smoked while Jake worried about the hound, but Jake had to use both of his fire extinguishers and evacuate the house, Dutch in his arms, while the smoke cleared.

As the week went by, Dutch recovered his appetite, then towards the weekend, the busiest days of a car wash week, he relapsed. Jake was determined not to take the dog back into the vet's; he was afraid of what the doctor might recommend. So he made the hound a special bed in the back room where he counted the coins. Jake counted and counted and counted until, finally, all but one bucket of quarters had been sacked into the thousand dollar bags he would deliver to the bank. He had put the chore off too long, he realized. Determined to finish counting all the coins he had collected, Jake dug into the last bucket of quarters. To his surprise, his first handful of quarters included not one, but two of the "magic" coins. They were nearly the size of a quarter, but they were tinted gold, and each coin featured the naked woman with the "Heads I Win" and the "Tails You Lose" expression.

"At last. Maybe now that bastard will leave me alone."

He fingered the coins, turning them both over and over and over in his palm.

After looking through the papers that stacked up on his desk, Jake gave up trying to find Cruz's phone number. He put the coins in the ashtray of the pickup truck so he could give them to Cruz the next time the gangsters appeared. But Jake didn't see the low riders at the wash that day, or the next, or the next, and the hound continued to grow weaker.

Then they were there, parked in the drive, admiring Jake's house, when Jake pulled up. For a change, the gangsters were all wearing shirts, identical black pullovers.

Jake was out of the truck in an instant; his hand was in his pocket, gripping the .32 auto.

"What are you doing here?"

"Came to see if you found our coin yet."

"How did you find my house?"

Cruz snorted, but he didn't smile.

"It wasn't hard. Lots of people watch you." He nodded toward Jake's home. "Lots of people knows your place—Fort Knox of Fort Worth."

"Yeah, well, I have your coin."

Without turning his back on Cruz and his gang, Jake fetched one of the gold coins from the truck's ashtray.

"Is this what you're looking for?"

Cruz examined the coin carefully, inspecting both sides before passing it on to his amigos.

"That's it. What took you so long to find it?"

"Like I told you, I don't count the stuff. The guy that owes the wash found it. I've been carrying it around hoping I'd run into you."

"You're a lucky man," Cruz said. "You don't want to know."

"Yeah, sure. Now leave me be."

Cruz and his buddies got into the Impala and sped off toward Berry Street. That was the last Jake ever saw of them; they never returned to the lot or to the house.

The next morning, Dutch was better, hungry and more active. During the week, the dog got stronger and stronger. And, almost magically, the equipment at the wash seemed to run smoother. The bums, prostitutes, and druggies seemed to disappear from the lot, and it even rained, dropping the temperature into the seventies, at least for a few hours.

When he was certain that Dutch had fully recovered, Jake took all the coins in the house—twenty-five of the thousand-dollar bags—loaded them into the back of his pickup, and delivered them to the humane society on Lancaster. He left the quarters with the director—an anonymous donation.

And from that day on, Jake carried two things in his pocket: the .32 auto and the magic coin.