How to Make Change

By kfann

The Cambio Man makes change in the street. He stands on the corner across from the bank ATM where big bills spit out in denominations too large for the local street vendors and merchants to break. The Cambio Man breaks bills.

He breaks bread with bankers, too, and keeps his cut, though he still lives in the old neighborhood. He walks past the old stores. He runs the bases with the children on the old ball field north of the harbor. When he works, he holds his Cordobas behind his back in a thick folded stack consisting mostly tens and twenties, with the 500 Cord notes and U.S. $20s on the inside of the wad. The Cambio Man dresses nicer than everyone else and stands in the shade. He doesn't sweat. He wears a pair of khakis, white-soled shoes and a crisp plaid shirt.

"Cambio?" he asks. "Cambio?" he asks. "Cambio?" all day. "Cambio?" every day. Only those in need of change hear him. When he breaks bills, the Cambio Man keeps a few points for himself. It is his cut, his finger on the scale. Somewhere on the

street, a solid iron lamppost seems to have eyes, as though someone's got the Cambio Man's back when night falls.

Outside the bank, on the corner across the street from the Cambio Man, the Military Man stands in the sun guarding the bank's front door. He wears a green canvas uniform, black bulletproof vest and boots. The Military Man holds his machine gun across his chest at the ready. No photos. No conversation. If you have business inside, he will let you pass with a nod. His neck is thick and tan. He takes orders as well as a good dog sits for treats, trained by the same clicker and ticker. He will do anything for praise from his master.

The Cambio Man never wanted to serve for praise. He never wanted to fire into crowds or shoo the hungry from the doorways. He never wanted to owe anyone at the end of a day. The Cambio Man has strong hands, but they are not the hands of a soldier, rather more like a sculptor's: Two percent of everything he touches sticks under his nails.

He has a daughter (yes, it finally happened!), his only child, whom he encouraged from the beginning to create, to paint, to sing, to dance, to go for the joyful returns on life, to think with the brain in the heart. But his daughter is a sharp one who doesn't trust her heart. Her friends call her Deda, short for dedalera, the herb she took for a heart condition she had when she was younger.

These days, Deda also says, "Cambio?" She learned by watching her father. She idolized him as a little girl. She would observe him from around street corners after delivering his lunch from home. She listened to her father's repetitions, not his admonitions. Deda saw how he touched 500 Cords and turned it into 520, adding it to the pastel stack in his hand behind his back. That's real creation, she thought. That's the magic touch. She loved that stack of bills and vowed to be the first Cambio Woman in Granada. She knew which lamppost she could count on, and eventually she did.

Tonight, it's a humid summer night. The Cambio Man kisses his wife good night and checks on Deda through a tear in the curtain separating her room from the hallway. She still lives at home. The Cambio Man looks at her white sneakers and baggy denim pants in a clump on the bedroom floor. He sees her fingerless gloves on the floor, which she uses on the street to count bills and calls her "fox gloves." Perhaps she will never marry, he thinks.

He goes outside and sits in the courtyard under clotheslines that hold clean sheets and a few of his laundered shirts. The shirt he will wear tomorrow hangs on the line, and the Cambio Man feels thankful. He watches the breeze ripple through the fabric and hears guitar music roll over the roof and eddy into the courtyard with growing notes of sleep.

The guitar has played here for hundreds of years, he thinks. My father taught me to play, but I could not make the sounds I wanted, so I quit. That is what seemed most practical. He sits back in a metal chair and closes his eyes. Life, he continues, is a column of coffee beans that may not stand for long.

A pop rings out, and the Cambio Man thinks a gun has been fired in the alleyway behind the sheet-metal gate. For a moment, everything disappears from his senses, as when the world changes forever. Then, a dog barks. A young girl laughs. The timeless guitar again rolls over the cooling pink marble walls and the vision of the old world returns.

"Cambio?" He returns to it. "Cambio?" The word has anchored itself forever in his mind, as squarely as the corners of the house, stuck like a tune, known as well as he knows his own name, as fixed as the board of directors, something asked without need for immediate answer. This is his chosen trade, and this, too, his rate of return, which unfolds and comes due in the midnight hours that affix his pile of days.

Across town, the Military Man has been asleep for hours. His gun rests on the floor beneath his bed and his bulletproof vest hangs on a wooden hook near the door, as though another day in a long line of days punched through with an X.