

THE WISHING WELL



Monday morning came at 3333 and 1/3 First Street in Boyle Heights, part of the Mexican barrio in East Los Angeles, where he and his mother and his two siblings had moved after his father's recent death. Charles was six years old, and it was time for him to go the first grade. He walked the six blocks to Belvedere Elementary School on Rowan Avenue down the street from Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church on Third Street, He installed himself in the first grade class room. He was the only gringo in the class. The rest were all kids from Mexico, most of whom didn't speak English.

The teacher, Miss Dunbar, liked him and he was sure she was she was the most beautiful woman in the world; except, maybe for the movie stars.

On the first day at his new school, shortly after his father died, he was very uncomfortable and felt the stares from all the other male students, who didn't speak English and were a few years older than what one would expect of a first grader. It was obvious they didn't like him. When the bell rang at the end of the school day, Charles walked out the side gate on Rowan Avenue. Five boys that were in his class confronted him. "*Que chingada estas hacienda aqui gringo?*" (What the fuck are you doing here, gringo?) But he didn't hesitate, instead he made a bee line for the church as fast as he could run, directly at the end of Rowan, and across from Third Street.

It was a large structure with a high bell tower and several rows of pews and an impressive altar. A large statute of Jesus Christ, just above the altar, reached for the sky, with stained glass windows of many colors behind it filtering light into the room.

The church was empty. He rushed down the aisle, looking at the painting of the various saints posted on the walls of both sides of the structure. When he got to the altar, no one appeared from the sacristy. Now he was even more afraid. The five boys were approaching him; they started hitting and shoving him, yelling at the top of their lungs, "*gringo salado, hijo de puta y chinga tu madre*" (you salty gringo, son of a whore, and fuck your mother).

“God, help me!” he pleaded, but there was no answer from above. After the boys had plastered him, they ran out the double doors in the front and left him prostrate in front of the altar bruised and crying with a bloody nose.

After a few minutes, he wiped away the tears and the blood with his undershirt and sat down in the first pew he came to. He needed a plan to prevent this from happening again.

That night, he went to bed without dinner as he was sick to his stomach and depressed. He had nightmares about being all alone and pursued by a mob and woke up drenched in sweat. He didn't know it then, but this nightmare would reoccur many times while he was growing up and later in his life, just as would the dream of his father's untimely death.

After he had breakfast with his mother, sister, and brother, he took his bologna sandwich and his apple and started walking the six blocks to school. On the way, he saw the public library on a side street. He started formulating a plan to avoid a future pummeling at the hands of the toughs. By the time he reached the Unique theater, where he would pan handle for fifteen cents on Saturdays so he could go the Mexican movies that were shown there, he had his plan completed. He crossed Rowan Avenue and went to class.

When the bell rang ending the school day, he went out the side gate on Rowan and started running toward the library with the same group of boys chasing him. He ran the three blocks to the library, and just as he ran out of energy, he pushed himself into the building. His pursers were yelling and

screaming as they had the day before, but he was safe.

He had never been in a library before, but he had a great sense of relief. First, it had saved him from being beaten. It was quiet and the place was full of books. He started looking around. He didn't know how to read, but he had an idea, so he first asked where the children's section was and Mrs. Garcia, the librarian guided him to it.

“How can I teach myself to read?” He could tell she was impressed. She handed him a book on the English Alphabet. “You see this letter on the cover of the book. These are the first three letters of the alphabet. Words are made up by combining letters from the alphabet, and if you understand the sounds of the letters, you too can make words. Since you are that interested, I will help you learn the alphabet, and you can turn your knowledge of the sounds of the letters into words and you will be reading. There are twenty-six letters in all, and you need to know how each one sounds.”

During his time in the library, he took full advantage of Mrs. Garcia's help with pronunciation of each letter in the alphabet, from A to Z. Within a short period of time, he was he was putting them together. He gradually advanced to books with words in them. Before long, he was reading; and then, a magic world opened up to him, and the spirits of the books started to whisper to him. He looked for easy books about President Washington and Daniel Webster. He was immediately attracted to men who made impres-

He never forgot the spirit of the voices in the books. And he never again was without books— any one that he could get his hands on.

The thugs that had chased him, soon got tired of it, and he didn't have to run to the library. He could walk, which he did every day for the rest of the school year while he was in the first grade.

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It was 6:30 a. m., on a Saturday at 3333 1/3 East First Street. It was the second year his family had lived there since the death of his father, and he was now seven years old. He had new job. Charles put his shoe shine rags and his black and brown shoe polish, along with two brushes in his shoe shine box. He had spent several days putting together the box with a saw he stole from St. Vincent De Paul and the scraps of lumber that he had taken from the lumber yard at Lorena and First Streets, right across the street from the L. A. County Public Cemetery for the indigent. He was as proud of his creation as any boy of seven could be. It looked pretty spiffy, he thought.

He had a breakfast of Wheaties, a splash of milk, and a piece of toast covered with margarine (It was war time, so there was no butter) and

jelly that came in the welfare package from the County. He borrowed two dimes from his mother and walked the half block to the streetcar stop. He waited for the wooden go sign to appear above from the signal box and crossed the border to the stop in East Los Angeles on the other side of Indiana Street, for the car going West to downtown.

As he rode the car toward the center of the City, he examined the seats from front to rear to see if anyone had left a treasure for him. Once he had found a box of colored six pencils; and then, he found a dime mystery novel on a seat half-way to the rear. It was his lucky day. He opened his shine box and tossed it in, so he would have something to read when things got slow on his shoe-shine route on Main Street. He got off the car right across from the City Hall. He had chosen Main Street because it was the busiest street next to Broadway in the down town area. The fact that it was Skid Row and full of winos didn't register with him, because he saw a lot of people on the street and that's what was important to him. It was only later in the day that he realized that it was the wrong place to start his career, or get the best return for his labor.

This first Saturday was the hardest. He wandered down Main Street to the South. Since it was only 7:30 a.m. when he started, the drunks hadn't woken up from their stupor of the night before and the Barber College hadn't opened yet, so there wasn't much going on. Also, he only had a dime

in his pocket and that was to take the street car back home, in case he didn't make any money, so he couldn't even buy a hot chocolate or a cup of coffee. He listened the frequent sirens from the police cars as they screamed down Main Street to quell some disturbance further up the street, or to arrest a drunk who was trying to pan handle an out-of-town tourist who walked up the wrong street.

Slowly, the street came to life. He found it interesting. The people were real and they had their own charm. He sat down next to a man sleeping on the sidewalk dressed in a tattered pin-striped suit with fashionable shoes that were scraped and needed a shine. That was the reason he nudged him.

“Want a shine, Mister? It will only cost you a dime. If you don't have change, I'll give you credit.”

The blurry-eyed man stirred and sat up. He had a handsome face and steel gray hair that was in disarray, but Charles could tell he had a certain refinement.

“What the hell are you doing down here, boy? You should be in school.”

“It's Saturday, Sir. No school today.”

The man laughed a little as he shook his head to clear the cobwebs, or the effects of the bottle of Gallo Tokay that was sticking out of the suit pocket, showing the label. “Did you say you wanted to give me credit?” and he laughed. “That's a really nice twist. For how much?”

“My shines only cost a dime. If you meet me here every Saturday for a shine, I can give you a line of credit.”

Now the man laughed out loud. “You know that’s the first time anybody has been kind to me since I got off the bus from Kansas City. I have a quarter in my pocket. Can you give me change?”

“I can go to the grocery store on the corner and get it,” said Charles.

“Okay,” said the man. He pulled the quarter out of his pocket without hesitation and handed it to the boy. “Most people would think I was crazy giving a quarter to a shoe shine boy on skid row who I didn’t even know. But you have an honest face.”

“I’ll leave my shoe shine box here as security.”

The boy took the quarter and ran down to the mom and pop grocery store on the corner, got change and brought it back to the man. By now, he was standing up and trying to look presentable.

“That’s a pretty nice suit you’re wearing,” he said.

“It’s seen better days, I know. But it was expensive when I had it made.”

“What are you doing out here in beautiful California?” asked Charles.

“I’m sure you don’t know this, young man, but in the rest of the country, when you have had bad luck and your life falls apart, you go West. This is about as far West as one can go. That’s why I’m here. My life went to shit

in Kansas City and my wife left me. She said I was drinking too much.”

“Sorry to hear that,” said Charles. “Put you’re right foot up on my shoe shine box and I’ll make you look a little better.”

The man responded and Charles had his first customer. It took him about a half an hour to do both shoes, and by the time he was through, he knew a lot about the man from Kansas City, and he learned a few things too.

“How come you’re down here on Main Street with all us winos? Why don’t you go a few streets up past Pershing Square, around the Biltmore Hotel? You could get better clientele and you could charge maybe fifteen cents or even a quarter?” said the Kansan.

“I don’t know the area. I’ll have to take a look later today after I make a buck.”

“There’s also a famous cafeteria on Seventh and Broadway, between here and there, where the owner gives free meals to the poor. You should check it out. You can eat free on the days you work. I’m only assuming you’re poor; why else would you be on skid row shining shoes for ten cents a pop?”

Charles smiled. “No doubt about that. But it won’t always be that way.”

After that they chatted about a lot of things. When he finished, he was paid his dime and they waved goodbye.

The Kansan said, “I’ll see you next week, if I’m still around. You know, there is something special about you. You’ve got determination and spark. I’ll tell you this, you’re going to grow up and be somebody. I can sense it, just talking to you. Charles smiled and thanked him. It was the first time anyone had praised him since his father became ill and died.

Full of pride, he wandered up and down Main Street, getting an occasional shine; and by one o’clock, he was hungry, and since he was at Seventh Street, he went up to Broadway and found Clifton’s Cafeteria. It was a several storied building with inlaid floors, wishing wells, full of coins with signs above some of the wells, inviting the public to contribute a few coins to help feed the poor. He went up to a cashier and started talking. “I’m one of the folks that the sign talks about. How can I get something to eat?”

The plump woman sized him up. She saw the roughly made shoe-shine box, the Buster Brown shoes with a decent shine necessary to sell his product, and the belt hanging from his pants that was six inches too long for him. “Y’all go and get a plate of food and come back to me. I’ll see that you get your eats.”

He took a tray and went looking at all the displays and was amazed at the amount of food that was on display. He loved fried chicken and he saw piles of it in front of him. He also remembered that his mother taught him to not forget his greens when he ate, so he found the vegetable section and

piled on the spinach, which he loved because of Popeye. He found chocolate pudding in a cup and put that on his tray too. Then he returned to the plump woman and showed her his tray. She smiled broadly. “You enjoy your meal, young man, it’s on the house.”

“Thank you, Ma’am,” he said, as he searched for an empty table and sat down among the throngs of people that were passing through the main floor and going into the food section. He ate all his banquet crowned by the chocolate pudding and washed it down with a glass of cold water. Then, he checked out the several wishing wells that were on the first floor, and focused on one, where there were less people surrounding it.

When he left the cafeteria, he walked up to Pershing Square, and looked across the street at the fashionable Biltmore Hotel, where only the rich stayed. He watched the numerous panhandlers moving swiftly towards the hotel patrons who had the courage to cross the Square to get to the hotel. He certainly wouldn’t be able to entice many of them to stand still to get their shoes shined and, at the same time, be pestered by indigents.

There were speakers who showed up to talk from on top of orange crates or soap boxes. They were something else, both entertaining and irreverent. The country’s great depression had ended only a couple of years before but vestiges still remained. Most of the people who crowded into the Square were dressed in old and tattered clothing and looked pretty pathetic.

In some ways, it was poetic and had been captured by the great photographers of the day. Charles listened to the talks and the accents of the people, and it was obvious, that even though they were in English, it wasn't in accents that he had heard before. One man was ranting and raving about a revelation that came to him as he stood by a wine vat in Cucamonga, wherever that was. Another had an empty two-pound coffee can by his side and was asking for donations, so he could buy a bus ticket back to Utah. He wanted to be reunited with his several wives and twenty-four children.

In the end, Charles's discomfort got the best of him. He couldn't get any customers, so he wandered back to Main Street as he realized that he wouldn't be back to this side of town, as he described it. He didn't feel that he belonged there now. Right now, his place was on the other side of Main Street. But he would cross the divide some day, he was sure.

By the afternoon, he completed his goal of making the dollar he had envisioned as part of his initial plan. He decided to go back to Clifton's to check out an idea that he had formed while he was there.

The Cafeteria was still full as he walked in and mingled with the crowd around the wishing wells. He moved to the area that he had previously staked out where there were not a lot of people. When there was no one looking, he stuck his hand into the well and grabbed a handful of change and thrust it into his pocket. The excess water ran down his leg and spotted his

jeans, and left a trail on the floor as if he'd peed in his pants; but, by that time, he was out the door and was safe on the street. He walked to the street car stop on Seventh and Broadway that would take him back to First and Indiana. When he boarded, he moved to the rear of the car and sat down with his shine box next to him and pulled out the dime novel he had found on the way in, and started reading it. He didn't dare try and count his money on the street car. He would do that when he was safely at home.

When he got there, he pulled the change out of his pocket. He had a total of the dollar that he had made from shining shoes and an additional twenty-two cents—a bonus of a little more than twenty percent for all his hard work. He was satisfied, and by then, his pants were dry. It was now past 6:00 p.m. His mother had dinner on the table. It was salty Spam and fried potatoes, and a few pieces of lettuce with a mayonnaise and catsup dressing. He wolfed it down while he explained to his mother his day's activities and gave her his day's earnings, leaving out an explanation of the extra percentage grab from the wishing well.

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His Saturday shoe shine business trips to downtown continued. All morning on Main Street, and then a quick trip to Clifton's for a free meal at

lunch time. Back to Main Street until he made his dollar. And, the highlight of his Saturday was his return to Clifton's in the late afternoon to top off the day's earnings with a grab from the wishing well.

It was in the spring of his second year shining shoes. He returned in the late afternoon for his tip of the day. After he scooped up the change from the wishing well and was on his way to the front door, a rugged looking man with an unusual accent grabbed him by the collar of his shirt. "Not so fast youngster. Where to do you think y'all are doin?"

He turned bright red. "I'm...I'm just leaving after eating."

"That's not the way it looks to me. You just swiped some money from the wishing well. That money is to get food for poor people."

"Well, I'm one of the poor people it's meant to feed. I'm just taking it myself."

"I don't think that's the way it's done. But I see the blue color of your underpants, sticking out of your pants, and I recognize that those were given to your family by the County Welfare. So, I tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to let you go this time, and I'm going to let you keep what you stole, but I don't want to see you in here again as a leech. If you come back you pay for what you eat here, and leave some money for the more unfortunate."

“Yes, Sir,” said an embarrassed and at the same time grateful Charles. He didn’t know what else to say.

The man let go of his collar and shoed him out the front door. Once again, he looked as if he’d peed in his pants. And, this time, that was partly true.

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The Kansan was right. When Charles grew up, he prospered as an Attorney, but he never forgot his experiences in the barrio. He had learned to survive in the sub world in which he’d grown up. As a lawyer, he put them into practice.

Several years later, Charles was driving around Los Angeles with his friend and client Craig Barron, who had moved to Los Angeles to continue his work in the film industry. “I’m happy about your move, Craig. Now you can get the credit, and remuneration, for all your years of work in the animation field. I think you know that I grew up in Boyle Heights on the East side of LA and used to shine shoes downtown on Main Street.”

“Yes, I’ve heard snippets about that.”

As they were driving in down town Los Angeles, past Broadway, and the Million Dollar Theater and Central Market, and then the Angel Flight

landmarks they finally passed Clifton's Cafeteria. "I have wild stories about that place," Charles commented. "I'm amazed that it's still there," and he proceeded to tell his friend about how he used to come there every Saturday afternoon to take a few coins from the wishing well."

"It was owned by Clifford Clinton," said Craig, "who was a very generous man. He made sure that all the unfortunates could get a square meal."

Charles laughed. "I know that, I was one of them."

"The old man died, and it was purchased and remodeled by a new owner, Andrew Meieran, in the same motif as the old landmark. He continued with the same philosophy that old man Clifton had. Meieran wanted to take care of the unfortunate and still use his entrepreneurial skills. Now he contributes the money that comes into the wishing wells to a mission that provides rehab and jobs for the unfortunates. I have some photos of the wishing wells. I'll send them to you."

"I'd like that. I moved out of LA in 1947, to a safer place. And when I graduated from high school, I went to Berkeley and then to the army and law school. When I graduated and had my Law Degree, I felt that I was a long way from the ghetto life I spent here on East First Street, but what the Kansan told me, I never forgot."

"Speaking of Clinton's, I have an idea. If you have an entrée with the present owner, tell'em, that as a shoe shine boy, I used to take a few coins

every Saturday from the well. Tell'em, I would like to pay Clifton's back and deposit a thousand dollars in coins in his wishing well, just to make up for my past transgressions."

Craig smiled, "I'll make contact with his people and get back to you."

It was up in the air for a couple of weeks, and then Greg got a call from his friend and client Craig Barron. "Andrew is pretty excited about your offer. He asked if he could have press present at the event?"

"Hell, yes, it's great with me. No such thing as bad publicity. Besides the statute of limitations has long passed," laughed Charles.

"Okay, give me some dates when you're available to go to Los Angeles and I'll work it out."

Within a week, the date was set for the celebration. Charles was going to make his contribution to Clifton's Wishing Well and he was happy to make amends, but it was then that the doubts entered his head. What affect would such an admission have on his successful legal career? Would his big money clients like the publicity the contribution would bring to him.

As the weekend of the ceremony approached, he made arrangements to fly to Los Angeles. Once there, he contacted his bank, so he could collect a thousand dollars in coins. When the clerk brought them out on a dolly, Charles realized that the package was so heavy that he couldn't carry it by himself. He advised the clerk that he would return. He went to the hotel and

brought back a small suitcase that he estimated could hold the coins. The clerk filled it up for him, but even though the suitcase had wheels, he couldn't lift it into the car he'd rented. The employees at the bank had to help him put the suitcase in the floor space behind the passenger's front seat. When he drove back to the hotel, the doorman had to lift it out of the car, and he rolled it to his room for safekeeping.

The next day, the coins were loaded into the same place in the car, and then Charles went to downtown Los Angeles for the celebration. He was met at the door of the cafeteria by the public relations man for Clifton's. It was shortly before the opening of the cafeteria on Saturday morning. There was a long line waiting to enter. There was some delay, because the man who was in charge of bringing cash to all the checkout stands hadn't arrived. The Arab storekeeper, next to Clifton's on Broadway was angrily demanding to talk to the person in charge of the cafeteria, because the line was blocking entrance to his establishment. Charles asked the PR man, "How many people do you serve in a day?"

"We usually get between six and seven thousand."

"You've got to be kidding?"

"No, this place has several floors. And do you see that huge redwood tree? It goes all the way up the top. It has grown inside of here, and it's able

to hold acrobats that swing from it, when they perform on its upper branches.”

“Amazing,” said Charles. “I don’t remember that when I was young.”

“The boss wants to meet you, He will be here at noon. What can we do for you in the meantime?”

“I’m glad you asked. I need someone to remove the suitcase from my car that’s parked at the curb. I can’t lift it.”

“No problem. Gus, will you take Joey, and help this man with the suitcase in his car. When you remove it, take it to my office on the second floor.”

He looked over at Charles. “Do you want us to unpack the coins or is that something you want to do yourself?”

“No, that’s fine. It will be a big help. I can go and park the car, and then settle down before the ceremony. I’ll meet you down here in about fifteen minutes.”

The employees removed the coins and put the suitcase in the elevator and disappeared. Charles drove the car to the garage across the street. While doing this, he reminisced about how downtown LA hadn’t changed that much from the many years since he had been there.

When he returned, he sat down with the PR man and had a cup of coffee. “Where do your employees come from?” he asked.

“Thanks for asking. They’re all from the Mission that we give the money to from the Wishing Wells.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize that. When I saw the photo that that my friend sent me, it was empty. That’s what triggered my idea to donate the money. So, you’re saying, the money you take in from the wishing well is given to a Mission on a daily basis.”

“Yes, it funds the operation and gives food and shelter to the people who are there in rehabilitation and trying to put their lives back together. In addition, all of our employees come from the Mission, so we are an active participant in their rehabilitation. And it’s been very successful.”

“All the more reason to make the donation,” said Charles. “What time does it start.

“I can see that by the number of people waiting to get in. How many pass through here on any given day?”

“Roughly six thousand.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.” No wonder you’re neighbor is frustrated.”

“We try and make him happy. It only blocks his storefront when people line up to get in, in the morning. After that, they move pretty fast, going through the line and getting something to eat. As soon as the owner and the guests get here, we’ll start the ceremony.”

Charles went through the line and sat down with the PR person for lunch. It was good food, freshly prepared at a reasonable price. When they finished, they chit-chatted about Clinton's in the 1940's, and the idea that Mr. Clinton had given food to those who couldn't afford it, because of the depression.

As one o'clock approached, all the guests were present and the ceremony started. The present owner Andrew Meieran, presided over the ceremony. First he introduced all the big wigs that ran the mission, and gave a quick recap of Charles's history with Clifton's; then, his employees brought out the thousand dollars in coins that had been stored in the suitcase, which Charles had brought with him. When the rolls of coins were opened, and the loose coins were amassed into a container that usually held dirty dishes and brought to the ceremony, Charles took a couple of handfuls and tossed them into the wishing well that he was standing in front of, and everyone clapped.

Just as he was about to say a few words, two men in well-tailored suits walked in the door and flashed their FBI credentials, and headed directly for Charles. "Mr. Reeves, you are under arrest for Money Laundering. He was read his rights, handcuffed, and removed from Clifton's Cafeteria. The entire crowd at the ceremony was dumfounded and speechless. The cart with the remainder of the thousand dollars in coins was removed by Clifton

employees and turned over to the Mission before the FBI agents could pack it up and take it with them.

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